

THE GERARD TUCKER ORATION DELIVERED BY: KASY CHAMBERS

**Sunday, 18 August 2019
Anglican Parish of Christ Church South Yarra**

“Beyond Tucker: poverty and hope in modern Australia”

Conny and I were, last week, part of a study tour of our sister Anglican organisations in New Zealand. Much has stuck from that experience (and much is still to be processed) but one thing truly seems to resonate this evening; something someone said to us just last Friday.

He said, “To look forward you must first look back”. To look back to where we have come from, to who we are, and to look back to our identity that will then show us the way, and carry us forward.

And so, it is that we are here tonight to look back towards the Brotherhood’s founder, Father Gerard Tucker, and in doing so examine and rediscover and honour your identity at the Brotherhood and reaffirm the way forward – the compass direction and the point on the map of 2019 and beyond where that takes us.

I’ve called this address Beyond Tucker which may sound a little callous at worst or confusing at best given I have also talked already about looking back. The reason for this title is that many of us did not know personally know Father Tucker, or even live at the same time in his world. In fact, he died when I was a little girl on the other side of the planet. However, I have become increasingly aware of and indebted to his legacy as I have got to know the sector and particularly the Brotherhood. My title for tonight is intended to move us beyond the physical man in the past and firmly into the future and his very real legacy.

My first exposure to Father Tucker was to hear a quote from him about discomfort and his wish that we should all feel it. I use this as one of my measures as I challenge myself in my work; as we finish a project, as we hold difficult negotiations, as we describe a better path for society. Have I felt enough discomfort? Have I pushed the boundaries far enough?

I am deeply honoured to be standing before you tonight and believe me tonight I do feel the discomfort that Gerard Tucker wished on those with a conscience. I feel totally overwhelmed by the next twenty minutes or so but also a deep sense of privilege to have been asked to give this oration. I am aware that I am the first non-clergy to give this oration and that the perspective I bring is that of a lay person.

As many of us know Father Tucker was horrified by the poverty of the Melbourne slums he encountered in the early part of the 20th century. Housing and the wretchedness of it in 1920's Melbourne affected him deeply. Employment at that time on the cusp of and during the Great Depression was often hard to come by, hard to do, unsafe and took its toll on malnourished bodies poorly housed.

We can even see the problems he despised as he made a film about it so that those who had leisure time could see the lives of those that did not. These are the roots of the proud tradition of innovation at the Brotherhood as it seeks to raise awareness about and bring an end to poverty.

Surely our times now in 2019 cannot have much in common with those times?

I do not want to spend your time reciting figures and statistics to you but let us consider just a few examples as we sketch a picture of 21st century poverty in Australia.

As many of you know the unemployment benefit has not been increased in real terms since 1994, 25 years ago. The chorus of voices calling for a rise includes not just the usual suspects (including the Brotherhood) but also the governor of the Reserve Bank, the Business Council, and conservative politicians.

Anglicare Australia's research report, *Going Without*, shows that people spend 122% of their income from the minute they go onto Newstart – starting a downward spiral of high interest payday loans, going without even the basics and poverty that leaves them ill prepared for taking up work.

In terms of housing fewer people own their own homes than they did in the golden housing age of last half of the 20th century. More and more people are living longer and longer in the private rental market. Not a bad thing in and of itself except that our tenancy

agreements are hugely skewed towards the landlords reflecting a time when this sort of accommodation was a temporary stop for most between the parental and marital home.

People in the rental market today move more often than they wish to, struggle to call the place home and in the case of elderly people in particular, report being afraid to ask for modifications such as grab rails in the shower for fear of rent increases or even eviction.

And of course, this housing is expensive with people regularly spending up to even 80% of their income on the rent and moving school books, dental appointments, insurance and even food into the category of discretionary spending.

That other great pillar of wellbeing – employment has also not fared well since the turn of the century. While not everyone can work due to disability, mental or physical illness, or the need or desire to care for others; those that can have been traditionally protected against the worst of poverty. In the past Australia led the way in many areas of employment policy prescribing adequacy and dignity through moves like the Harvester agreement and the industrial awards system.

Last year we passed a sad milestone in employment in Australia; for the first time less than half of those employed were working in a full-time job with leave entitlements¹. Professor Brian Howe, long term friend of the Brotherhood, predicted this as Chair of the Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia in 2012²; that we would have a situation where there was secure work for a few with a new class of insecurely employed around the periphery. Indeed, we have a whole new class of working poor in Australia where underemployment and a minimum wage that is inadequate to meet the cost of rent lead to working people accessing charity so that in effect we are using these welfare benefits to subsidise big business and employers. Professor Howe's only lack of foresight was just how quickly those changes have occurred.

