

JUNE 19, 2016

RUPANYUP UNITING CHURCH

ELDER

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My Faith Journey. I had a slide of the wall-hanging to describe the TS history.

Reading 1: Matthew 22: 37-39

Reading 2: 1 Peter 2:5a

Hymns – first numbers are from Together in Song (TIS) – second is from the Templer Hymnbook where applicable

Hymn 111 (64) – Praise to the Lord Almighty God of Creation/Lobe den Herrn

Hymn 152 – Joyful Joyful

Hymn – not in TIS (116) – This is the day/Dies ist der Tag

Hymn 699 (2) – A new Commandment I give unto you (sung twice through)

Hymn 147 - To God be the Glory

Benediction 778 – Shalom

Welcome and introduction and opening prayer by Rev Barry Baker (retired)

Thank you for inviting me to share with you my faith journey. I am an elder and member of the Temple Society Australia and I will need to give a brief history and explanation as my journey is inextricably linked with the Temple Society and its changing views.

Hymn 111 – Lobe den Herrn – Praise to the Lord Almighty God of Creation

The TSA and its sister organisation Temple Society Deutschland arose from the organisation Temple Society after the Second World War and were split mainly to meet government regulations – our shared beliefs and history are still based on those of the Temple Society. The reason I say that my faith journey is inextricably linked is that I am the great-great-granddaughter of the spiritual founder, Christoph Hoffmann, and I was aware of this from the earliest time I can remember. The TSA regional head for all my growing up period was my uncle. The head in Germany was at that time a great-uncle. One way or another we (my brothers and sisters) spent a lot of time hearing or discussing the understanding people had of the Bible and how this was to inform how we lived.

The Temple Society is an independent, non-denominational Christian church; it is free of ties to rigid dogmas and fixed creeds, sacraments and rituals. It grew out of the pietistic movement in Germany. The Pietists were deeply concerned with the conditions small scale farmers, factory workers and the poverty-stricken masses found themselves in, and put it down to the rise in materialistic and egotistic tendencies accompanied by a declining emphasis on inner spiritual values. Pietists affirmed the free, direct and loving relationship between God and man that Jesus had taught, but were pretty literal in the reading of the Bible. It was also concerned with the practical application of belief in the day-to-day. Christoph Hoffmann was raised in a village that was created especially to try and

establish a community based on the values of the Pietists. He then went on to study theology and was an ordained minister in the Lutheran Church. Hoffmann and like-minded friends created a discussion group and newsletter in which they discussed how to improve the life of the masses – how to live as God would want us to. From early on they took as their motto Matthew 6:33 – ‘Set your mind on God’s Kingdom and His Justice before everything else and all the rest will come to you as well’. Their belief was that by living correctly you could bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth.

In general the group was not happy with the leadership and the direction the Church was taking, but at no stage were they thinking of leaving the established Church, because as they concentrated on their motto – trying to bring about God’s Kingdom on Earth, they became increasingly critical of the establishment. The Lutheran hierarchy, however, had problems with the German Templers and excommunicated Hoffmann and his followers. This is when they became the Temple Society and started to prepare for life in Palestine in earnest, as they thought the best chance to try and establish a Kingdom of God on Earth was in the Holy Land and in Jerusalem. The group started a staged emigration in 1867 and, by 1871, there were three established settlements. The Templers have always thought it best to lead by example – by deed and not word – and by having their own settlements – colonies – they could show how to live according to the tenets set out by Jesus. This was disrupted after the First World War, but they managed to return to their settlements; however, after the Second World War and the formation of Israel, they were no longer welcome and their houses and land were appropriated. Many of the Templers were interned in Australia – at Tatura – and when they could no longer return to their homes they were given the choice of staying in Australia or being repatriated to Germany. At the same time, there were those who had been sent to Germany during the war (either through prisoner exchanges or because the fathers/sons had been called up) and they, too, were

offered the chance to emigrate. The possibility of living in our communities separate from mainstream society was not possible.

