

JUNE 26, 2016

FOUNDING DAY

ELDER
DR GEOFF MCCALLUM

(Themes major: Religion in the digital age. Love. Enlightenment. The seasons of life.)

Readings: Matthew Chapter 3, Acts 1: 1-10, Psalm 23, 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Elder: Geoff McCallum

Pianist: Victoria Schulz

I am pleased to welcome you here today for this Founding Day service. It is a pleasure to visit Sydney and in particular the NSW Templer Community.

I would like to introduce myself with a brief personal history.

I remember very well my first visit to Sydney in the summer of 1969. It was with my school friend and hereditary Templer Dieter Kirchner. If I am not mistaken, we had borrowed his mother's old VW Beetle for the trip. I remember visiting the Hoffmann family in Plumpton. Ingrid was our age and a good friend, especially of Dieter, who knew her from Point Lonsdale Camp. Ingrid and her friend Ursula showed us around and it was a very memorable visit.

I thought Sydney was magic with its wonderful climate and the physical beauty of the harbour and

the beaches. As an 18 year old, I felt my eyes had been opened to another life.

I would like to begin our service with a Hymn of awakening and optimism – Morning has broken, a hymn by Eleanor Farjeon, made famous by Cat Stephens.

Hymn 72 – Morning has broken

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since my first visit to Sydney but I still love to come here. Of my five kids, two live in Sydney which is of course another reason why I am happy to visit.

Although I was not born into a Templer family, I have been involved with the Temple Society since around 1966 and an Elder since around 1995. If my life has seasons, then I suppose I am now in autumn. But though all the seasons have had their share of storms, autumn is for the main part sunny, much as it tends to be in Melbourne.

Seasons are a good metaphor for human life. During the spring of my life I lived for a time in Japan. The Japanese are very conscious of nature and the seasons. As it is in Europe, spring is celebrated as the season of new life. Central to the celebration of spring in Japan, is the celebration of the flowering of the cherry blossoms. It is celebrated by picnics under the blossom trees, enjoying the

beauty of the pink blossoms. Women and girls in kimono, men drinking sake.

Just as we have our cultural metaphors, to the Japanese, the cherry blossoms are a metaphor for human life. They bud and flower and are beautiful then the blossoms fall in the wind and disappear from sight.

It is a poignant sad metaphor of the transitory ephemeral nature of human life in general, and youth in particular. It is a bit like the feelings we older people experience at a traditional wedding, where the bride and groom are beautiful in their youth, optimism and innocence. And the younger guests wonder why the older guests shed a tear!

Human life is a journey of discovery. We are born innocent. We discover our mother then our family and then discover the world at large. It is an outward looking experience.

The understanding of oneself and the inner journey generally comes much later.

Jesus, after whom the religion of Christianity is named, also had a journey. As we know, his earthly journey began when he was born of his mother Mary, in a stable in Bethlehem. This is why we celebrate Christmas. However today I would like to read an account of a later period in his life.

Matthew Chapter 3 (somewhat abridged)

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, was preaching in the Judean wilderness proclaiming the message, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is upon you." His clothing was a rough coat of camel's hair and ... his food was locusts and wild honey. People flocked to hear him and "they were baptised by him in the River Jordan confessing their sins."

Jesus arrived at the Jordan ... and came to John to be baptised. John tried to dissuade him saying, "It is I who need to be baptised by you." But he did baptise Jesus according to his wishes and "no sooner had Jesus been baptised and come up out of the water than the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove to alight upon him and there came a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved son in whom I take great delight.'"

Jesus' baptism signalled an abrupt change in his life's journey. After 40 days in the wilderness he embarked upon his life's mission. Today many of us would recognise Jesus' baptism as the moment when he underwent that profound and disturbing change in his perception of reality which Buddhists, Hindus and many Christians would describe as undergoing enlightenment or self-realisation.

In the book of Matthew, it is presented as a metaphor, a dove and a voice from heaven, as enlightenment cannot be told or taught, only experienced.

For Templars, today is designated as Founding Day. Since we call ourselves Christians it is interesting to reflect upon what came before Jesus in a religious sense, as well as what came after and how we come to exist as a religious community.

Jesus was a Jew and the history of Judaism can be traced back to Abraham who destroyed the idols in his father's shop and proclaimed a belief in one God.

