

Telling the Stories

Papers, stories and reflections
from the AADA conference

October 2010

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

compiled by Graham Lindsay



a publication of the Australian Anglican Diaconal Association

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The Australian Anglican Diaconal Association

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Introduction to the papers

Graham Lindsay

When calling for papers and presentations for a conference, organisers are never quite sure what they will end up with. The organising committee of this conference, led by Archdeacon Anne Ranse, invited a range of speakers on topics which they thought might speak to deacons who work on the edges and margins of church activity and presence.

Not only did these papers speak effectively to those present but they also challenged and disturbed us into thinking and asking critical questions. The following papers need to be read in this light – the light of scrutiny, discourse and debate. People will disagree with some of what was presented; that is natural and right. The important outcome was that the papers were discussed in good faith and a spirit of love as Paul urged the people of Colossae in Colossians 3:12-17.

The paper presented by Bishop John Stead was one which produced ‘nodding heads’ as he outlined his vision for the ordained ministry in the church. John gave the clearest outline that many deacons had yet heard concerning the office and work of a deacon. He made a very important distinction between the ‘office’ and the ‘person’ of the bishop, priest or deacon. The office of the ordained person is clearly set out in the Anglican Church’s ordinal. The deacons I spoke to after the presentation were unanimous in declaring that John’s vision of orders in the Anglican Church made them feel fully included and not lesser clergy, not ‘just a deacon’.

Associate Professor Scott Cowdell is the Canon Theologian of the Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn. Scott is also a research scholar with Charles Sturt University. He presented two papers. The first, ‘Facing up to Richard Dawkins and the New Atheism’, introduced the audience to some approaches to dealing with the more strident atheism of people like Dawkins. Deacons may well

directly encounter the influence of this New Atheism in their work in the wider community. Scott Cowdell's second paper was certainly more controversial for some and very challenging for others. Church people don't like to talk about sexuality because they have grown up with the after effects of nineteenth-century thinking that placed sexuality in the brown paper bag under the bed. Definitely not a topic for discussion in polite circles. Scott has provided an extensive set of end notes for this article for those interested to follow up. Scott is asking his audience to listen carefully and critically and respond rather than react to his thinking.

The Reverend Don Jamieson is a much-loved deacon who has developed a gift for working with the aged and frail aged at a time in their lives when they are clearly nearing the end. His work on reminiscence theory and helping people to write down their stories has had a significant positive effect on those among whom he ministers. Don's reflection on the deacon as pilgrim is wonderfully fresh and ancient at the same time. It glows with the wisdom of rich life experiences and biblical insight. We were indeed enriched by his presentation.

I trust that those of you who read this book will respond as we did, with questions, challenges and our own ideas and reflections.

Will You?

You want to be my friend, the one who brings me home to God!

Will you walk with me this last, dark journey of my life?
Will you be there, hurting when I hurt, crying when I cry?
Will you laugh with me when my laughter is so close to tears?
Will you climb from your warm bed
 and drive through the frosty night,
 or on a winter's morning,
 because I can no longer wait to see my God?

Will you hold my hand and pray for me
as the world darkens, and for a moment I cannot see my way?
Will you listen to my last breath as dawn breaks,
and the birds begin to sing outside my window?
Will you enfold my loved ones,
 with the same love and care you have shown me?
Will you walk the last mile letting me look into the mirror of
your face,
so that I can see the reflection of the Christ that is within me?

I do not want you to walk in front of me dragging me,
into beliefs I may not yet be ready to accept.
I do not want you to walk behind me pushing me,
at a pace with which I cannot cope.
Just walk with me, at my side,
share my journey, my fears, my pain, my unbelief,
and then, as I take that last step, hand me on in hope and love.
If you can do these things, then yes,
be my friend, my pastor, my bridge.

Don Jamieson, 2002

Will You? is a poem in which I try to describe my approach to the care and nurture of older people.

My dream of the Church of God

The Rt Rev'd John Stead

Conference Dinner Address
National Deacon's Conference, Canberra, 5th October 2010

Let me share with you my dream of the Church of God, expressed in the Anglican tradition in the Australian context.