Of my four grandparents, three were born in Palestine – my mother’s mother met my grandfather in Germany after the First World War and stayed in Germany. She was baptised and confirmed in the Lutheran Church, but retained her links to the Temple Society because the TS allowed all to follow worship according to their conscience. I mention this because she lived with us and provided my first religious instruction, as well as drumming it into me that my great-great-grandfather founded the church and her great-uncle had become the second head of the TS. She read to me from a children’s Bible every Sunday when I crept into her bed – particularly concentrating on the Old Testament. This was fully in line with Templer philosophy that one needed to understand the Hebrew Bible before one could understand fully what Jesus was teaching. We need to understand the context of Jesus’ teachings. It was also where we learnt that we weren’t baptised. As a treat we would occasionally go to the Lutheran services with her at the Lutheran Trinity Church in Melbourne. We were made very aware that we could not partake in communion – as a small child this seemed to take forever, being stuck in the pew until she returned.

Having had family members who grew up in Palestine, who had walked the streets of Jerusalem, had had picnics on Mt Sinai and experienced the places mentioned in the Bible, I realised that the places mentioned were real. It made me wonder if any of the stories in the Bible had any basis in truth and this is something I tried to explore – in particular through a book called the ‘Bible as History’. That book made me realise archaeology could prove, for instance, the walls around Jericho had fallen, but not show exactly how they had fallen. It was more as if the Bible tried to explain actual incidents in the understanding of the people of the time. Not having a language for some natural

phenomena, they called it as being caused by 'God'. It also caused me to read the myths of other cultures and in particular reflect where these stories seemed to be similar.

My first Sunday School lesson sticks in my mind as the first time I realised that I could not believe in the God being presented to me – an angry, interventionist God. I can't remember the exact story, but it was about a war between the Israelites and the Philistines and how God was on the side of the Israelites; but I could not understand how he could not also be on the side of the Philistines, because they were people and obviously believed in a God too. I spent many years of my childhood trying to resolve that issue – for me it was not necessarily about the Bible, but the more recent Second World War. My family had been on the losing side, yet they believed in the same God as the victors and aimed to live their lives well according to Jesus' teachings. Having early on jettisoned the interventionist model of God, I jettisoned the old man in the sky image of God, too. I had a few gorgeously illustrated children's books that showed God as a lovely old man with round cheeks and flowing white hair and beard, but that just was not real to me. The images that stuck with me early on were God as the burning bush and as the wind. Something that was embodied within nature – the sky, the wind. The other point I realised was that, in the Templer philosophy, Jesus is regarded as an exceptional human being, who by his word and deeds showed us how to live – however he is/was not divine.

In our final years of Sunday School this was brought home to us. I still remember that our teacher equated 'religio' with conscience. In other words, we have been taught right from wrong, and now it was up to us to live a just life. We were told we were now at a stage where we needed to be responsible for our own actions and decisions. There was to be no shifting of blame.

Hymn 152 – Joyful Joyful

Reading 1: Matthew 22: 37-39

Jesus answered 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

Reading 2: 1 Peter 2:5a

Come as living stones and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple.

Hymn 116 – This is the day

I have chosen the two readings because these were the verses in the challenge that our founders set for themselves and ourselves. The name Temple Society comes from the second reading – we are to remember that we are living stones and that we should come together and try to embody that reading. It is up to us to make sense of this and to live our lives as best we can – there. Thus our behaviour is up to us. For our collective belief, it is the living life, as exemplified by Jesus, which will bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth or an enduring Christian community. The text tells us that if a group of people come together all living their life as best as they can according to Jesus' tenets, then we will have the foundation for a community that will survive all that is thrown at it and bring about the spiritual temple or the Kingdom of God on Earth.

There is one guiding principle that we follow to implement this and that is the twin commandments of love. Apart from that, how we believe, what we believe and how we implement this is up to us. As there is no prescription of what to believe and how to behave, it is up to each individual to put into

practice the best way they know how, so that we can find the justice in God's Kingdom here on Earth. That means that each of us may react differently to the same situation. We need to hang on to those twin commandments and it is necessary. The members have always had diverse views and the remembrance of those commandments did help to settle disputes and live harmoniously. The overarching principle is that we need to work together.