And a particular passion for Tucker was the plight of older people. I wonder what he would make now of a fairly common story of a manual worker laid off at 56 with nine years of

¹ The Dimensions of insecure work: A Factbook. Dr Tanya Carey and Dr Jim Stanford. Centre for future work. May 2018

² Lives on Hold: Unlocking the potential of Australia's Workforce. Final report of the independent Inquiry into insecure work in Australia. May 2012

inadequate Newstart payments and little hope of reemployment. Moving to an aged pension at 65 that is predicated on owning your own house and therefore having no housing costs. And to cap it off then having difficulty accessing care to help her stay in her own home because the landlord won't allow the modifications necessary so moving to residential aged care prematurely and not out of choice. And indeed, single older women are now the fastest growing group of homeless people.

What we now see is that the risk of economic change and development has been shifted firmly onto the individual. If you lose your job, if you join an industry that later gets restructured, if you are injured at work, if you didn't achieve at school, or fail to get into the secure workforce you risk precarious housing and precarious employment and subsequent poverty.

I have so far only talked of indicators of economic poverty but inadequate income, unaffordable and insecure housing and precarious work lead to other, almost more harmful forms of poverty.

If you can't see forward far enough to imagine a time when you might be given a chance you develop a paucity of aspiration. Where is the point in aspiring to undertake training to be a bookkeeper when you can't afford to heat a quiet place in your house to study or even the Internet for the kids to do their homework? Where is the point in painting a bedroom in expectation of the new life you will bring home from the hospital when you are on a month by month lease? Where can you find the hope and bravery to put yourself through another job application when you haven't heard back from the last 273? And yes, that is a number I heard from a young man in Newcastle.

The yearning to belong is something truly human and yet so many people in this precarious society we have created experience real poverty in belonging. Loneliness is a growing issue with huge effects on people's physical and mental health. Yet once again monetary poverty leads to poverty of belonging. When you don't have enough to eat you don't invite your children's friends around for tea after school, playing on school sports teams is out because of the extra cost of the uniform. And while you don't invite people to your house you can't meet in a café either when the price of a cup of tea equates to a quarter of your daily income after rent.

And sooner or later all of this leads to a poverty of enfranchisement. A sense that your voice isn't heard, that your vote doesn't count. That you are a cog in the wheel of this economy rather than an active citizen. A loss of power and a sense that no one would care what you thought.

And finally, I see a great poverty of kindness. The criminalisation of welfare, the assumption that those in poverty are different to us makes it very easy for us to start to treat them differently. To make them into "the other". Once we do this we can blame them for their plight. We can see poverty as a symptom of a moral failing of that person.

So, may be there isn't too much difference between Tucker's Melbourne and ours and as we meet here tonight in Gerard Tucker's own church I have to ask myself "Is this the society God wanted for his people?".

Many myths about poverty exist. "The poor will always be with you" always taken out of context; that a "rising tide floats all boats" as a rationale for promoting extreme capitalism; and one my own sector is fond of "poverty is a wicked problem" for wicked read unsolvable.

I want to take issue with the last one. Many of the symptoms of poverty – the things caused by poverty may indeed be wicked problems – mental health, drug use, chronic health issues, disillusion and disenfranchisement. However monetary poverty in Australia itself could be solved. At Anglicare Australia we modelled the money foregone by society in tax concessions such as negative gearing, superannuation, private health and education GST exemptions, and discretionary trusts³. Over \$135 billion was foregone by Australia in its choice to make those concessions. The distribution of them was equally disturbing; \$68.55 billion went to the richest 20%, and only \$6.14 billion went to the poorest 20%. The concessions to landlords alone to provide that private rental market we talked about earlier are worth \$14.8 billion year and yet none of that public money forgone is delivering secure or affordable rentals. These concessions mean that we do not tax income from property the way we tax income from labour for example.

So, we have the way, but do we have the will?

³ The Cost of Privilege: A Research paper by Per Capita for Anglicare Australia Emma Dawson and Warwick Smith. March 2018

Many of us may now be starting to feel the eyes of that small bespectacled figure of Father Tucker burning into us. I am not immune to that discomfort – I benefit from some of these concessions in superannuation for example and many of us here tonight will.

But I use this to show that this is a choice, having such a gap between those on government benefits and those in the top quintile of income is not a law of physics, it is not a law of economics, and it certainly isn't God's law.

This is a structural poverty that we have built and not a moral failing of the individual.

Earlier I asked, "is this sort of the society God wanted for his people?". I now pose myself a different question "As people of God are we creating a society that honours God and his Creation"?