It is of the Church, as Christ's body in the world, living into the reality of total ministry, all-member ministry, the ministry of all the baptised (or whatever term you wish to use), as the basis of an ecclesiology which resonates with the very nature of God and God's call to us all.

I understand ecclesiology as our human understanding of how we go about being the Church of God in the world, of how we become the mirror in which the divine image is reflected to the world. As a result our ecclesiology, if it is truly to reflect the image of God, needs to be relational as God is relational in Trinity – One God expressed within our human experience as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

While our understanding of the Trinity is a doctrine of the Church, it nevertheless captures the essence of our experience of God as expressed in both the Old and New Testaments. That nature is in a process of what in the literature is often called interpenetration: within the Father there is something of the being of the Son and the Holy Spirit; within the Son is something of the being of the Father and the Holy Spirit; and within the Holy Spirit there

At the time of the conference, John Stead served in the Diocese of Bathurst as Assistant Bishop which includes the role of Ministry Development Officer and Principal of the Company of the Good Shepherd (which ministers in the north west of the Diocese). John was recently installed as Bishop of the Willochra.

is something of the being of the Father and the Son. Augustine of Hippo called this interplay *perichoresis*, roughly translated as 'dance'. One expression of God takes the central part of the dance, but only does so in relationship with the other two who are supporting the dance in the background.

Our understanding of God, then, is of interplay: of mutuality and yet identity; of a team of three which are at the same time both one and three. The Church, that is, the people of God, who are the followers of the Way of Jesus who is God's Christ, are called to reflect this, to live in mutual interdependence. We are all to play our part, sometimes in the background and at others times in the foreground, sometimes upstage left and other times downstage centre, in the spotlight. Whatever our role, in God's economy it is of vital importance. Just as the *corps de ballet* needs to be present and active in support of the *prima ballerina* and/or the male lead dancer, we are a required part of the dance. Without us, the dance is incomplete, diminished.

My dream then is of a Church which does not just understand itself as being the reflection of God, to give the nod to this theology and ecclesiology of being Church; that is easy to do. My dream is that we genuinely live it. To live in this way requires that we all, who are the Church, need to be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, indeed in the very depths of our God-given being.

In addition it requires that we all seek to know ourselves, to be able to articulate with what gifts God has gifted us: abilities, skills, intellect, physical being, compassion, and the list could go on. We need to be able to articulate what are God's spiritual gifts to each of us, accepting that the scriptural lists are not exhaustive but rather indicative. If I were to ask you to list the things that you are good at, would you be able to do it or would you shy away from doing it with some pretence at modesty (dare I say it false modesty)? If you are not able to articulate what you are good at, on what basis will you be seeking the opportunities to play your part in the mutuality which is at the core of the nature of being Church?

Mutuality, in Paul's terms being the Body of Christ, or being built into a holy temple of living stones, requires that we all play our part. If we don't then it is not just one person who misses out but the whole that is diminished; the body is disabled.

Each role, each exercised gift (spiritual or otherwise) is given by God for the benefit of God's work in the world.

My dream would see the Church in action, not as some militant strike force for God, but in loving service to the world that God created, that God saved and that God is in the process of making holy. Can you imagine what a force for transformation the Church could be if we were all actively pursuing all opportunities to touch people's lives.

We are all part of the Church of God – for what purpose, and for whose purpose?

The Old and New Testaments tell the roller coaster ride of God's rescue plan. The cycle of humanity's relationship with God: faithfulness – wandering away, often after other gods that seem more exciting – warning, through judges and prophets and such like – failure to heed the warning and the subsequent consequences of that failure – repentance and return to following God. Then, given enough time, the drift away from God's ways and the cycle repeats; it resembles a spiral throughout human history.

In God's time, the *kairos time* (that is, the right time) the rescue plan finds its fulfilment in the birth, life, ministry, arrest, scourging, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God's Christ, God's anointed one. The cycle is broken, the deserved consequence is dealt with, humanity's relationship with God is restored and the Kingdom has come – although it is not yet fully realised.

