

Anglicare Australia National Conference 2005

John Roffey Memorial Lecture

Massah and Meribah (Gathering around the Rock). Connecting with a theology of hope in a culture of diversity.

The Venerable Dr Cathy Thomson, Diocese of Adelaide

Ladies and Gentlemen

The places where we gather are important. I would once more like to acknowledge that our conference takes place in the land of the Durumbal people.

It is a great privilege to be asked to give the John Roffey Memorial lecture. To be invited to address a National Conference of the stature of this annual Anglicare conference is undoubtedly a great honour in itself. But there is for me an overarching sense of personal privilege, that I have an opportunity, publicly, to pay tribute to John Roffey.

John was warden of St Barnabas' Theological College in Adelaide for three out of the four years of my time of training there as a candidate for ordination. John had a relaxed, almost "laid back" style of leading and guiding the college community. However this ease of style belied a vigilance to pose for each of the candidates in his care appropriate challenges to deepen in them elements of the priestly character. John wanted us to become the best human beings we could be, and he wanted for the Church which he loved to the depths of his being, a generation of priests that would serve it out of the depths of their being.

John was an eminent Old Testament scholar, who loved the Hebrew language. He loved the way the sounds and meanings of the language leant themselves to the poetic sensibility of the Hebrew people, God's people, who had given voice to that language. And he knew that the language, and the Old Testament texts that were written in it, were capable of drawing the very heart of the reader towards God. John was concerned to develop his students awareness that the Hebrew Scriptures have a capacity to reveal that "profligate" sense of the sacred: that it is in us, amongst us and around us, and that it invests with holiness the very ground on which we stand.

I, and many of my contemporaries, would be very different priests today if it hadn't been for John Roffey. (I don't mean any irony in that!) I owe John a personal debt that two years after my ordination he caught up with me and said, "Now what about starting that doctorate?" And there began another saga in my life...

We are each marked by the grace of the lives of others. I appreciate very much that there is grace in memory and imagination, in speech in service, of a generation of theological students of which I am one, that to some extent bear marks of the grace of the life of another. I am not alone in knowing I have a great deal to thank John Roffey for...

Now to a story inscribed not in the memory of living human beings, but one immortalised in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, John favourite source book for meaning.

In the story you are about to hear a natural physical place is transformed, an event is interpreted in a way that gives shape to meaning, ambiguities are uncovered, conflicts are laid bare. Out of all this emerges a model for discourse that will serve well the church and its agencies, as they seek to develop a theology of hope in a culture of diversity.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you. Take into your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It was a tired, hungry, thirsty and disgruntled group that gathered around the rock at Horeb. And they were dysfunctional as well. Their argument was with God, and they knew it, but they projected their angst onto their faithful leaders Moses and Aaron. They had reached the point when insecurity translates into contempt. Isn't it about time we had some water to drink? Why did you bring us out of Egypt to this place? Are you trying to kill us with hunger and thirst? Well we may as well have stayed in Egypt, in our slavery. At least we would have had a bite to eat. It is remarkable that Moses remained their faithful advocate with God, despite the derision.

On God's instructions, Moses gathered them around a rock. God promised Moses that God would be present in that place, "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock of Horeb." Moses struck the rock with his staff, and clean, drinking water gushed forth to satisfy the people's thirst.

And from that day on, the place was called Massah which means "test", and Meribah which means "quarrel", because here the Israelites quarrelled with Moses and Aaron and tested God.

How we visualise the rock might help us appropriate the meaning of the story: Was this "rock" one of a piddling rubble of boulders that you wouldn't give a second look to? Was it the promontory of a ridge that jutted out and imposed an invitation on Moses? Was it a mysterious standing stone waiting to be invested with social as well

as sacred meaning? Or, was it already a holy rock, one at which the children of Israel would naturally gather to seek nurture and strength and reassurance?

We know that it was limestone. Biblical commentaries tell us that in the wilderness of Sin, this desert place situated in what is now the Sinai peninsula, underneath the limestone formations there are underground streams which could conceivably be accessed by cracking open a rock at ground level. However, it is not the supernatural, legendary elements of the story that interest me, but the meaning that the story invests in the rock, and the potential for this gathering to provide us with a model for public discourse that assists the church and its agencies with our contemporary challenges.

