

Honouring the name afresh

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 12 June 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Trinity Sunday C

**Contemporary Reading: 'There is no spiritual program',
by John O'Donohue in *Anam Cara*; John 16: 12-15**

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

'Cheer, cheer, the red and the white/ honour the name by day and by night' – yes, that is the beginning of the song of the Sydney Swans. To my mind, and I admit my bias as a long-time Swans fan, it is the best of all the AFL club songs. For I won't name names, but, with all respect, parts of some other clubs' songs are, well, somewhat embarrassing. However, if Swans supporters are being completely honest, even we probably wouldn't claim our anthem to be the greatest song ever written. I do wonder too, after all the rain we have had, and the consequent problems, whether the line *'shake down the thunder from the sky'* is all that appropriate to sing right now?!

I guess that is the point of what, in the best sense of the word, we might call 'tribal' songs. They may not always be perfect. They might even be awkward at times. We may not hold straightforwardly to all the details. We might even want to change some of them - and sometimes manage to make that change - just as the original Sydney Swans line *'while our loyal sons are marching'* was changed, in March last year, to *'while our loyal swans are marching'*, reflecting the emergence of the Swans girls youth program and the Swans women's team (happily, albeit belatedly, to play in the AFLW later this year).

They may also be quite annoying to others, even, after a victory, even a little insulting and enraging perhaps to some. However, despite all their limitations, such tribal songs are part of giving expression to shared experiences of deep connection and community, and to forms of faith and hope. As such, trite though they may be in comparison, I feel that they thus give us one way into approaching the historic ecumenical creeds of the Christian Church...

Now I won't reflect at any length this morning on the Apostles Creed, which Jade will affirm in her baptism today – except, mainly, to ask what do we make of our historic creeds and how do we want to use them in the days ahead? For this congregation has a tradition of sitting light to the historic creeds, and rarely using of them up front in liturgy. Yet the wider Church generally has a different practice and outlook. Indeed, within the Uniting Church, both the Basis of Union and ordination and licensing charges to Ministers are also clear that the historic ecumenical creeds are to be used in liturgy and teaching. For the Uniting Church, with the wider historic Churches, is insistent that baptism must specifically be carried out *'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'*.

This is part of our Christian tribal identity, linking us with the wider Church through time and space, through the different centuries and cultures, and into eternity. So how then do we respond and journey with this? How, if you like, do we handle our Christian 'tribal' songs?

Our Gospel reading today is very relevant to such reflection. In part of Jesus' wider, and deep, Trinitarian discourse, Jesus says '*when the Spirit of all truth comes, he will guide you into all truth... and will declare to you the things that are to come.*' What do you make of that? Different Christians have developed that in quite contrasting ways. Many Anglicans in the diocese of Sydney for example, would argue that '*the truth*' of which Jesus is speaking here is the '*the truth*' revealed by God and found in the Bible. So, in line with many other Reformed Christians, for many of our Anglican Christians siblings near us, the Holy Spirit is particularly understood as an interpreter of scripture and a guide to the end times.

Others however, particularly many Progressive Christians, would understand this as indicating that the Holy Spirit will bring new truth, and new ways of seeing and being truth: new truth that may even leave both scripture and wider Christian tradition behind. Meanwhile, with varying limits and emphases, mainstream historic Christianity has understood these words of Jesus as indicating that God as Holy Trinity is a God of many dimensions, eternal and dynamic, now and yet to come, past, present, and future, all rolled up in one.

This passage indeed is one which resonates with John Henry Newman's influential concept of 'development' in Christian life and thought. Whilst God, in essence, said Newman, is beyond human change, the Church itself can, and must evolve, for this is at the heart of God in Godself, and the work of the Holy Spirit. As the Roman Catholic Church has understood it - with mainstream Anglicans, Lutherans, and others, but in varying ways - development of doctrine, order and expression of the Church will, and must, consequently happen over time. Yet how, such traditions frequently ask, do we maintain our shared apostolic mission and identity? How do we grow as one tribe?

