

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETIES

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The theme of this conference is communities in transition and social transformation and my task is to provide you with some theological reflection upon that theme. Of course, the very fact that we are speaking about change and transformation in or of communities at all, is somewhat unusual, given that much religious thinking and endeavour in the past history of the Church has centred upon the transformation of persons rather than the transformation of communities. Individual persons, and their personal relationship with God, rather than the transformation of society and the reformation of its unjust structures, has up till recent times dominated our Christian thought patterns. So the first thing to be done is to try to explain how we got this way.

Generally speaking, much of the religious thought of the past, both Catholic and Protestant, has been conditioned by the input of St Augustine of Hippo, who in the second half of the 4th and early 5th century sowed the seeds of a way of thinking that prevailed in the Christian West up until very recent times, indeed, up until the time of our own living experience. Prior to his conversion Augustine had been a Neoplatonist, and when he came to the New Testament he naturally tended to read it with Neo-platonic glasses. Neoplatonism was the invention of Plotinus who started out with Plato's distinction between the world of eternal and changeless ideas and the world of material objects of this passing world, and then introduced some modifications of his own in between. So let me begin with my version of Plato for beginners, as it were, a crash course in Plato. For Plato, you can close your eyes and conjure up before your mind's eye the eternal ideal apple, a perfectly shaped, beautiful, red and polished apple, without blemish, and this ideal apple can be compared with all the particular imperfectly shaped, changing, decaying, blemished and multi-coloured apples of this world, which are far from changeless and eternal for they are all in process either of coming to be or passing away. These real apples of this world are all pale reflections or shadows of that ideal, changeless and eternal or perfect apple, that you can conjure up before your mind's eye, and you can consult that ideal prototype whenever you need to identify a piece of fruit as an apple. You can say 'This is an apple' because what you are holding compares more or less with the prototype of the ideal apple before our minds eye. Plato thought that we were all born with the imprint of the eternal ideas already in our minds

because our pre-existent souls had contemplated them prior to our earthly existence. As you know, John Locke and the English empiricists (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) abandoned the Platonic belief in the pre-existence of souls and propounded the philosophical view that at birth our mind is a blank slate and we learn what, for example, an apple is through ostensive definition, by our parents pointing to an apple and saying 'apple'. We learn the meaning of the word as the image is imprinted on our mind. From then on if we want to identify an apple we consult the mental image that we carry in our minds. So, for the empiricists the way we learn the ideas is different from Plato, but the epistemic schema is much the same.

Well, Plotinus began with that distinction between the changelessly eternal and ideal and the real and changing world of Plato, and then began to insert a ladder of being or a graded series of forms in between to construct a kind of ordered world view. So he started with formless matter at the bottom, material chaos, and ended with the ideal or matter-less forms of things, the eternal ideas of Plato, at the top, and in between he inserted various grades of being. He started with the mud and slush of disordered creation, a kind of pig sty, and introduced an initial element of order to it, so that it became good fertile soil and then with a little more refinement it became even pristine and clean beach sand; and then there were the plants, cactus and ill-formed plants, and pumpkins, and then tomatoes and plums, and cherries and flowers, beautiful daffodils, and then animals in various grades or refinement and beauty, and then human persons, men above women of course, and good men above corrupt and sinful men and criminals, and then spiritual men and right thinking men, philosophers, and above the humans were the angels and purely spiritual non-material beings, also in various orders, angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim, and so on, and finally for Plotinus, there was the One, the single uncomplicated divine principle who endowed the whole with form and order, emanating down and petering out in material chaos at the bottom.

So Neoplatonism ordered creation in a kind of ladder of perfection, starting with formless matter at the bottom of the created order, and moving up through various grades of being, with increasing order and form to the matterless or purely imaginary forms of pure thought of the ideal and spiritual world at the top. In the Middle Ages gothic architecture expressed this Neoplatonic framework in its high soaring lines towards the clerestory at the top, where the light flowed in and down by gradations to the darker shadows below; in such buildings the soul was lifted up in worship and contemplation from this world to glimpse in a moment of enlightenment something of the vision of the divine.

