

National Anglicare Conference

The John Roffey Lecture 2016

God as Trinity: The God who 'speaks and acts' alongside the vulnerable

Pre-amble

It is a great pleasure to give the 'John Roffey Lecture' here in Darwin. I knew John in two capacities: warden of St Barnabas College, Adelaide, and CEO of Anglicare. I had graduated from St Barnabas College, Adelaide, by the time John had become the Warden of the College, but I came to know him around the diocese, and from the occasional lecture or address that I would hear John give. John became CEO of Anglicare in Adelaide when I served in the Diocese of Willochra, but our paths did cross on a number of occasions. I knew John had an important influence on many of his students, and colleagues, in keeping the Christian faith and social conscious in close connection. I hope I do some justice to that legacy with this oration.

My theological interests lie with the renewal of orthodoxy based in a revaluing of the concept of God as Trinity. In this I owe my debt to John's predecessor; another John, John Gaden, the Warden of St Barnabas College, Adelaide, when I was a student there (1987 – 1990), and like John Roffey he died all too young. John Gaden left a theological legacy with those who were fortunate enough to be one of his students. It would also be true to say that

there was great theological continuity between the two Johns. They were both prophets in their own way.

A Trinitarian Theology for justice

Trinitarian Theologian, the late Colin Gunton, makes the claim 'that everything looks different in the light of the Trinity (Gunton 1997, p. 28). Interest in God as Trinity has had a remarkable renewal in recent decades. There has been a veritable explosion of material concerned with seeking to explicate the uniquely Christian concept that God is one but, somehow, also three. This renewal of interest in the doctrine of God as Trinity, as Australian Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Kelly states, places this doctrine 'in the deep structure of Christian faith, rather than leaving it as a revered but irrelevant piece of information.' (Kelly 1989, p.101).

This renewal has largely been attributed to the neo-orthodoxy movement associated with protestant Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, and his Roman Catholic counterpart, Karl Rahner. Yet, we would be unwise to ignore the considerable input by eastern Orthodox theologians, such as Vladimir Lossky, Christos Yannaras, and John Zizioulas (Cunningham & Thekritoﬀ 2008, p. 233). This renewal of Trinitarian thought was at first a reaction against Western Liberalism, which Barth, in particular, believed to lead to an easy and dangerous association between Christianity and the achievements, and

ideologies, associated with human experience. This, in his thinking, which he was beginning to formulate more deeply in Germany in the 1930's, led straight to the false claims made by Hitler and the NAZIS. In Barth's thought, the 'liberal' God had ceased to be God, and became simply the supporter of human achievement. God had lost his Godness, so to speak, and was replaced by an idol made with 'human hands' (Ford 1993, p. 31). A new proclamation was needed of the God that Christians purported to worship. That God traditionally was, and is, God the Trinity. Theology, and its living out within the Christian tradition, was to be set on a much surer footing. Theological reflection, in Barth's view, begins and ends with God interpreted in Trinitarian terms (Olson & Hall 2002, p.96). God needs no other point of reference. God reveals all we need to know about God's self through God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

Barth, and his supporters, saw the political implications of this way of doing theology. Jürgen Moltmann points out the socio-political consequences once we reflect more deeply on the nature of God as Trinity; in particular, the second person of the Trinity, the Son, which he calls, following Martin Luther, 'the Crucified God' (Moltmann 1974). This Crucified God stands alongside those who have been, and are rejected, by society, because God knows within God's very own being these rejections, having experienced the ultimate of all

rejections: death on the cross (Moltmann 1974, p. 192). The second person of the Trinity, the Son, stands not with the powerful, but the rejected, oppressed, and vulnerable, because this is the very self-experience of God. To quote Moltmann: 'God suffered in Jesus, God himself died in Jesus for us. God is on the cross of Jesus 'for us', and through that God becomes God and Father of the godless and the godforsaken.' (Moltmann 1974, p.192; Olson & Hall 2002, p. 100).

It is important when thinking in a Trinitarian framework to see that God is not three separate Gods, but God in relationship with God's own self. This is found in the traditional terms of three persons, but one being. I don't intend here to expound upon how that is so, but to put out the importance of keeping the three together in one. Yet more importantly, to emphasize that God is intrinsically in internal relationship: God is 'Being in Communion' (Zizioulas 1997).