I have seen how that works within our society, and we do help those in our midst when we know about it. No one is a mind reader so people do need to reach out for help. However we just can't look inward. In a way, by living in small communities outside of the mainstream society – both in Germany early on as well as in Palestine – meant that we could show how living to our beliefs could lead to a better society, which our founding members were trying to do. It didn't mean that they agreed on all things – members left because in the end the way the faith and belief systems were being expressed did not meet their needs. But what could be seen was that people were doing the best they could to live the way Jesus wanted and to pass that on to the next generations. The challenge our community has is to remain and work within society, even as there are more and more distractions of the modern world and the distance between members can increase. I have found that a challenge, too – how to contribute to the community life while living a great distance away. I was challenged on how to pass on my beliefs – my way of thinking – to my children, all without preaching. But I think this is a challenge to all of us.

One of the few rituals the Temple Society kept was the Confirmation. In keeping with Lutheran tradition this is took place at age 14 or 15. This is when the young people are introduced to the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus, and they get to explore in detail the Templer Hymn. This was written in 1855 and reflects the beliefs of the founder at the time

– but it still embodies the core values, although in some verses the language is not what we would use today.

This was the second part of my journey – Confirmation. The notion of self-responsibility for our actions was reinforced. All our decisions were to be seen in relation to our conscience that had been informed by the teachings of Jesus. How we acted, what we thought, what we did was our responsibility – and this was an important concept because the overarching vision was that we had to put our beliefs into action. It was also the time we started attending services and in my family there was the tradition that we – our uncle and aunts – gathered for afternoon tea. At this time there used to be a vigorous debate on what the elder of the day was trying to say in his sermon, and whether their interpretation of the reading agreed with our own. Just as important was whether the case was made to support the position. We weren't stopped from putting our views forward, and sometimes I think we may have not completely understood what was said, as our services at that time were primarily in German. Having two languages for spiritual thought suited me, as I could pick what I thought was the slightly more nuanced word – even though I may have misinterpreted the exact meaning.

I have picked out four verses from the ten of the Templer Hymn that have spoken to me over time and developed my beliefs and thus how I try to act.

1. Seek ye first of all God's Kingdom
Jesus' challenging words are these:
"Enter through the narrow gateway
To eternal life and peace!"
Our wishing and waiting bring small consolation;
With vague speculations no victory is won.
It takes faith and courage to win our salvation;
And we must determine whose side we are on.

This sets the actions in place – living correctly, trying to live the way Jesus taught was not easy. It was an active decision and required action – lip service would never be enough. In an increasingly secular world, having a faith was something that was almost ridiculed. The notion that living as Jesus wanted was not hard, but speaking about it was. Thus the position where the faith is acted out was welcome. Also if you fell off the path – because it is narrow – then you still had a chance to get back on.

2. In the midst of Earth's great market

Anxiously we look for gain;
We expect to be rewarded,
While avoiding work and strain.
The Lord who is offering work in His vineyard
Has called us to work and has promised to pay;
He calls for more workers to offer their service,
Although it is almost the end of the day.

The second verse is the one that spoke to me most when I was young and probably up to about twenty years ago. It reminded me of the parable of the vineyard – but expanded to include all of mankind. It didn't matter who they were, but all were hoping to reach that elusive goal of God's Kingdom without working for it. It was about the inclusiveness of all people in the world. It was also a lesson that we should not be jealous or envious of others. It also showed that it didn't matter at what time of life you became that worker in the vineyard – at what time you start living your life according to God's will as told to us by Jesus – the reward is the same. It shows that all are capable of redemption and we should not be the ones to judge others; that was to be left to God. It was also a lesson that we should not be jealous or envious of others.

9. From our present situation

Toward the goal we raise our eyes.
Let us constantly be striving

Lasting truth to realise.

This standard will help us to measure correctly;
We learn to distinguish the glass from the gold.
Not frightened nor tempted by cheap imitations,
We seek only that of which Jesus has told.

