

Easter 6 (A) and Holy Baptism, CCSY, 29 May 2011

Acts 17:22-31; Ps 66:7-19; 1 Pet 3:8-22; Jn 14:15-21

I wonder which edifice St Paul would stand in front of in this city today, were he to address Melbournians as he did the Athenians all those years ago: 'I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For . . . I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship.'

Would he set up his soapbox at Gate 6 of the MCG? Or, by a café on the river outside the casino, perhaps? Or even, as other zealots do, on the steps of Flinders Street Station, observing the goings on in the town Square, and – across the road – at the altar in the cathedral church named for him?

At least Paul can't be accused by his fellow apostle, Peter, of not being ready to account for the hope within him. Whether it was done with gentleness and reverence for the traditions he encountered in Athens, however, is debatable.

His 'baptism' of the altar to an unknown god could be said to smack of the colonizing tendency which has characterized so much Christian mission – not least in this country, as recently as last century: the crude mapping over of existing religious beliefs and cultural practices with a reading of the Gospel that is no less inculturated.¹

Of course, we encounter Paul here in Acts through the lens of the evangelist Luke, rather than in his own voice. In the middle of this National Week of Reconciliation we do well to remember that, of all the New Testament writers, Paul is the only one to use the specific language of reconciliation, even if the theme is present elsewhere.

In his correspondence with the church in Corinth, we read,

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:17a, 18)

As the sacramental way in which we lay hold of being 'in Christ', baptism commissions us for the ministry of reconciliation in the places we are set, as 'ambassadors for Christ', to use Paul's metaphor, 'since God is making his appeal through us,' as he explains to the Corinthians (5:20a). As he did when standing before the Areopagus, Paul draws here on the things he sees around him: in particular, the language of diplomacy – the political rhetoric – of his own time and place. But he takes what is culturally familiar, as Luke has him do in Athens, and recasts it to suit his own rhetorical purposes as an ambassador for Christ.

We preach first to ourselves, it is said, and Paul knew himself as a new creation from his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, through whom God appealed to Paul as an enemy of Christ's body, the Church – the Saul from last week's first reading, you may remember, who held the coats of those stripping down to stone the first Christian martyr, Stephen – making of this formidable enemy an influential friend.

¹ As Leonardo Boff explains, 'The *inculturation* of the gospel is the process by which a culture assimilates the gospel in terms of its own cultural matrices.' *Good News to the Poor* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992), 8.

This experience of God's transforming initiative in his own life leads Paul to turn the concept of reconciliation, as his contemporaries understood it, on its head, in at least two ways. First, whereas it was customary in the Greco-Roman world for those responsible for any rift to take responsibility for restoring relations, in Paul's framework all the impetus for reconciliation flows from what God has already done in Christ. Second, reconciliation cannot be achieved on the basis of a one-off apology, or act of reparation, without radical and ongoing changes in the way community was formed and maintained. This means there can be no reconciliation without lasting justice. Reconciliation, then, as Paul recasts it, brings about a double exchange: friendship for enmity, and justice for sin.²

The theme of Reconciliation Week this year, as celebrated by our Parish School here on Friday, is 'Recognition'; and in his *re-cognizing* – his thinking through again and afresh of what is culturally familiar – Paul models the '*re-cognition*' that is required if God's counter-intuitive reconciling work in Christ is to gain traction in us and through us.

Baptism, likewise, is the Church's rite of 're-cognition': recognizing ourselves 'in Christ' as never-to-be-orphaned children of God; and – as a result of this incorporation into his crucified and risen body, 're-cognizing' present realities in terms of God's future. This is what twentieth-century geologist and Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, called the 'Omega Point', the 'Christifying' of all matter,³ as God draws all things to their reconciled completion and fullness in Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega.

In the baptism, the 'Christ-ening', the 'Christifying' of William Ewert today, we see this cosmic vocation writ small. What William might become – what each of us might become – is set before us afresh, and we know, we recognize, William and ourselves as those through whom God's future must break into the present.

As with any ritual practice or symbolic system, like the ritual meal of this Eucharist, baptism serves as both a model *for* reality, and a model *of* reality.⁴ That is to say, it at once informs and reflects our sense of those deepest truths into which God's Spirit is leading us; it is where the possibilities of God's future meet and challenge the limitations of the present. As a baptized and baptizing people, we must live with and within that constant tension between what is 'now' and what is 'not yet'; but always with a sense that what is 'not yet' – that God's vision of and for us in the risen Christ – is the *primary* reality, the new and more substantial creation.

Font and altar; objects for our worship that have less to do with being 'extremely religious', to return to Paul's apologetics in Athens, than with becoming more fully human, as we search and grope through all of our cultural and religious matrices for the God who is ever abiding with us and within us, and in whom we live and move and have our (human) being.

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² Compare the juxtaposition of reconciliation and justice in Rom 5:1-11. See Geoffrey Burn, 'Reconciliation and Land in Australia', *Pacifica* 24:1, 80-100, and here at 90-91.

³ Denis Edwards, 'Teilhard's Vision as Agenda for Rahner's Christology', *Pacifica* 23.2 (2010): 233-45, and see 234-35.

⁴ See robin Koning, 'Clifford Geertz's account of Culture as a Resource for Theology', *Pacifica* 23.1 (2010): 33-57, and especially 50-51.