The rock was a dry place, characteristic of wilderness, of semi-desert terrain. A place of aridity, which mirrored the spiritual aridity of the Hebrew people. The rock was also a place of discourse, a discourse which in the circumstances quickly gravitated towards quarrel and complaint of a people gathered with their advocate, whom they were progressively alienating. But the rock was also the place where God was present, and the rock became the place of the gushing forth of new life and renewed hope in the form of life-giving springs of water. When it was all over, the rock never quite returned to being itself. It had been shattered in order to sustain human life, and it had been named for ever a place of quarrel and complaint. As so often happens, the landscape that sustains our human life bears the inscription of the story of human ignominy. And the landscape that provides a resting place for the sacred is yet unable to withstand that presence and remain unchanged.

Within our Anglican Church and within its agencies there are opportunities for us to "gather around the rock". Western people are discursive people, in other words we do not explore our issues and resolve our difficulties in the deep searching silences of native north American people for example, nor in the retracing of the wisdom of the ancestors in dreamtime stories like indigenous Australians. No, we like to gather around and have an argument! (What in the contemporary vernacular of my Scottish birthplace would be called "a bit of a chinwag").

Sometimes I feel defeated by the outcomes of the "chinwags" that take place in our church. Often they are marked by rancour, deep division, and occasionally a callous sort of brutality that discredits our humanity, to make no mention of our aspirations to be a moral people, and a holy people.

But a number of you may be wondering what all this testing and quarrelling has to do with us? Surely an august body of people such as those gathered for an Anglicare conference would have no truck with disagreement or dissent. Surely there could be no milder nor more compliant group than those gathered here, October, 2005, at Yeppoon?

I hope you will bear with me a while, and allow me to unpack the potential for this story to offer us, the church and agencies of the church, a model for our discourse

Allow me then to prevail upon you once more that picture of the Massah and Meribah meeting place, of which I am sure you have by now formed your own mental picture. This was a place where all the children of Israel gathered. It would be a mistake to imagine them an homogenous group. They were twelve tribes. Most of us are aware

of the depredations of tribalism in situations where people are struggling to maintain identity while they value difference. The first point for our model then is that they were all there, and they all had a voice, albeit a complaining one. In this discourse, diverse groups had a place and could articulate a voice.

Secondly, Moses was there with them, a leader and advocate and the most faithful servant of the God they feared on the one hand, and on the other "had it in for". The second point is that in public discourse those who bear the burden and responsibility of leadership: individuals, agencies, representative, advocates are often conflicted, not because they are hapless individuals or inept organisations. They are conflicted because of the situation in which they find themselves.

Thirdly, let us recognise ourselves in the characters of the story: God's people self identified as such, struggling with life and death issues. If the people have no water, they will die. Yet the gathered community is also struggling to maintain religious meaning amidst these significant life challenges. Is God with us or not? Is right on our side or not? Are we on the side of the angels, or not? The third element to take note of for our discourse is that discussions around life and death issues which are crucial in themselves are always underpinned by a search for spiritual meaning about the nature of life, and my, our, significance within it.

Fourthly, the place itself – that place of quarrel and of testing – was a place of significant ambiguity. The rock around which the people gathered is a place of both aridity and fluidity, the place of both thirst and satisfaction, the place of desolation and hope. Here the very presence of the sacred seems remote; yet here the grace of God attends every word, and bends even to grumbling.

This, then, is not a place devoid of the Spirit of God, even if the children of Israel initially felt that it was. In the story God said to Moses, "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock of Horeb." Nor did the presence of God depend on the words or actions or general behaviour of the people. God's presence with them was gratuitous as it was unconditional.

This dry rock was therefore not a place bereft of the capacity to give and sustain life. After all, it was from the rock of quarrel and test that the waters of life gushed forth. It was at the Israelites' moment of greatest desolation that their God was closest to them. Our story tells us that the place of disputation can also be the place of grace.

We have derived six principles for discourse:

- (1) The disputation that we take part in, the discursive aspects of the life we share together, should take note of and afford expression to the diverse nature of our company and of our constituencies
- (2) In public discourse we must recognise that our leaders are often in conflict. This provokes the need for the offer of compassionate support for these leaders, as well as an impulse to "keep them honest."
- (3) Issues that are presented as life and death issues, usually *are* life and death issues. But they are often undergirded by a deep search for meaning
- (4) The internal discourses of our communities, as well as the public discourse they engage in, are often marked by disagreement and difficulty. And the outcomes are often ambiguous.

- (5) This discourse may seem to isolate us from the centre of our being, the source of our spirituality, yet that source is never far from us. What's more, it does not depend on our being right or even good: it is there as a gift.
- (6) The interior landscapes of person, and social landscapes of organisations and communities, remain marked by the discourses within which they participate. We may be accused forever of being that disgruntled mob, that "cursed priest". We must bear the disfigurement of the fray, at the same time that we drink in deeply from the life-giving impulses that derive from being in it.