This is the second last verse and where I am now in my quest for faith. I find when I am looking for hymns and I choose the Templer Hymn, verse 9 will always be sung, as it appears to work well with whatever my reflection on the reading is. We can always be trying to get better. We are not perfect – most will never feel that they can lead a life as perfect as Jesus did, but we can still try to lead a better life. In today's society we have access to more information than ever before. How do we try to sift out the truth from the lies – consider here the debates around vaccination and climate change? How do we work out the truth? The fact is that when there is so much information around, we don't have time to read it all, and the sad truth is that when we read we tend to source articles that we think we will like – all this reinforces the ideas we already have. By using the commandments and the rules of thinking that Jesus taught us we can start to sort the truth from the lies.

10. To remember His commandments

And obey with heart and mind;
To believe His words of promise
Of God's Kingdom for mankind;
To recognise justice in Jesus our saviour,
Through whom God has offered redemption to all;
Let this be our goal and continuing purpose:
To hear Jesus' message and answer His call.

This is the last verse and again it is the exhortation to listen, read and understand Jesus' message. It is trying to find the nuggets of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels and work towards God's Kingdom

on Earth. The hymn has been translated from German and, while the sense has been beautifully conveyed, there is a line in the German version that mentions working towards God's Kingdom is good work and that it differs from those building the Tower of Babel who were building a tower to reach heaven because they could and for their own glory. There was no thought how this work would lead to the spiritual right living of the community – in fact it was to further their glory. Just working together and striving toward a goal is not enough if it is not done in the light of Jesus' teachings and trying to live a 'good' life. It does not work if we do not love each other and God as we are asked to.

Hymn 699 – A new commandment

My journey started in a community where all I knew was to work towards that goal of God's Kingdom on Earth – whatever that might mean. It was a community well aware that its situation in Australia was very different to what they had known in Palestine and that this brought a very different challenge to its members. As far as I can remember, no one ever blamed God for what had happened – it was this has happened and now we get on with rebuilding our community.

My own journey started with being aware that among the founding leaders were ancestors and wondering in my formative years what drove them to back their beliefs in face of considerable official opposition. But it was also realising that was their journey and belief, and I had to find my own way. The way they believed in God was theirs – I had to find my own. I remember sitting in a discussion group on faith being led by a scientist who, in the usual scientific way, was trying to define our terms so we clearly understood each other. We never got past defining the first word – God. It became clear to me then that we all have different understandings of what that word means – it is undefinable. But I have also reached an understanding that God is

that part where I go in a metaphysical sense to find strength within myself.

It left me free to journey on – I had many years of not going to a service regularly and spent a lot of time (and still do) listening to the Spirit of Things. It explores many areas and types of faith and how people believe, the similarities and the differences in religious belief. I came to understand that the Bible is not a history book, nor a science book – it is a book of how we can live a just life within the parameters set out in there. It is not always evident, because all the writings were written within the cultural context of the time and the society for whom they were writing or preaching. This was then collated at a later date by people who were trying to teach the same message to a different time. Although people now are no different to people past in religious understanding, the knowledge of the world around us and the society we live in are very different. In learning to differentiate between what Jesus actually taught and what people thought he meant and how to apply it in the society of the time are very different.

I had reached that point, and felt also that I was not contributing to my religious community enough, and feeling slightly guilty because that is the whole purpose of the Temple Society – to work together, each contributing with the talent or skill they have – when I was asked if I would like to become an Elder. The services in the TS are always held by an Elder, and while I was not sure if I had anything different to contribute, it was a challenge I accepted. That was about twenty years ago and I am still happy to contribute. I was lucky in a way because my first services were for our country service – about 20-30 people, usually sitting around a table or in a half-circle – and could talk remaining seated. Interjections from the floor were common and discussions about the service afterwards were had. For me, that was a space I felt comfortable in.

Every community member still works together within that shared belief. It is still an active form of belief where, when members are in need, others rally around. It is not always doing what the other member can't, but helping in those moments where an extra helping hand makes a lot of difference. Rod and I were on the receiving end of that help after the floods. We had not suffered any real damage but had lost a machinery shed. We had plans to use the iron to put a side on our hay shed. A team of workers turned up for a long weekend, and in two days the work was done. All we did was provide a place for their tents and food. A couple of people even helped in the kitchen. At times like that I feel I don't do enough, but I realise, too, it has always been that you do what you can.

Lord's Prayer

Offering

Hymn 147 – To God be the Glory

Blessing – our traditional

Benediction 778