Now, Augustine came to the New Testament with this Neoplatonic schema already in his head, and it gave him a basic scheme for interpreting the human predicament and the impact of God's good ordering and grace upon the human predicament. He understood human beings to be destined to move up the ladder of perfection with the help of God's grace, to resist the downward pull or *gravitas* of sinfulness with the help or grace of God, particularly through the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament, in order to achieve the ultimate goal, the *Visio Dei*, the heavenly Vision of God. So salvation was understood in a highly individualized sense, and the chief end of man was the *Visio Dei*.

Now, this essentially Neoplatonic schema was taken over by the Western Church under Augustine's influence. The basic debates and disputes of the Christian West have therefore had to do with the mechanisms whereby a human individual moves up the ladder of perfection towards the goal of the Vision of God, the *Visio Dei*. The Catholic side has emphasized the mediating role of the institutional Church in this process, and the place of the Sacraments; the Protestant side has underlined the preaching of the Word and the appeal to the scriptures as the ultimate source of authority in coming to enlightenment - the mind of God. But in each case, whether it is an enlightened conformity to the sovereign will of God, or formation in holiness by receiving the sacraments, these are the channels of the grace of God that assist each human individual to resist the downward pull of sin so as to be released from it to move heavenward. Any glimpse of heaven, any fleeting moment of enlightenment experienced in this world along the way, was a fleeting break in the clouds, as it were, a glimpse of the anticipated *Visio Dei*, the heavenly vision of the glory of God which awaits us after death. So, under the influence of Augustine, and the Neoplatonic glasses with which he read the scriptures, we have our inherited basic structure of Christian understanding and much of our Christian activity in the past has had to do with creating a revolution, a complete turn around within the hearts and minds of individuals to get them moving on this upward escalator towards God.

Even quite sophisticated twentieth century theologies, such as those of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in the first half of the twentieth century, presupposed this basic schema. For example, Bultmann became famous for his programme of demythologization in which he argued that much of the pictorial language presupposed by the New Testament involved belief in a three decker universe, with heaven above and hell below and earth sandwiched in between, and that Christian belief was not just a matter of believing in the existence of a whole load of objective realities of that mythological three tiered world view. Rather, the preacher of the Word of God had to so de-objectify the language, so that it was no longer heard as an objective description of a past state of affairs of that first century world or as an

objectifying description of the heavenly world to which the believer had to be coaxed into giving his or her assent, rather the Word of God had to be so proclaimed in the hour in Church on a Sunday morning as to be heard existentially, not as objectifying description of an external state of affairs but essentially as an address to a human subject. In the case of Bultmann, revelation was said to occur in a moment of enlightenment between the hours of 10 and 11 am on a Sunday morning when the Word of God was preached. When I hear the preaching as an address to me, calling me to see myself as a creature, limited and fragile, and dependent on my Creator, then I glimpse both the enlightening presence of the Creator God who at that timeless moment addresses me and, at the same time, I grasp in that moment of authentic self-understanding, my true identity as essentially a dependent a creature called to obedient discipleship; in one hit, in that fleeting moment of revelation, self-knowledge and enlightenment I glimpse the *Visio Dei*. All this off-loaded a hierarchical or three tiered view of the universe but it is really still very Augustinian in its understanding of the revelation of God.

But then in the mid 1960s a dramatic change came upon theology. I think the chief architect was undoubtedly Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian at Tübingen, who was undoubtedly the most influential theologian of the second half of the twentieth century, but there were others who around that time came to see that if they took off the Neoplatonic glasses which Augustine had bequeathed to successive generations of Christians, then a quite different perspective opened up (Wolfhart Pannenberg, John Baptist Metz, Carl Braaten etc.).

It should be said that they were helped to make what was really a kind of paradigm shift by the fact that Christians were deep in conversation with Marxism at the time. Indeed, Jurgen Moltmann taught in the theology faculty at Tübingen in Germany. At the same time, in the early 1960s there was a philosopher teaching in the philosophy faculty at Tübingen called Ernst Bloch. Bloch had been visiting in Tübingen from East Germany when the Berlin Wall went up. He so disagreed with the building of the wall that he refused to return to Communist East Germany and so remained in Tübingen in West Germany as a kind of philosophical Marxist refugee from East European Marxism. In any event Bloch's great work was entitled *The Principle of Hope* in which he pointed out that the concept of hope is hugely important for the transformation of communities. Unless the workers unite in their hope of achieving a better world, they will remain in their chains. More importantly, Bloch (though not a believer) drew upon many Old Testament images of the Israelites in bondage and of their release from captivity and their journeying towards the land of promise, in order to expound his philosophy of hope. This clearly resonated with the Christian theologians of the theology faculty, and Moltmann in 1966 produced his seminal work, *The Theology of Hope*. It was a