We live in the 'in-between', between God's final rescue in Jesus the Christ and the fully realised Kingdom of God. The purpose, the *raison d'être* for the Church, is to be co-creators of the Kingdom on earth, to work toward the restoration of all humanity, indeed of the whole creation, to full relationship with God. That is the purpose, and it is God's purpose; that is our purpose and it will take all of us who follow the Way of the Christ to achieve it.

The dominant descriptor then of God's activity in the world through God's Church is MISSION. Tim Dearborn wrote:

It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world.

Mission draws people into a transforming encounter with God, through God's Church. It fulfils the Great Calling: to be God's people in the world, living lives that reflect the Christ in the world; the Great Commandment: to love God, to love your neighbour as you love yourselves; the Great Commission: go into the world to make disciples, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the farthest ends of the earth.

These last two, the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, are the 'why' of the Great Calling. God has willed and purposed to work through the Church, the people of God, you and me and those who form the various congregations back in the churches that we come from.

It is from mission that ministry comes. From the 1998 Lambeth Conference issues the following statement:

Mission goes out from God. Mission is God's way of loving and saving the world. Therefore, mission is never our invention or our choice.

Every ministry that you, or I, or those who form the church in any given place perform, is an expression of God's mission: that people will love God, will love their neighbour as they love themselves and will go into the world. Because it reflects the nature of God expressed in human form in Jesus and his ministry, we reach out in empathy and compassion to individuals and situations which we confront or encounter. We too will bind up the broken hearted, heal the blind, see the cripple walk, but in ministering we will always be pointing away from ourselves, away from the human institution of the church, and towards the divine Church, towards the Christ, towards God. In the relationship with

the divine Church, with Christ, with God is the transformation which meets the deep spiritual needs of the people we encounter, the situations we walk into, the groaning in travail of the whole of creation. Ministry fulfils mission's reason for being: restored relationship with God.

What then is our place in the Church of the God of mission? Teresa of Avila reminded us that the Christ has no hands in the world but our hands, no eyes but our eyes, no voice but our voice ... We are to be the active agents, not of our own agenda, but of God's agenda, that all may come to know Christ and that needs may be met by our actions. It will take all of us to meet the needs that will confront us and even if that is achieved it will only be through the power of God that we will ever do all that needs to be done.

The God of mission who has a Church in the world calls us all, for all of humanity is Spirit breathed, but calls us particularly through our baptism. Our baptism is, at the least, our calling to be fully who God has made us to be, and to be actively engaged in the mission and ministry of the Church into which God calls us. The baptism liturgy makes this abundantly clear: 'strive to live as a disciple of Christ', 'continue in the fellowship and service of God's Church. May they proclaim, by word and example, the good news of God in Christ'. 'We thank you for the ministry we have...;', 'Confess Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, look for his coming in glory'. 'Equip us to serve your people and advance your gospel in the world.' Baptism is our commissioning for God's mission and ministry in the world. For us to truly live into our baptism we need to live into that call to mission and ministry, recognising that God will have gifted us practically and spiritually for it.

I re-emphasise the priority of the need for the Church to reflect the very nature of God: relational, mutual, where there is a natural tendency toward the interpenetration of the three within the one, and within each other. Just for now accept that premise, for the Church as I dream of it sees the relational aspects of each order of ministry, sees the mutuality of each order to the others

and sees them as interpenetrating each other. Yes, some things are distinctly of one order, just as there is in the nature of the Son that which is uniquely the Son's.

Let us now consider the role of the ordained, in sequence from bishops to deacons.

Bishops

I dream of bishops being grounded in aspects of two earlier models: the Celtic and the Minister. The Celtic bishops were missionary bishops; they were actively engaged in God's mission in the world. If you go to Lindisfarne, you will find the missionary base of Aidan and then later of Cuthbert. In our day the Island of Lindisfarne seems a little out of the way, although it is within a stone's throw of the main rail line from London to Edinburgh. In its day, it was on the equivalent of a major four lane highway: the sea route which hugged the coast of north east England. It was based close by the King's castle, which could be reached by walking across the sands at low tide. Thus it lay close to power and close to the trade route. At an early time, following its initial establishment as a holy place by the monks of Iona under the original leadership of Aidan, it focussed on the education of an indigenous body of monks and priests. Under Cuthbert, it became the bastion of Christianity which went about from there in its task of fulfilling the Great Commandment. Cuthbert's focus was on enabling the mission, a mission in which he directly participated. I dream of bishops who are primarily missional in their outlook.