However, God does not just relate internally, so to speak, as if God has no need of another to relate to, or to put it another way, God is locked up within Godself: 'a heavenly and eternal ménage-a-trois' (Olson & Hall 2002, p. 101). However, through the Son and the Holy Spirit, God reaches out, to use the language of Irenaeus, 'as the Father's two hands to the world'. There is no separating God as Trinity: 'there is no hidden God behind God's self-disclosure

in Jesus Christ...' (Olson & Hall on Karl Barth 2002, p. 96). In Jesus, we experience God 'speaking and acting'. This is born out in Jesus exchange with the apostle, Philip: 'Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord show us the Father, and we will be satisfied'. Jesus said to him, 'have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14: 8 – 10). To hammer this point home, Athanasius, writing in the 4th Century, points this out 'in a deceptively simple manner: all that is said of the Father is also said of the Son except that the Son is the Son and not the Father' (Kelly 1989, p. 78)¹.

What I have been saying is simply this: when Jesus 'speaks and acts', we experience the Triune God 'speaking and acting'. When we want to know what God thinks, we find this ultimately and definitively expressed in the person of Jesus. This has an integrity in itself, and it is the basis for the Church's own 'speaking and acting'.

Let me just slow this Trinitarian theologising down a bit with a wonderful illustration of this. A Biblical text; well known, and interpreted well by Bishop

¹ I could say more about the doctrines of *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) and *appropriation* (the whole Trinity is engaged in the ministry of any person of the Trinity). However, I think for the purpose of this lecture, my point has been made.

Chris Jones in his 2010 'John Roffey Lecture'. I hope I add something to his already fine treatment of this text: John 8: 1 – 8.

John 8: 2–11

²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. (My addition: *What was Jesus writing here: one strand of the tradition has it that he was writing the sins of them all. Writing in the dirt, and soon to be blown away*) ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

This illustrates, I believe, the presence of God through the second person of the Son, Jesus, standing alongside the vulnerable. What I want to highlight about this text is that there is no discussion about the innocence, or otherwise, of the woman. Quite clear in the mind of those who are about to stone her that she is guilty. There is no question in their mind she deserves the punishment she is about to receive. It should be noted that Jesus makes no

case for her innocence. In fact, it appears that Jesus accepts her as being guilty: he tells her to sin no more. Of course, there is a back story? Where is the man, or men, who are guilty of adultery with her? Jesus would be all too aware that adultery is a very difficult act to perform alone.

However, what Jesus takes issue with is the self-righteousness of those who about to punish her. The question is not 'those who are sinless in terms of adultery alone' are permitted to cast the first stone, but those who are 'sinless in general'. In the vulnerable woman we meet all that is vulnerable and susceptible to sinfulness. The question is not about innocence, but in this woman we meet all our vulnerabilities to the harshness of life, and our collective participation in the rejection of God. No one stands innocent, and so no-one has the right to 'throw the first stone'. Miroslav Volf points out that someone might start their journey in innocence, but in a world of violence the lines become blurred, and 'we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, and brutalities, each reinforcing the other' (Volf 1996, p. 81). This is what the South African Council of Churches calls 'Solidarity in Sin' (Volf 1996, p. 82).

Vulnerability does not presume innocence, though there are those who, for a time at least, may be so. Vulnerability places us under forces from which we have, or feel we have, little or no control. Vulnerability places us under the

control of the 'other', which can be potentially or actually, be for good or, in contrast, potentially or actually, be destructive. The woman caught in the act of adultery was vulnerable to the violence of the mob and, conversely, she was vulnerable to the graciousness of God. Would Jesus stand with the mob or take another path?

Jesus himself stood vulnerable against the mob. Would he side with them? Would he enforce the law, as they understood it, or would he reject it outright and show, once and for all, that he was a messianic pretender? Rather than give into a debate about innocence or guilt, Jesus chooses another path. A vulnerable path in which God 'speaks and acts' grace. Jesus' concern is not about legal debates (the law was clear on this issue, and he would have known that), but his concern was about the transforming nature of grace; both for the woman, and, importantly, for the violent mob. The woman and the mob leave the scene reflecting on their own 'solidarity in sin'. For Jesus, there has to be, and there is, a better way than 'throwing stones'.

A word on violence

I have mentioned above violence a number of times. The woman caught in the act of adultery faces a violent judgement from the self-righteous mob. Earlier I mentioned violence in context of the experience of the Triune God through the death of Jesus on the cross. Volf points us to the problem of

violence as solution: 'the sword intended to root out violence ends up fostering it'. (Volf 1996, p. 277). We are caught in a cycle of competing violence where the lines of just, and un-just, violence, innocence and guilt become blurred. In this story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus takes another option: the way of grace.