hugely important work. Led by Moltmann, the theologians of hope saw for example, that the basic thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures was not oriented upwards towards the Vision of God, but more horizontally from past to future, and that the fundamental theme of the scriptures has to do with promise and fulfilment, God's promises to his people, and his faithfulness to his promise, which grounds all their hopes for the future. Revelation thus began to be understood not as a fleeting moment of enlightenment in the present but essentially in terms of the category of promise oriented towards a future fulfilment. So a basic schema of promise and fulfilment, memory and hope, began to provide a different kind of structure from the inherited Neoplatonic Augustinian verticle schema within which to begin to think theologically. Within this new schema, instead of the ultimate individual quest for the Vision of God, the object of Christian hope becomes not the *Visio Dei*, the Vision of God, so much as the vision of man as God can make him or the vision of woman as God can make her, the vision of humanity as humanity can become. From a Christian perspective grounded in the revelation of Jesus, the object of hope is the Kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed to be dawning in this world. Thus, Jesus taught the parables of the Kingdom, which set forth the values that are expressed when the reign of God is acknowledged; and he taught us to pray, not 'Get me from this world to the heavenly vision of your Kingdom above' but rather 'Your Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven.'

In this schema the sacraments become not means of grace designed to help individuals to resist the downward pull of this world in their ascent from this world towards the enlightenment of heaven, so much as a down payment or pledge as St Paul would have said, in this present world of what is yet to come, a further fulfilment. They are the sacramental signs of the Kingdom. The eucharist which gathers together all the baptised of a particular place in one communion and fellowship around the sharing of the loaf and cup, regardless of the usual human divisions based on race, or class, or gender, with which the world is so familiar, takes its place in this schema as a promise or anticipation of the messianic banquet when men and women of every race and nation will sit down together in love and peace in the Kingdom of God.

The prayer of the Church is not a closing out of the world; rather, in prayer we hold up the unredeemed face of this world before the image of God's promised Kingdom, and we wrestle with the all too apparent discontinuities: 'How long, O Lord. How long?'

Moreover, if the chief orientation in this schema is the future dawning Kingdom of God, towards which we move in active hope; then what we hope for calls in question the world that we have got and makes us dissatisfied with it and prompts us to work for its

transformation. Hope becomes not an armchair hope but an active hope. And this is why, for theological reasons, we work under and imperative to get involved not just with the transformation of individual personal lives but also with the transformation of communities. It is all triggered by the Christian hope.

In this perspective the Christian community, the Church is the anticipation of the future dawning Kingdom of God, that part of the world where the Kingdom of God is already dawning in the faithful and obedient responses of God's disciples who hear his word and align themselves with his good purposes. The Church is thus the prolepsis or anticipation or vanguard of the Kingdom. The idea of a vanguard is not common in our contemporary mentality. We sometimes talk of a rearguard action, but rarely of the vanguard. I grew up at a time when there was a kind of motor vehicle called a Vanguard, the name was intended to suggest that it was a leader in the field, the one in the van out front by contrast with those trailing behind in the rear.

In naval parlance, the van sails at the front of a fleet of ships by contrast with the rearguard. If you know anything of the tactics of Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, instead of sailing up to the line of enemy ships in parallel and blasting away at each other, Nelson with a smaller number of ships than the French, deliberately and quite unexpectedly because it had never been done before, sailed his line of ships right through the middle of the French line. He then dealt with the last half of the French fleet while the first half sailed gaily on. The heavy cumbersome vessels had to turn around in the wind and come back to the fight. By then too much damage had been done and Nelson won. And the point is that it was the van of the French fleet that sailed on, those at the head of the line while Nelson disposed of the rearguard.

Likewise, the Church is the vanguard of the Kingdom, the place at the leading edge of things where the Kingdom of God is already dawning in the world, where the values of the Kingdom are being upheld in lives of faithful discipleship, and where the values of the Kingdom of love, and peace, and neighbourly care, and justice and forgiveness, and human reconciliation, all the values that are expressed in the parables of Jesus and lived out in his life and death, are beginning to show themselves in transformative action, so as to change and transform society. As I often say, the Church is advance publicity of coming attractions.