Augustine of Canterbury, sent by the Pope to re-christianise the south of England, established himself at Canterbury as a base of operation, as a minister for a growing group of churches which were aligned to Augustine and to the See of Canterbury. Augustine used Canterbury as his home base, taking long journeys from the headquarters out into the mission field of the outlying churches, forever pushing out and forever planting new churches. As each journey concluded he would return to base, refresh, renew and re-equip himself and those who travelled with him for another

foray into the outlying areas. The minister model establishes a home base from which the outlying congregations are resourced. The Bishop holds the parts together as one: diverse, diversified, and yet united.

I need to distinguish between the person of a bishop, that is, one who has been consecrated as bishop in God's Church, and the office of bishop, that which is stable no matter the change as to who is the bishop. Indeed, for each of the orders of mission it is useful for us to distinguish that which is unique to the person and that which is the nature of the office.

The office of bishop is one of unifying, of holding together in the world the base unit of the Church as we who are Anglicans understand it. The bishop is the focus of unity between the diversity of the sum total of the parts which form the whole, the base unit being the diocese. The bishop is charged with the role of reminding us that we are more than individual followers of the Christ, that we are more than members of a congregation, that we are more than members of a parish or a ministry unit and that we are first and foremost members of a diocese. Each bit of the diocese lives in relationship, mutuality and interdependence with all the others bits. The diocese needs to reflect the nature of God. The office of bishop also reminds us that the mission of God is to the world, to the whole creation. Just as bishops call us beyond our local setting by reminding us we are first part of the bigger picture of the diocese, they too call us to see that the diocese is part of the Anglican Communion and ultimately part of the Church Catholic – the Universal Church.

The office of bishop is an office of oversight as chief shepherd of the flock, of all those who make up the diocese. Oversight is about care, is about a willingness to seek out the lost sheep and bring it home and is about being the servant of the diocese and its constituent parts.

This can require of the office of bishop a willingness to call people to account for their own care for the Church, in terms of right teaching and right behaviour, as well as a willingness to show

the love of God through empathetic and compassionate action. The office requires that the nature of God who has a mission and who has a Church for that mission in the world be represented to the diocese repeatedly. In that office it is the bishop who is called upon through the laying on of hands to make deacons (in an older form of language), to ordain priests and to participate with the metropolitan and other bishops in the consecration of bishops. Bishops are the custodians of the apostolic succession.

Essentially I dream of bishops who are focussed upon mission, who move from the headquarters out into the field on a constant and frequent basis, who recall us to God's mission and to our role as God's Church, who know that they are bound to the diocese as its servant and who would, if needed, die for the diocese (one hopes metaphorically rather than literally).

Priests

The office of priest, as I dream of it, is that of an enabler of the local expression of God's mission and therefore of God's ministry within a more defined geographic area or ministry unit. The priest is primarily a distributor of the mission and ministry rather than an accumulator of it, always looking to give away opportunities for the Body of Christ to engage in the mission and ministry to which that body is called: in time, in space, in the local context, among the local people.

Their role of teaching, of caring for, of leading us in worship, toward the Word of God and the Sacraments - most particularly the Sacraments of Baptism and of Eucharist but also the Sacraments of the Church - is essentially focussed upon building up the body of Christ for the mission and ministry of the Church of God.

They do have a calling, reflected in the ordinal, to be looking outward and directed towards the cure of souls (as emphasised in our Anglican understanding) for all who live within a geographically bound area. It is as a leader of the Church in mission that they are primarily concerned, with a clear priority for enabling the

building blocks of the Church, the people of God, to be released into that mission field which begins right outside the doors of the church building.

The leadership of the priest is modelled after the Good Shepherd, a willingness to be a slave of the Church and to lay down one's life for the sake of God's Church. This is forcefully recalled to us by establishing the priest's relationship to the church they serve as being modelled on the vision of the Church as Christ's spouse and body.