Contemporary examples of Vulnerability²

In recent weeks, Australia, has been confronted again with violence against the vulnerable. Here I am referring to violence and abuse of young people, particularly Aboriginal, held in detention here in the Northern Territory. The images that were presented to us in the ABC 'Four Corners' report were confronting and deeply distressing. The result of which was the calling of a Royal Commission into the events. The events are now well known to all of us.

The media were pick up the case, and equally quick to start 'throwing stones'. Some sections of the media were keen to regard these acts committed vulnerable young people as a consequence of poor parenting, for example Bill Leaks' controversial cartoon.

Paul Kelly writing in 'The Weekend Australian', August 6-7 2016, and defending Leak's cartoon, suggests that the problem lies with 'political

² Karl Barth is reputed to have said that Theology is done with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Here is my attempt.

correctness' and the inability of politicians, and others, to deal with the root cause; namely, 'the breakdown of the Indigenous social and family order through a range of issues including family dislocation, neglect, violence, parental abuse and drunkenness'. Kelly doesn't offer any real solutions to the debate, except to suggest that the problems is an Indigenous one, even though he tries hard to suggest that he is not saying this. The real problem, according to Kelly, is that political correctness prevents us from entering into real debate.

The question in my mind here, and also with those who are arguing for changes to 18C of the 'Racial Discrimination Act': what is it that they want to say that they can't say already; what is it they want to say about 'race' that they are too afraid, seemingly, at this point, to say? Forgotten also in Kelly's article, however, is the very real acts of violence and abuse against children in detention, which is actually the foundation of this debate. What is seen as a solution, detention, punishment, and violence, I will argue, only further perpetuates the problem.

Gary Johns, writing an open letter to the Prime Minister, Malcom Turnbull, in the same edition of 'The Weekend Australian', suggests that it is 'Social Workers' who have in fact failed Indigenous Australians. The real cause, however, is 'the ex-nuptial births to Aboriginal mothers ... (high) Aboriginal

teenage fertility rates ... poorly socialised families and welfare dependence (that) create each generation of troubled youths'. Johns argues that 'the protection and detention system is not at fault.' The answer according to Johns: 'contraception for youths and adoption for at-risk children are better than social workers.' Again, the abuse and violence committed against children in detention is 'white washed'. In fact, Johns labels it 'rough treatment', rather than abuse and violence. Frightening to me is that he suggests that the answer lies with social engineering and some form of eugenics. Indigenous Australians and European Jews have heard this argument before.

On the front page of the same 'Weekend Australian' was an article written by Hedley Thomas that detailed Dylan Voller's behaviour, as well of Voller's mother. It seems that a 'Correctional Services Internal Report', listing 800 of Voller's 'incidents' whilst in detention, was mysteriously made available to 'The Weekend Australian'. In short, the article, was essentially designed to stop us from being overly sympathetic to Voller's case. Implicit in this article was that Voller was deeply troubled, in fact a violent criminal, and there was, therefore, some justification to his treatment. Violence, in some form, was obviously to be accepted in these sorts of cases.³

³ My thanks to the Rev'd Daryl McCulloch, Priest in the Diocese of Bathurst, for a 'blog' in response to this article: www.catholicevangelical.com

So, there were three articles in this one paper that dealt with the abuse of minors in detention, and defending it to some degree, or at the very least, trying to shift the blame to the victims, or their families, or their 'race'. As I read them, these articles were largely an attempt to move our attention away from the violence and abuse committed to Voller, and others, whilst being held in juvenile detention. The argument was largely that in some way they got what they deserved, or that blame should be placed at the feet of their parents, or more widely with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In contrast, in the 'Weekend Australian Magazine' in the same edition of the paper there was an article by Kathy Legge on the problems experienced by Harriet Jill Wran, the daughter of the late Premier of NSW, Neville Wran, and his widow, Jill. The article dealt with Harriet Wran's drug addictions, life of crime, involvement in murder, and incarceration. Whilst the article deals with some of the difficulties experienced by the Wran family, there is no suggestion that the family were in any way dysfunctional or it was a 'race' problem. Harriet attributes her problems with withdrawing from the Ritalin, a drug prescribed for those suffering from ADHD (which Dylan Voller, apparently, also suffers from), depression, and mixing with bad company, amongst other things.

The contrasts between this article and the others couldn't be more pronounced, and lend weight, I think, that if you are Indigenous in this country you will experience different treatment, and certainly at the hands of some sections of the media. There was certainly no suggestion that all problems would have been solved had Jill Wran taken birth control, or that Neville and Jill were bad parents, or that it was a 'white race' problem. I need to say here that I have no issue with Harriet Jill Wran. I wish her well in her recovery.