I think it is also the case that in his teaching about the relation of the Church to the world, Jesus always taught that his disciples would be a minority doing a transformative work for the majority. He spoke of the presence of his disciples in the world in terms of salt, light, and

yeast. The role of salt is not to turn the world into more salt necessarily, but to give flavour to the stew. Likewise, yeast raises up the quality of the dough and makes it less heavy. It is not intended to turn the dough into more yeast. Light gives light to the world to help it on its way, its chief task is not to turn the world into more light. So the Church is understood as a minority or representative people doing a work for the social whole. In the process others will join in the work, the Church will grow. But there is nothing to suggest that the chief aim is to change the whole stew or loaf into more salt or yeast.

Now this means that whatever we do in the Church by way of education for example, we consciously act as leaven in the lump, as a minority performing a service for the social whole. And if the Church is always the anticipation or vanguard of the Kingdom, what we do should always be seen as a ground breaking exercise, at the leading edge of society. We take initiatives that cannot be taken, or that can only be taken with difficulty in the State School system, given State managerial control of schools and their comparative lack of financial autonomy. But eventually what we are able to achieve should prompt the State also to move in a particular direction and so to urge it to catch up. This is how our presence in education operates as salt or yeast. When that happens, when the State catches up by providing similar resources or teaching programmes or new initiatives in education, we do not rest upon our laurels, but move forward once again, prompted by our renewed hope.

Similarly in welfare work, we are not just in the business of crisis care, band aids and Asprin, though there is a need for that kind of welfare. But we are also involved in challenging unjust structures that bind people down, by bringing the values of the Kingdom of God to bear upon them. Once again our social critique flows out of the values of the Kingdom, and we work in active hope towards the achievement of a better world. I often like to quote the words of George Bernard Shaw, so much loved by the Kennedys in America: "Some look at the sorry state of this present world and shake their heads and ask 'Why?' Others look to the world of the future and ask 'Why not?'"

Well, that in more precise terms can we draw out of this for understanding our mission as welfare agencies of our Church? I think the first thing to be said is that the work of care is not peripheral to the core business of the Church. It is integral to the core business of the Church, an essential part of our mission, not an optional extra, as it were. Welfare is not an extra-curricular activity of the Church that is somehow secondary to the primary of core activity. It is not that our primary business is the worship conducted by parishes, and that welfare work is secondary to that. Rather, these two activities are woven together in a single whole. For worship is an activity in which we celebrate and give thanks for the redemption

won by Christ; in worship we are renewed in our identity as we hear again the call of God and the assurance of his promise; we are renewed in our hope. And insofar as, in the central act of our Christian worship, as we break the loaf and share the cup we are re-made in the communion of God, our worship is an event of the re-making and transforming of society – as such it is an anticipatory sign of the Kingdom. But that is also what the delivery of care to the marginalized and needy is also about – it is a visible and tangible sign of the nearness of the Kingdom. So, your work is integral and not just peripheral to the mission of the Church in the world.

Secondly, if our Christian hope keeps us on the move as we live within the tension of promise and fulfilment, we should not resent change as though it were an unwelcome intrusion into a more settled and more desirable routine. For the Christian, the normal state of affairs is not a state of rest, as though the ideal situation in which to be were one where we are undisturbed. Every age is an age of transition. That is unavoidable. I wonder if you know the story about Adam and Eve, who, when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden, were leaving it for a world of thistles and snakes, and work and labour pains, Adam was heard to say to Eve: ‘Madam, we live in an age of transition.’ Every age is an age of transition, but sometimes we become particularly conscious that the cake of custom is being broken up. In such a situation we may yearn for calm, stability, peace. Religion has often in the past been used to secure the *status quo* and endow it with a sense of legitimacy. But alas, if every age is an age of transition, we should not only accept that change is a norm, but embrace change. Indeed, as Christians who understand our mission in terms of a vanguard of the Kingdom, at the leading edge of change, we are, even more than people who embrace change; we are agents of change. Change, the transition to something new, is the norm if we interpret life from within the Biblical perspective of promise and fulfilment.