I dream of priests who have caught the breath of the Spirit, who dream dreams and have visions of what the Church of God can be like and are not constrained by the reality of what it is like at any given time or in any given place. I dream of priests who are courageous, who are willing to try and fail in the knowledge that success is measured not just by the size of the congregation but by its faithfulness to God's mission, God's will and purpose. I dream of priests who measure their own success not by how many times they get knocked down but by the fact that they get up and are never down-and-out.

I dream of priests who have a heart for people, those within and those without the Church. I dream of priests who are inspired by God's mission and open to the Spirit's leading and are able to share what it is that God is doing in their own lives and in the lives of the people that have been placed in their hands, the hands of one who will nurture, encourage and release people to grow into their full God-given potential.

Deacons

The World Council of Churches' Lima Text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* says:

Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service

in the Church's life. [Deacons] exercise a ministry of love within the community.

I dream of a diaconate that is seen as the primary or base order of the ordained ministry, that ministry which connects the true nature of the world which God loved so much, which God loves so much, and the Church. That reminds us all of the nature of the God of mission who has a Church in the world.

I dream of a diaconate that can imagine itself as not just those with the towel and bowl, willing to wash feet, but also as the builders of the bridge, the path, the stepping stones, the trail, whatever it takes to connect us and whatever can be used for those who are outside to come in and for those of us who are inside to go out.

I dream of deacons who are constantly smashing holes in the walls of the church, who are pulling down the barriers, dismantling the barricades - whether these be attitudes, structures, expectations, mannerisms or anything else that acts as a brake upon people coming to a Church which will not just say, but will live the reality: 'you can belong here'!

John XXIII embraced as his lifetime motto the diaconal text: 'Strive to be unknown'. The deacon's ministry is a hidden and secret ministry which embraces a surrendering of one's rights so as to serve. What do I take from the motto of John XXIII? I understand this to mean not that I must debase myself as I exercise a diaconal ministry, but that I must diminish so that the other can grow. I must not become the focus of the ministry, verging on if not crossing into the temptation to build the cult of personality where I grow in stature rather than the love of God in Christ Jesus. The diaconal ministry must be focussed and must point constantly toward the Christ, for in the Christ is salvation, is mercy, is grace, is forgiveness, is reconciliation, is restoration, is healing and so on - not in me, but in Christ, in God.

I dream of deacons exercising a ministry that brings the world to us in our prayers, the prayers of the people. I see deacons helping us to be a learning organism that has a culture of listening,

cherishing the voice of dissent and connecting those who make the decisions with those who have the information, knowledge and experience of the realities on the margins.

The Scottish Ordinal says of deacons that they 'work in renewing the world'. They are a 'sign of the humility that marks all service offered in the name of Christ'.

I dream of deacons who understand that the diaconate requires a willingness to be served as well as to serve, for when we allow ourselves to be served we allow ministry to flourish. This requires vulnerability, such as we read about when, finally, Peter allowed Jesus to wash his feet.

I dream of deacons who accept that many aspects of their ministry find their fulfilment in pioneer ministry. As they minister on the margins, as they bring the margins to our knowledge, in time a new community will form there. Fresh expressions of church will emerge and it is a fulfilment of the deacon's calling to nurture such communities of faith as instruments that God can use to build the Kingdom on earth.

I dream of a Church that lives into its divine calling, that acts to transform the whole creation and that reflects the glory of God.

Story, Symbol and Connection: The Deacon as Pilgrim

Don Jamieson

This paper is dedicated to the memory of

Andrew James Stewart

“Jim”

A man of the land.

A pilgrim on the journey of life.

A man of great courage who could always find
something to smile or laugh about.

An inspiration to family, friends and church.

19 September, 1930 – 14 July, 2010.

The Reverend Don Jamieson is a deacon in Aged Care ministries in the Parish of Harden-Murrumburrah in the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Don prepared this paper for the Australian Anglican Diaconal Association Conference, 5 to 8 October 2010.