There are many other heroic figures in Jewish history as recounted in the Old Testament, including Moses who led the Israelites out of servitude in Egypt and formed a Covenant with God which included the so-called Ten Commandments.

Many generations later came Jesus who, after undergoing his enlightenment experience, set about preaching a new interpretation of Judaism which focussed upon love, compassion and forgiveness.

How did the teachings of Jesus come to us? In large part it was due to the activities of Paul, otherwise known as Saul, who set up Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. Paul, the architect of Christian community life, never met Jesus in person; however I would like to read about how it was that he came to be Jesus' most effective disciple.

I quote from the book of Acts Chapter 9 verses 1-10 (translated in the Revised English Version): The reading concerns Saul, the strict Jew, the Pharisee and lethal persecutor of the followers of Jesus:

Acts 1: 1-10

Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest (in Jerusalem) and applied for letters to the synagogues in Damascus authorising him to arrest any followers of the New Way whom he found ... and bring them to Jerusalem. While he was on the road and nearing Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed all around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He replied, "Tell me Lord, who you are." The voice answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Saul got up from the ground but when he opened his eyes he could not see. They led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. He was blind for three days and took no food or drink.

Here we have another metaphorical account of an enlightenment experience, this time experienced by Saul or Paul. As with Jesus' baptism, enlightenment cannot be taught or explained and the author of the book of Acts almost certainly had an imperfect understanding of what Paul had experienced. But there is no doubt what effect it had on his life.

Christianity in Europe has a history. It was introduced by Paul and Peter and in 312AD the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Scroll forward 1200 years and the Catholic Church is well established throughout most of Europe but opulent and corrupt. It is funded in part by selling indulgences, which means places in heaven, to the rich and gullible. Then along comes Parish Priest Martin Luther who challenges the corruption of the Church by nailing a proclamation to the Wittenberg Cathedral door, and thus the Protestant movement was born.

But, sadly, even the Protestant Church in due course became institutionalised and restrictive leading Christoph Hoffmann and his fellow thinkers to found the Temple Society and in due course establish colonies in the then Palestine.

Hoffmann and his colleagues were in the main Millennialists, which meant that they believed in the imminent or soon return of Jesus and the thousand years of peace.

Well Jesus didn't return or hasn't returned and here we are, a century and a half later, a long way from Palestine and a long way from South Germany.

Since the time when the colonies were established, we have developed an understanding of the evolution of species and developed the theories of cosmology such as the big bang, which pretty much

do away with the need for a God the Creator. But does that leave us with God the anything, and is there any point in religion at all?

Historically religion in general and Christianity in particular served a number of functions.

It provided an explanation for natural phenomena which people could not understand. But science has pretty much taken the lead in this area even if our knowledge is still very incomplete.

It provided a system of regulation and governance, but most of these functions are now taken over by governments.

It provided a code of behaviour or law based on moral principles which was often enforced by punishments. Although such codes still exist in varying degrees based on the Old Testament of the Bible and, in the case of Islam, the Koran, at least in Western society, there is a secular legal system which fulfils these functions.

But, to be fair, the principles underpinning our Western legal system were in their origin based on Biblical morality and law.

It provided ceremonies for the big events of life: birth, coming of age, marriage and death. The Churches still fulfil some of these functions to a greater or lesser extent.

It provided spiritual guidance. How to understand humanity at a deeper level. How to adapt to challenge and change, bereavement and our own mortality. It also provided insights and guidance into how to view reality from another perspective, what one might call a Spiritual Perspective. Certainly the government does not do these things.

To further explore the question of what spirituality is, let us return to the source: the word. At the beginning of this service, I read Biblical accounts of the enlightenment experiences of Jesus and Paul. But scriptural wisdom does not begin there.

Let me take you back 1000 years before the birth of Jesus and read from one of the Psalms attributed to David, the shepherd who became king.

I use the King James Bible for this, as it sounds more poetic and the Psalms of David are poems or songs.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

What this Psalm reveals, is the psalmist looking beyond himself, or perhaps deeper within himself, for strength and guidance.

The passage from Matthew which I read to you earlier in the service about Jesus' baptism does not end with the "spirit of God descending from heaven like a dove".

If you read on into Matthew Chapter 4, you will find a further highly metaphorical account of Jesus spending the next 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. Why the wilderness?

One explanation is that Jesus was so overwhelmed by his altered perception of reality that he had to spend 40 days in solitude to come to terms with his changed view and decide on a course of action in the concrete world which the rest of us inhabit. Hence all the references to the devil and temptation etc.