It is the contrast in approaches by the media that concerns me here. Being 'non- Indigenous' and from an influential, and respected, family will get you a more sympathetic hearing. Being Indigenous and from a difficult parental background will get different hearing altogether. Legge's article finishes with an acknowledgement that not everyone gets this sort of second chance, yet she hopes that 'maybe she (Harriet) will publish an account of her odyssey. It won't be the kind of book her mother once imagined she might write, but she's got a powerful story to tell.' Voller, and others who have gone through juvenile detention, and now adult incarceration, have a powerful story to tell, as well, but is anyone listening.

No one, I think, would argue that there are not problems within the community, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that lead to crime and incarceration. Standing alongside the vulnerable is not dependent upon their

innocence. As I argued earlier, through the lens of God's 'speaking and acting' in the second person of the Trinity, the Son, standing alongside the vulnerable is not a question of innocence but those, who even though guilty, are vulnerable to violence, and the vicious circle of violence perpetuating violence. Children are particularly vulnerable to the 'lessons learnt' in the school of violence, and we could speculate with some justification that had the circle of violence been broken at 'Don Dale', life might have taken a more positive path for Dylan Voller and the others.

The Church cannot, if it is grounded in the life of the Triune God, take or endorse the way of violence especially with those who are most vulnerable, especially children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are particularly vulnerable to high rates of incarceration. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are particularly vulnerable to violence, both as victims and perpetrators. A correctional system that endorses physical violence through spit hoods, tear gas, restraining chairs, handcuffs, isolation, forced stripping, violent manhandling, and the like should not be surprised that it just perpetuates the problem.

Another way?

Does God 'speaking and acting' in the person of Jesus suggest another way for detention: a transformative way? I think it does. Our reflection on the

story of the woman caught in the act of adultery suggests that the way of 'throwing stones' is limited, and punitive measures, and certainly violence, have limited transformative ability. The way of grace suggests that, within the context of accountability, more creative options are worth pursuing.

To that end, and by way of example, 'Justice Reinvestment' has, I would argue, a lot to commend it; especially with juvenile offenders. Redirecting costs away from simply building new gaols and detention centres, and tackling the root causes of crime makes for a transformative way. The hope, I think, of the current justice system is to reduce recidivism, and to help young offenders become less vulnerable to a spiral of offensive behaviour and its consequences. However, it is quite clear that the current correctional system of detention is unable to do this. Alongside this, there are sections of society who think that the simple answer to the problem is to build more gaols and impose longer prison sentences. This view fails to recognise that if we get criminal transformation right, then the consequences are felt by all. (Here I suggest we reacquaint ourselves with to some of the points raised by the 2012 'John Roffey Lecture' given by Archdeacon Karen Kime). Quite simply, punitive measures do not work. The way of 'grace' suggests an exploration, at the very least, of alternative methods of transforming behaviour.⁴

Concluding Thoughts

⁴ http://www.smartjustice.org.au/resources/SJ_JusticeReinvest.pdf

Basing our theological reflection on God as Trinity reminds the Church that God has something to say. My feeling is that we, the Church, can at times ignore the authority of our own tradition. With Barth, I agree that the Triune God has ‘spoken and acted’ in history through the person of Jesus Christ. Western liberalism tends to sideline the voice of the Church as irrelevant, or at best, antiquated. It is a role that the Church, sometimes, too easily accommodates as we vest other opinions with authority, and ignore the basis of our own: we have listened to and accepted the propaganda. I am reminded Dorothy Sayer’s wonderful comment:

“The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore – on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him ‘meek and mild,’ and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.”⁵

Building upon a theology of a Triune God who ‘speaks and acts’ is to also reclaim the prophetic tradition that was at the heart of John Roffey’s own speaking and acting⁶. John’s vision was of a Church that defended what, I have

⁵ <http://wp.patheos.com.s3.amazonaws.com/blogs/robertcrosby/files/2013/01/Dorothy-Sayers.jpg>

⁶ At his point, I should add that I have not introduced the ministry of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, in God’s ongoing ‘speaking and acting’: perhaps, another oration, but certainly for another time. It is sufficient to say that I have implicitly highlighted the role of the Spirit in reminding us of what God has already ‘said and done’ (Cf: John 15: 26; 16: 12-13).

labelled, the vulnerable, especially those who are most vulnerable to government policies, and public opinion, that sees them further disenfranchised. Anglicare is at the forefront of this vision, as it is the part of the Church with the best knowledge, and skills, base to speak and act for justice. It is the responsibility, I believe, of people like us to ensure that the God who 'speaks and acts' for the vulnerable is not forgotten: to keep this dangerous memory alive!

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