Introduction

In this paper it is my intention to float some ideas, and look for your reaction. I find it so important to be constantly looking ahead to see just where God is taking this order to which we belong. It is so important that we do not rest on our laurels and believe that we have reached the point where God wants to take us.

The re-emergence of the diaconate in the church in the last twenty years has been God driven for a particular set of reasons. It has not been well received in all areas of the church because it provides a challenge to the status quo. We would provide a much more comfortable fit for some areas of the church if we would stay in our place and not seek to want to be a “full and equal order” as James Barnett suggested¹ we might be. Even though we have been a part of a major movement in the church there are many priests who still do not understand that the person called to diaconal orders is not just an assistant to the good order and function of a parish.

Using the ideas of story, symbol and connection I would like to help us think about the continual pushing of the boundaries of diaconal ministry within the church. I would like to use the image of pilgrim and the concept suggested by English priest, David Male, of the “dangerous deacon”², to challenge our own concept of personal ministry. I will make some reference to the concept of a mission shaped church and mission shaped ministry because I believe that it might well be in a concept like this that we will be able to recognise just what God is doing with the order of deacons in God’s world.

My hope will be that through this paper and the ideas it floats, you might be able to ask yourself the question, “Is my ministry the

1 Barnett, J.M. (1995). *The Diaconate: A full and equal order*, Revised edition. Trinity Press, Valley Forge.

2 Male, D. “Fishing Nets or Safety Nets”. A presentation in Canberra on 23 June, 2010 sponsored by the Uniting Church of NSW. See website <http://davemale.typepad.com/churchunplugged> See also – Male, D. (2008). “Church Unplugged: Remodelling Church without losing your soul.” Authentic Media; Milton Keynes.

same as it was when I first became a deacon?" If your answer is, "yes", then I hope that might prove to be the thing that suggests to you that you might want to think just where God is encouraging you to push the boundaries so that you and those around you might explore together what God is doing with deacons.

Deacons should not be comfortable people. We should have tension in our lives. We should be risk takers. We should be dangerous people. For many within the church, we should be a bit thorny. God needs us to be a little like the burr under the saddle of the church. I believe that God is calling the church to change, and deacons are one of the groups God is using to remind the church of God's reason for it to be here.

Some reflections on my own story

If what I am to say to you today is to have meaning for you, you need to know who I am and where I am coming from. Telling you some of my story might help that to happen.

Also in the telling of the story I hope you will see connections. These connections show me, at least, where God has been preparing me for the next step in my life's journey. Mostly I have recognised this in hind-sight.

If anyone was to feel comfortable in the church it could well be me. From my earliest memories, church and faith have been a huge part of my life. I was born in Canberra and my mother advised the taxi driver on our way home from hospital that I was going to be the first Canberra born Prime Minister of Australia. That didn't happen and in many ways I thank God it didn't.

I barely knew my father as he enlisted in the army soon after I was born. He was sent overseas with the 8th Division only to become a POW in 1942, and then to die at the hands of the Japanese in 1944. Initially one of my grandfathers was the father model in my life, but he too died in 1942. The one who then did the things a father does with his son in the early years, was an Anglican priest. My mother and I moved in with my grandmother

in Queanbeyan when my grandfather died. Her house was opposite Christ Church, Queanbeyan and our family was strongly connected with the church.

The rector, who we affectionately called “Pop”, was William Holiday. He was an unusual man. He had already begun to do his bit for the war effort by digging up the parish tennis courts and planting, of all things, tobacco. He hung the leaves up in the rectory stables to cure. He was also a maker of violins. He was sufficiently good at this craft to have several of his violins on display to this day in the Powerhouse Museum.

“Pop” taught me how to fly kites and many other things a boy needs to do, and he helped me to love God and want to belong to God’s church.

Eye problems for me, forced Mum and I to move to Sydney, at the end of the war. My mother married again after a couple of years and I had a new family arrangement in which I did not always feel comfortable. My step-father and I did not really begin to get on well together until I left home to go to Teacher’s College some eleven years later, and yet that man had a profound effect on my later years when I began to explore diaconal ministry.