The upshot of this is that for the Church and its agencies in discourse which often feels life denying, and within which there are undoubtedly life-denying elements, there is potential for a wellspring of possibility to open up because we are a community gathered with our leaders, gathered with our constituents, around a source of meaning that underpins everything that we do.

Now I have probably been about as theological as a gathering of mixed company will allow. I now turn to the task of trying to relate what is beginning to emerge for me as a theology of hope in the midst of some imperfect modes of discourse. I do this around those issues of life and death that concern us, and shape us as people of meaning.

Let me turn my attention first of all to the Anglican Church itself. Perhaps the clearest contemporary example of the Church's struggle to develop a theology of hope in a culture of diversity is in issues over sexuality. For the Church this is an internal struggle, but one with credibility implications within the local community, in terms of how we love, welcome and include our neighbours. It has implications also for the Church's standing in the global community, where our neighbours are as diverse as developing nations which still rely to a great extent on cash economies, to super-developed nations positing democracies underpinned by bill of rights sensibilities.

The general public in Australia, as well as journalistic interests serving the global community, are interested in how the Church resolves this issue. I am ambivalent that it is an issue of our quarrel that draws us into public discourse here. I am concerned that it is an area of our internal contention that attracts the interest of the general public in the church. Yet I recognise that quarrel is one of the prevailing elements of discourse, and we must trust the potential of the Spirit of God to sustain God's people as they journey through the wilderness of this time.

Church parties hardened into theological identities derived from their history and culture, express differences around how they interpret the Bible. Social theorists would probably tell us that there is more to it than just that. These differences are played out politically in our synods, particularly our national synods where they take on a heightened significance, as a national church tries to circumscribe the different identities of a range of dioceses.

The issues have been played out in international discourse in groups such as the Primates Group of the Anglican Communion and the Lambeth Conference, a meeting of Bishops of the Church. They have influenced the production of texts such as the Windsor Report, developed to provide a model whereby innovation in the church can be negotiated and "received" over a long period of time. There are some

characteristics of the discourse that remain unsatisfactory to the people in the pews. Firstly it has been mediated through gatherings of bishops, and very senior bishops at that, whose concern for unity in the Church has inadvertently forced the discourse to become rarified and univocal. Unity is the organising principle, and concern for justice often gets lost. With respect to the Windsor Report, disappointingly, this was a report that didn't take into account the issue of difference itself. Indeed it viewed diversity as a problematic. It became therefore an exercise in containment that failed to assist the church deal with diversity itself, and thereby generate models of discourse and invent strategies to help us manage diversity creatively.

I want to say just a few more things about this. There needs to be recognition in communities marked by diversity, that diversity itself and how we manage it, and celebrate it, is one of our core concerns. Miroslav Volf in a book entitled *Exclusion and Embrace* tells us this: "It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world - in the living rooms in inner cities, or on the mountain ranges - testify indisputably to its importance..." This is a message that the Church still needs to accept.

With respect to the entrenched nature of the beliefs that divide us. Bruce Kaye in *Reinventing Anglicanism* and Stanley Hauerwas in a book called *Sanctify them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* have explored Alasdair MacIntyre's idea that differences in beliefs and the co-existence of diverging belief systems is actually a function of "epistemological crisis." In other words, beliefs are formed around the question: how it that we learn to know, and accept that we know, what it is we believe that we know? Beliefs are also formed within a tradition. They are never constructed in a vacuum.

Quarrelling with fundamentalists may seem the stance that has the greatest integrity for a person like me in the Church. It may seem the best model for our shared discourse. And "quarrelling" is in fact what we as Church have attempted to do. So far in our synods we have considered issues that we know to be controversial such as sexuality and ordination, and the consecration of women as bishops. We do so by lining up adversarial (albeit civilised adversarial) presentations and hitting it out across the floor of synod, usually to result in a predictable non-resolution of the issues. This is hardly the best form of discourse to maintain identity whilst tolerating difference in our Church. We must begin to consider gathering together around a different kind of discursive model that might assist us, not to agree, but to live tolerably with disagreement. This, I believe is one of the main internal challenges for the Anglican Church in the 21st century.