So, what is different between now and Tucker's Melbourne? Of course, there are many differences between then and now but one I want to use this question to focus on the topical issue of democracy.

I have a great love of history – it gives me perspective (and it attempts to teach me humility). As we began here tonight so we need to understand our past to not blunder through our future. In reading about the working classes in Britain and Australia in the period between the world wars, the time of Tucker, it seems to me you can pick out great optimism and hope about democracy. Rarely do you see references of people being urged to vote for themselves alone but rather for a better society which in turn would offer them and all their neighbours a better life. This is more than economics, it is an acknowledgement that we are people in relationship with each other and that poverty diminishes us all.

I wonder what those folks would have made of our recent federal election. One where neighbour was turned against neighbour – whether that was those with jobs against those without, the young against the old, or those of us that won the lottery of birth and live in Australia against those that didn't. An election campaign where the only thing people were asked to assess was the wellbeing of their own hip pocket.

There is much newsprint and server space taken up with the lament about the state of democracy and all from better brains than mine. I do not just want to re-prosecute the

lament about the state of democracy on the world stage. Although I do think it is worth asking ourselves who has missed out in the gains of extreme consumerism and globalisation in the last 30 years.

It is also worth reviewing what democracy really means, or rather the different ways it has been expressed over the years.

The current form in Australia and the rest of the western world seems a little lazy and more than a little patronizing – vote for us once every three or four years and then let us get on with things, don't trouble yourselves. This leads to the view that politicians are in it for themselves, that they are all the same and that they are different to us. And if many of us lose faith in our ability to have agency, to change things - what must those people who feel forgotten, left behind and "othered" feel?

In other societies in other times whilst the right to vote was limited to a small part of the population they did have other ideas worthy of revisiting. Regular fora about issues of public importance; the principle of subsidiarity – smaller governing areas where things that matter locally can be determined locally. Conversations about meaningful differences in how we think about things. Developing a genuine understanding of the varying options.

These sorts of ideas seem to me to be at the heart of a strong democracy that can truly work for the benefit of all and not just a few. The state of politics does not seem to offer many opportunities for this sort of engagement at the moment. However, I think that this is where we come in; when we dismiss democracy as only politics we are complicit with the lazy view that we cannot change anything, that they are in it for themselves. We deepen the trench, we even cast the politician as the other. Let's not forget that they are our government, they need hear from all of us and be part of us. Politicians are not inherently bad people, in fact I think most are truly motivated for the best of reasons. But cynicism and systems, short term interests and disinterest do not serve democracy well.

Let's take up this challenge and use the power and influence that the Brotherhood has to develop these other parts of democracy. Let's call it "small d democracy" the sort that happens around tables over cups of tea, that involves everyone and for which I think we all yearn.

The Brotherhood has a lot to contribute here. You have a proud history of not buying into the destructive narrative of the “other”, of recognizing people’s inherent worth and strengths. It is incumbent upon us to hold this strongly so that as a trusted voice reflecting Tucker’s passion for research, you can promote national discussion and knowledge amongst the country’s leadership. It is not an easy balance to develop the facts that can cause discomfort and yet to be trusted in relationships to tell of those. But this is at the heart of what the Brotherhood does and has always done. And this is what we are called to do.

You have the opportunity to work in local communities in ways that matter in that community and you do so in ways that respect the people and their strengths; not the fly in do unto fly out version of government service delivery affected by some organisations. The communities you build like the Coolibah centre give belonging to people and can also be the places where small d democracy conversations happen, where these voices are elevated.

The Brotherhood is in a unique position, given your identity and past, to be with people, to stand alongside people not only to campaign for monetary wellbeing but to address those other poverty’s of aspiration, belonging and franchise. We must let people know that their voice does count because many others are telling them it doesn’t. We must tell people they do matter and they are loved because many others are telling them otherwise. We must create communities where people can and do belong. These are communities which are truly inclusive and empowered.

I live in hope that by doing these things we will lead a way back to a space of greater public kindness. And when that happens we will all be the richer for the voices of all will be heard. The Brotherhood has always led the way, I ask that you add to your list keeping small d democracy alive while big d democracy catches up.

Father Gerard Tucker was without doubt a very influential person. To be the innovative organisation of his legacy you can never take your eyes off the future, but doing it knowing where you have come from and who you are will keep you true to your mission.

The Brotherhood is true to its identity and to its past and is well placed to lead the sort of society we want, not just for ourselves but for those poorer and richer than us, for the planet itself. The heady brew of research, politics and compassion that is the Brotherhood

today would be instantly recognisable to Father Tucker as you stand in solidarity with the poor and needy, and challenge injustice and oppression - The marks of mission of the Church whose mission you are in action.

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