You should know a little about my family. My mother’s side of the family were “socially acceptable” and prominent in the life of the community. My father’s side of the family were seen by my mother’s mother as being beneath her community standing. And yet in the hard times of the depression years it was my father’s mother who sent out her children with pots of hot soup to families she knew were really battling. How she did this, I don’t know, as she had very little to support her own family. I loved both sides of the family, but I found my real place in my father’s family.

Our time in Sydney had us living in Balgowlah, Brookvale, the little village of Prospect and finally in Seven Hills. I enjoyed my schooling at Manly West Primary, Manly Boy’s High School and Parramatta High School, although I was never a “scholar” as there were always too many distractions. I was an ardent reader, just like my mother, and this was often what caused the distractions.

We were always strongly connected to the church, and I learned my faith through Sunday School and Youth groups. In my teen years I taught Sunday School and when we moved to Seven Hills I helped to run a Christian Endeavour group. Church services were where I loved to be and I remember those years with much affection. The Bible was part of everything I did and I remember many happy times singing from the old red Alexander's Hymn Book.

I barely passed the Intermediate Certificate, and did the same with the Leaving Certificate. In the year leading up to the Leaving everyone applied for a Teacher's College scholarship. It was just the thing you did, so I did it as well.

I had a vacation job working for the CSIRO at the Sheep Biology Laboratory in Prospect when the Leaving results came out in the paper. I had four "B's". Needless to say when the Teacher scholarships were announced I was not on the list.

When I had applied for the scholarship I had not thought about taking it up, even though I had been doing a certain amount of "teaching" in my local parish. When I was not on the list it was suddenly what I wanted out of life. Or, perhaps it might have been more correct to say I did not want to continue at the Sheep Biology laboratories. I believe that at this point in my life God taught me an important lesson. If you want to do something then you must work hard at getting it.

Fortunately I was given a late scholarship, that someone else didn't want, and I set off for Wagga Wagga Teacher's College, arriving a week later than everyone else.

Some friends suggested that I might not like the Church of England as it was then, and that I should perhaps look toward a more evangelical church to find a home.

I arrived on Wagga Wagga train station just after lunch on a Saturday and you might say I was a marked man. I got off the train with a flannelgraph board under my arm and a Christian Endeavour badge on my lapel. I was met by a lecturer whose eyes lit up as he saw my accoutrements. He was the mainstay of the local

Baptist church and as he dropped me to my accommodation he invited me to a special service which was to be held that night to welcome new College students.

I have no memory of who the speaker was, but I do remember he made some very unkind remarks about the Church of England. This spurred me on to attend church at St John's Wagga Wagga the next morning, and there I found a new home, quite different to the church I left behind. I have no regrets about being part of evangelical parishes in my youth, as that gave me a real "fire in my belly" for my faith. However in the years that followed my Christian faith was nurtured and grew in the depth of the Church of England in the bush.

Two years at Teacher's College passed quickly, and I had learned God's lesson and I worked hard. I made many good friends and was fortunate to have several friends from earlier school days also at College. In my second year I met Pam, who was to become my wife just over three years later. The lecturer who met me at the station became a lifelong friend, even though I did not join the Baptists. I discovered over the years that he was probably the closest thing that the Baptists have to a bishop. He had a yearning for bringing the gospel to rural Australia and worked that in prayer and action until his death just a few years ago.

Teaching began for me in a one teacher school where I had twenty students beginning in Kindergarten and finishing at the Intermediate. As were all scholarship holders I was on a three year bond to work off, so I had regular visits from the Inspector who seemed quite fierce and frightening.

Looking back I realise that I did not come out of Teacher's College as a fully fledged teacher, even though perhaps I thought that I did at the time. I believe that it took me six years before I could call myself reasonable at the job. In that time I had two years in the one teacher, twelve months as a relief teacher, and then after Pam and I were married in 1962, we had three years at Bungendore.

We loved our time in the parish of Bungendore, part of this diocese and there we had the opportunity to run Junior Anglicans and Young Anglicans with a wonderful group of young people.