It is a good thing Jesus did not have a mobile phone. If he had, his mother would probably have been ringing him four times per day to see that he was all right and then have sent one of the servants out on a donkey to bring him bread and cheese and wine.

What I am saying then is that our modern digital world, with its constant and seemingly inescapable connectedness, is the natural enemy of enlightenment or any significant spiritual development at all.

As an adolescent, I think I was somewhat fortunate to have had a rather solitary youth. Farm work, like being a shepherd, provides enough freedom from intrusion to allow deeper reflection and perhaps even some rudimentary spiritual development, albeit in the disguise of boredom.

And I recall well the solitude of the dark, lonely road. Many was the Sunday night I would find myself standing by the Western Highway in Deer Park, Melbourne hitchhiking back to my Agricultural College dormitory 200km away. It was not unusual to for me to arrive in Horsham in the early hours and walk the 12 or so kilometres to the college.

It sounds so dangerous today, and I am sure it was then, though it was not appreciated as such at the time. But the freedom from intrusion and stimulation was, in my view, an opportunity to escape from the trivia of everyday life and, even if I did not appreciate it at the time, nourishment for the soul.

I would like to return to Paul. He did have an enlightenment experience which shaped the rest of his life. I would like to read from 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13. For anybody who does not know, this is a short quote from a long letter written by Paul to the Christian community in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,

and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have,

and if I deliver my body to be burned,

but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient,

love is kind;

love is not jealous or boastful;

it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way;

it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

At weddings, this is sometimes where the reading stops. But there is more to it. It continues like this:

As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will pass away.

For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect;

but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully,
even as I have been fully understood.

So faith, hope, love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

Paul's letters are the earliest written records of Christian thinking. The last few verses do tell us some important things about Paul himself. The most obvious is the importance Paul placed on love.

But there is more. Even although he underwent an enlightenment experience on the road to Damascus. Even though he changed from the most zealous persecutor of Christians to Jesus' greatest apostle, his knowledge and understanding were, by his own admission, imperfect. His understanding of the spiritual essence of Jesus' teaching, of all religious teaching, was imperfect and incomplete.

Our spiritual understanding is also imperfect. However much we study and pray and meditate it remains imperfect. Like Paul, ultimate

understanding eludes us. If we do not realise this, we are practising a very simplistic and literal form of religion.

So I would say that there are two golden threads which run through Jesus' teaching and also through many or even most religions. Spiritual enlightenment is one. The other is love.

Though your understanding of the deeper spiritual mysteries may be imperfect, and enlightenment may elude you, you do have access to love and nothing is more important than this.

Let us sing together the Templer Hymn.

Hymn 1: Seek ye first of all God's Kingdom
(the first two and the last two verses – 1, 2, 9 and 10)

Love we can understand, even if we are not always as adept at its practice as we should or could be. It is certainly a golden thread running through Christianity even if it is not always as evident as it should be.

The deeper thread in most or even all serious religions, which is less accessible to us than love, is spiritual enlightenment as experienced by Jesus and Paul and by the Buddha and by others, and by even many more on their death beds.

When I was a young man, and having realised all the things which God was not, I used to say that faith was the irrational belief in the occurrence of the improbable.

Today I would say that faith is the belief that there is another way to see reality, different to the common sense way and separate from the explanations

of the physical and biological world articulated by science.

But to catch glimpses of the other way of understanding reality, it helps to be receptive. This is where solitude and freedom from interruption come in. You need to create the space and the peace and the open mindedness for these things to happen.

You may never achieve full enlightenment but then again you might. And if not in the spring, summer or autumn of your life, you may experience enlightenment as your life draws to a close.

And in the words of the Psalmist you may indeed, dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

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I thank you all for coming today. I greatly appreciate your hospitality.

I thank Victoria, our pianist, for her musical accompaniment.

I understand that Peter and Bev Leszinsky are going to follow the service with a slideshow of their recent trip to the Holy Land.

I close the formal part of the service with a blessing of Paul:

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.

Post Script: The service was followed by a light lunch during which Peter and Bev Leszinsky presented a most interesting slideshow focussing

on the preservation and restoration of many of the buildings from the Templer colonies in modern Israel. It was pleasing that those structures, and the work of the families who inhabited them, is achieving some form of recognition and appreciation.