Third, I have sometimes said that as Christians we cannot really ever be conservatives. This is because we are always oriented towards the dawning future Kingdom of God, the reign of the god who promises to make all things new. We need to remember that the first Christians were seen as somewhat disruptive agents of social change. In *Acts 17:6* with reference to Paulo and Silas we read, not that they turned a few lives around, but that ‘These men have turned the world upside down.’ This means that we are destined to be quiet revolutionaries, not supports to the *status quo*, but critics of it. For what we hope for always calls in question the purely historical developments of the past; what we hope for calls in question the world that we have got. That is why we necessarily get involved in advocacy for refugees, and the aged and marginalized and the unemployed. Very often, perhaps more often than not, we

will therefore find ourselves being critical of government, regardless of what political party is in power.

Fourthly, this certainly means we cannot allow ourselves as welfare agencies to be put in the situation where we are contracted to do little more than administer government programmes. There is nothing wrong with administering government contracts providing, of course, we bring our own qualities of commitment to love and human service to the work. But we will always need to ensure that we have adequate resources of our own, whether raised from appeals or Op Shops or other outside sources of finance, so as to be in some degree independent on Government. If we are called to be the vanguard of the Kingdom, we always need to be free to step ahead of what Government is prepared or willing to fund. Indeed, the resources to allow us to take entirely new initiatives and then to demonstrate to Government that a particular work deserves to be funded and so to attract government funding is absolutely vital if we are to be true to our vocation as Church agencies always to be vanguards of the Kingdom in the world. If governments can be persuaded to take over the funding of a particular programme, then our job is then to look for a new initiative so as to step out ahead as the leading edge of social transformation.

So my chief point is, not only is the Church's welfare work integral to the proclamation of the Gospel of the dawning Kingdom of God in the world, the Church must live with a consciousness of its identity and vocation to be the leading edge of God's transforming work in the world.

Finally, let me give you a concrete example of the kind of ministry I think we are therefore called to, understood from this perspective and of what may be required of us in our dealings with Government. Many of you will remember **David Roberts** who during this last year retired as Director of Parkerville Childrens' Home in Perth. David and his wife Annette had worked at Parkerville over a 26 year period, first as cottage parents, and then they passed through all stops in between, prior to David's appointment as Director. David continued to champion the cottage model for the care of children at Parkerville in the face of a prevailing ideological commitment of an anti-institutional kind that favoured foster parenting. He could see what the Department in its ideologically driven way failed to see: that some difficult to serve children might run through a succession of foster parents, making the institutional work of experts in the field absolutely vital at the end of the day. In this role David was in my experience a person of terrier-like determination, who always refused to be talked into less than standards of utter professionalism and best practice, despite attempts of successive

State Government Departments and Ministers to cut corners. I recall him remonstrating with a number of Government Ministers about funding levels, refusing sign contracts until adequate funds were provided to meet the needs of the children, and refusing just to make do with a bed-and-breakfast service when there was need of remedial school work or orthodontic treatment for a needy child. Above all, he was a person whose work was conditioned by an absolute commitment to the well-being of children. I can remember going with David to remonstrate about the levels of funding for child-care with one WA Minister for Community Services; at that stage we were simply refusing to sign a new contract and this went on for over 18 months. The Government was still providing financial support for the children and we were sending in added bills to cover the extra work that we felt needed to be done, but without a contract. David says he recalls one point when I threw a draft contract into the Ministers waste paper bin. I do not remember that. But I certainly do remember telling the Minister that we were not just going to provide a bed and breakfast service without proper case management and if she was not going to fund the programme properly it would be better for us to pull out of the work than compromise our principles. And I pointed out that the 40+ wards of State for whom we provided residential care were actually her responsibility. The aghast look on her face when I said we might regrettably have to put them all in a bus and deliver them to her home was something always to be remembered. I mention this because I think it is the vocation of experts in the field to urge us bishops on, so as to take the risks that are sometimes necessary for the advancement of the Kingdom and the transformation of society. Indeed, I think we Bishops need you as experts in the field of welfare to urge us on in this kind of way.

For, do not forget, that welfare is necessarily an integral and central element in the Church's mission once it is clearly seen that our Gospel good news is the announcement of the imminent dawning of the Kingdom or reign of God in the world. This necessarily leads us all into the work of transforming communities for good as we work in active hope.