Interestingly though, if our discourse itself does not serve the management and celebration of diversity, within the church there are political structures that actually do contribute to the maintenance of diversity. In the Anglican Church of Australia, no canons passed by General Synod will become applicable in individual dioceses unless passed by diocesan synods. So where the General Synod of 2004 seemed wholeheartedly to support a code of conduct for clergy and church workers which arguably pandered to a fundamentalist agenda, and which I know caused considerable anxiety in Anglicare circles and in Anglican school circles, only three of our diocesan synods have passed it. The national Code of conduct may have given a perception of a cohesive stance against abuse, yet it had represented a significant confusion of

issues by implying a link between homosexuality and child abuse. Fortunately it was undermined by a more localised discourse that has resulted in the qualification of the extreme elements of the national position. One way or another, we all get to gather around that rock.

The ambiguities of our church discourses are laid bare: as national and international polity concerned with a univocal preoccupation with "unity," in some senses vies with more localised diocesan impulses which encompass a justice discourse. Therefore as fundamentalism flexes its muscles at the national and international level, it is disrupted and undermined at the local. We are gathered around that rock in all the pain and ambiguity of the experience, with modes of discourse that have not yet been sufficiently refined, but with the Spirit of God working hope in the midst of us. "I will be standing there before you on the rock of Horeb."

I turn now with some trepidation to the situation of caring agencies with respect to their internal and public discourses which attempt to take note of and manage a concern for diversity. I am very aware that I am less well qualified than almost everyone else in this room to make comments here. So, I offer my humble observations and suggestions in the hope that they may in some measure support and sustain this company (of mild, compliant souls) in your work of meeting and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I understand that Anglicare has begun to gather around a different rock in your recent move of your peak body, Anglicare Australia, to a new situation in Canberra. This is a move rationalised in terms of improving access to a whole range of discursive partners, other caring agencies who already have peak body representation in Canberra, as well as to the Federal Government. Is there potential for quarrel and test in this new situation? Well, inevitably...

I was very interested to read the Joy MacLennan address delivered recently in Adelaide by Eva Cox, an academic from Sydney University of Technology. (It is of course significant that this lecture was delivered in the context of the Adelaide Festival of Ideas. This was an effective way of widening the scope of our discourse, and engaging with the community). Eva Cox articulated a number of clear challenges for non-government organisations generally, and particularly for those who substantially depend for their funding on the federal government. She perceived a tendency of NGOs towards disinclination to challenge the status quo and advance their advocacy role in favour of the vulnerable sections of society. Her suggestion was that the advocacy role of these organisations, a form of public discourse in which by their very nature they have always participated, could become compromised as the organisations themselves become closely tied to government funding bodies.

It seems that caring agencies are not so much gathered around the rock, as finding themselves situated between a rock and a hard place. And the leaders are often conflicted as they try to negotiate the values systems of their organisations, which encompass concern for the poor and marginalised, in a marketplace where expectations of political compliance seem increasingly to prevail.

This situation is analogous with the challenges in a Church that is sometimes tempted to engage in a univocal discourse about unity that leaves out concern for justice. I

hope that non-government caring organisations will find ways to avoid univocal discourse that leads to a concern for compliance and leaves out advocacy for justice.

Now I am not suggesting by any stretch of the imagination that Anglicare has become swallowed up in that particular trap. I was heartened to read in last year's annual report about Anglicare's exploitation of the opportunity that arises in the political insecurity of marginal seats at election times. Anglicare's willingness to launch campaigns in support of the eradication of poverty, a strong advocacy campaign, in those politically unstable places was a sign of consummate strategising, that could not be accused of being politically partisan. And which in the words of the report, "put poverty itself on the agenda".

There is of course the prevailing concern about whose job it is to speak out. Centralising impulses may wish to leave this task to the peak body which, I understand, is the body which engaged the recent media campaign on Anti-Poverty week. But should individual organisations have a role to play in stimulating discussion at state level? Clearly it is important that the challenges of the contemporary funding situation are recognised and addressed by agencies such as Anglicare Australia, as well as its constituent bodies at their local level.

One way to help address this potentially compromising situation is to maintain the integrity of the discourses that take place within the organisation itself. It would be important to recognise the danger that leaders might negotiate the common values of the organisation in ways that have potential to alienate the very people with whom those values are shared. I mean that, at a structural level, leaders must be vigilant that as they promulgate shared values of justice and equity, they take into account the paradigm within which these values are mediated. There is no point speaking of shared values of an organisation if some are wishing to promote them through existing political structures and norms while others feel that the value base itself suggests an imperative for political change.

Again this is very like the Church whose international and national agenda can direct it towards univocity of discourse, which is then only diversified by the more "grassroots" diocesan discourse. So too with community service agencies. These are organisations whose management is more and more determined by legislation and governance compliance concerns. And we know these to be a double-edged sword, at once assuring laudable accountability structures, whilst also having potential to again limit the participation of the grassroots in decision making. As Eva Cox remarked there is a danger for political processes to exclude others further down the power chain. Using my own theological paradigm, it would seem important that we are all there, gathered around the rock.