I am glad that Jade is keen to affirm the Apostles Creed today because, in doing so, she also invites all of us both to reflect upon our own understandings of faith and also on our relationships with others in the wider Body of Christ. In sharing this great ancient 'tribal' song of the Church, she helps connect us with our living heritage across space and time, and assists us to revisit what we may or may not have seen in it, thereby encouraging us to a richer and deeper awareness of the experience of God the Holy Trinity whom we celebrate today.

So, what, do you think, is involved in living an authentic Christian life today, in thought and word, as well as deed? How do the historic ecumenical creeds help us? It is a tricky question, and one which can divide liberals from progressives, as well as liberals and progressives from conservatives and fundamentalists. I suspect there is real tension for us in this in our own Pitt Street community, reflecting dynamics in the wider Christian and secular communities.

On the one hand, on grounds of seeking strong authenticity and integrity, we might read today's Gospel as primarily a call to follow the Holy Spirit on new pathways. If we have doubts about certain words or phrases in the creeds for example, or in scripture, we may feel we need simply to avoid or alter them. I know for Jade, for example, what might seem to some as patriarchal language of 'Father' and 'Son', has given her pause for reflection. We may feel, perhaps with personal human wounds, that such words are not only unhelpful but difficult for us or for others.

On the other hand, to dispense with the historic creeds, is to risk cutting ourselves off from relationship - relationship not only with other Christians, past and present, but with vital aspects of God represented by the creeds as symbols of faith, and as incarnate pointers to ultimate mystery which may be disclosed in new ways, but which also subsist in the whole of time and space, not simply our own times and perceptions. Development in faith, as in life, as Newman put it, does not mean that anything is possible.

The process of '*germination and maturation*' of faith, will be a life-sustaining '*development*', he said, only if '*the assemblage of aspects, which constitute its ultimate shape, really belongs to the idea from which they start.*' Or, more simply, '*young birds do not grow into fishes.*'¹ As the UCA Basis of Union affirms, attention to our 'tribal' songs and traditions is therefore, also important to our development, lest perceived 'new truth' of the Holy Spirit is actually distraction.

Personally, I feel that it is not easy to rehabilitate ancient language for God in our contemporary world. I am also convinced that some Christians need to be actively exploring different language, liturgical, theological and practical expressions into God. Indeed too few are, and so that is part of the continuing call and charism of this particular faith community in Pitt Street. Yet, as a self-proclaimed 'progressive' congregation, I think we also do ourselves no favours if we push away too much of our 'tribal' heritage. It is good to revisit features of it from time to time, including metaphors and symbols which may seem quite foreign, and even difficult at times.

I said earlier that I do not want to speak at any length about the Apostles Creed as such, at this point. Yet, I am wondering about offering some opportunity for exploration, perhaps using Brother David Stendhal-Rast's open and generous book *Deeper Than Words*. For the moment, alongside some of our other shared Christian 'tribal' songs and features, I invite us all, with Jade, to reconnect with the deep mystery to which they point: that ultimately inexpressible reality which we name as Holy Trinity, which is so much more a doorway into living mystery than a threat of enclosure.

As John O'Donohue said, drawing on the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart: *in a sense there is actually no spiritual program, no set of words or practices, which can point us to God*. Rather spiritual growth begins right where we are, with ourselves, and in deepening our awareness and relationship to the God, within, around and beyond us, now and always, witnessed to in all the great 'tribal' songs of our common Faith and bursting with fresh joy and hope into new vibrant expression.

May Jade, and may we all, therefore know that relationship more fully, and live more vividly, joyfully and faithfully, into the future.

In the Name of God: immortal and invisible; intimate and incarnate; inspiring and indestructible; God in Holy Trinity. Amen.

¹ See further J.N.Newman *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*