Another way of addressing the kind of ambiguities that arise in community service organisations that can be divisive is to assure that the very value base of the organisation is in an ongoing way scrutinised for ethical integrity. I read a book by Peter Singer recently on the ethics of George Bush, which demonstrated that there can be an ethical divergence between what can seem a laudable set of basic values and the actions chosen to carry them out. And more insidiously, that the "values" themselves lose all cogency unless they are anchored to a strong, well-founded ethical system that

is able to be clearly articulated and used as a measure because it sets the values in their philosophical context.

I mention the need for ethical integrity because well-worked ethical systems can be derived from the discourse of groups that wish to articulate the shared values even although they are diverse by their very nature. I am now not referring to diversity with respect to different levels such as executive governance, middle management and grassroots professional practice. I refer rather to the diversity that comes from the fact that despite Anglicare's clear Christian derivation, not all those associated with Anglicare are avowedly Christian. In a situation where a foundational religious value system has to work alongside intuitions deriving from a range of social theory models, and I affirm that it is good to have the various threads present, an appropriate and helpful discursive meeting place is the ethical sphere.

I hope Anglicare Australia as it seeks to extend its research base, will be keen always to include some ethics research. This should offer both an historical appreciation of the ethical foundations of our society, and ongoing checks and balances that will evaluate the integrity of ethical systems, value statements, modes of discourse, and actions that claim to implement the lot!

I said with respect to Massah and Meribah that much of what we struggle with as life and death issues, the provision of life-giving services to the most vulnerable in our community, are underpinned by deeper spiritual issues of meaning. For Christians, this is worked out at the level of the faith, for non-Christians often at the level of values-derived stances. When both forms of discourse meet in an organisation like Anglicare, they find their meaning in an ethics discourse.

I would want to conclude by saying that discourse that takes place within community services organisations can be helped by referring to the model derived from the Massah and Meribah story.

Thus, the disputation these organisations take part in, the discursive aspects of the life they share together, should take note of and afford expression to the diverse nature of the organisations and their constituencies. Secondly, in public discourse we must recognise that leaders of community organisations are often in conflict. This provokes the need for the offer of compassionate support for these leaders, as well as an impulse to "keep them honest." Thirdly, issues that are presented as life and death issues, usually *are* life and death issues. But they are often undergirded by a deep search for meaning. One place where this search for meaning can begin to be explored is in the area of good sound ethics research and development. Fourthly, we can expect that the internal discourses of organisations, as well as the public discourse they engage in, will be marked by disagreement and difficulty. And the outcomes are often ambiguous.

But I hope that I have demonstrated that a theology of hope resides in our being open to the presence and power of the sacred in our midst. Christians define this as the presence of God, others who wish to take a less confessional stance, will nevertheless have experienced the profligate forms of grace that often spring up into the midst of our conversations, in our endeavours, even when they are difficult, conflicted or ambiguous. When we are engaged in godly discourses and in the goodly work

amongst the ones for whom God has the greatest concern, the presence of the sacred is never far from us.

And we are all changed by what we do. Marked for ever by the trials of the difficult work we undertake, by the frustrations of sometimes being misunderstood or misrepresented, by the brick walls our conversations often lead us to. We must bear the disfigurement of the fray, at the same time that we drink in deeply from the life-giving impulses that derive from being in it.

For me, a Celt, the rock of Massah and Meribah is a giant standing stone which conveys just the hint of a suggestion that it could be carved into a monolithic, if rough-hewn, Celtic cross. It is a mark of the pastiche of the postmodern that I dare to introduce an image of a Celtic standing stone into a discourse about a rock in the Sinai desert during the second millennium BC, and then impose it onto a discussion taking place amongst a gathering of contemporary Australians. (However I have to say, I am an unrepentant postmodernist, and therein lies the subject of another address at another time).

I imagine that if I were to reach out and touch my stone the quality of the tactile in hardness, roughness, coldness or warmth would generate in my heart a sense of closeness to a creator God who chooses to mediate complexity in the elemental, and who catches me up into a loving embrace at the very moment that I am having a great "spit" at the fundamentalists. Which is why if I gather around my rock with my friends, Christians and non-Christians alike, oh and I suppose the fundamentalists as well, I would expect robust conversation for starters, and that we would all leave a little more tolerant of the differences that make us who we are.

God said to Moses: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock so that water may come out of it, and the people may drink..."

Cathy Thomson