Then we moved to Moree, where our two wonderful sons were born. Arriving there we found that the local inspector was a man we had known earlier. At once he mapped out for me a pathway to promotion. He suggested that I spend two years with an Opportunity "A" class, a group of slow learners and towards the end of that he would inspect me. Those students taught me more than I taught them. They were wonderful children, who had a few learning problems and more than a few behaviour problems. To help them I had to grasp very quickly the smaller learning steps that were needed to help them understand life, literacy and numeracy. Just being with them made me a much better teacher and, I believe, a much better human being.

My inspection was successful and I was put onto a class full of bright children for twelve months until I could apply for promotion.

Pam and I left Moree as four, instead of the two we had been when we first went there. I had a number of new tools in my teaching tool box. I had learned how to construct a curriculum to help slow learners achieve the best possible levels of achievement, and I had learned to construct a curriculum which would allow brighter students be pushed to their potential. I had learned to be part of a larger school staff and when I got a little too full of my achievements I had some good friends amongst that staff who gently and caringly brought me down to the level I should have been on.

We had both had opportunity to be a part of a wonderful church family in Moree, a parish in the Diocese of Armidale, and we still regularly correspond with friends from that congregation.

It was on to Barham on the Murray, and a deputy's position for two years. Pam had stopped teaching while our two boys were in their formative years so she had a fairly quiet time in this small river town.

Belonging to the parish of Barham in the Diocese of Riverina was a fascinating experience. Our rector was a single man with a

huge passion for theology. He would regularly visit, and as part of that visit raise an interesting theological issue which he discussed with great gusto. Then he would take that issue on to the next family he visited and build up their understanding as well as ours and his. Even though it was only a two year stay it was a time of growth for us.

Then, with another promotion under the belt it was off to Tooraweenah as Principal. This quiet village nestles under the Warrumbungle mountains, and whenever I was particularly stressed I could walk out on to my classroom verandah and gaze at the view.

At Tooraweenah I was faced with teaching secondary students in all subjects. While this was daunting, it was not quite as frightening as facing the task of being a principal and carrying responsibility for students, staff and parents. Learning how to do both these things was to become important a little further down the track.

During my time in Tooraweenah, somehow I became Deputy Captain of the local Bushfire Brigade. To my eternal shame I was away on the only day we had a bushfire in our area.

Pam was able to come back teaching as a casual Teacher Librarian in our third year there and this was the first step back in to fulltime teaching ranks for her.

At Tooraweenah we were part of the parish of Gilgandra, and it was interesting to live in a smaller centre, rather than at the centre of a parish. Gilgandra was a part of the Diocese of Bathurst.

Another inspection loomed and with placement on the next list it was back into the ranks of applicants for promotion. With nothing much looming for someone as new to this list as I was I went in search of hard places to fill. There were places like Lightning Ridge and Menindee which could have been possibilities. When I broached Menindee with Pam she said that she and the boys would happily come with me, but it was my responsibility to ring her Mum and Dad and let them know where I was taking their daughter.

Before setting out to Menindee we dutifully visited both sets of parents, Pam's in Sydney and mine back in Canberra by this

stage. Before we left Canberra I had a check up with a problem I had been having for a while, and was immediately dispatched to a surgeon, whipped into Canberra Hospital, and had a repair job completed post haste. So it was that we arrived at our new school, with me on a walking stick and unable to lift and a house full of furniture to unpack.

If Pam and I have ever had a difficult period in our lives it was that first year at Menindee.

Just before Easter my step-father Bill became seriously ill and was not expected to live. This underlined for us how far we were from family. We made the dash across the bush roads of central NSW and arrived in Canberra in just over eleven hours. Bill had survived an urgent operation but was still a very sick man.

My Mum and Bill had both been very dedicated to church work over many years, and when they settled into All Saints, Ainslie parish Bill spoke to the bishop about ordination, with a view to becoming an honorary priest in the parish. Just before his illness he had been ordained deacon, and when he recovered he continued in that work, but it was decided that it would not be wise to proceed to priesthood. In hindsight Bill was a DEACON in the model the church went on to rediscover in the years that followed. Bill provided a wonderful model for me in my ministry when I was called to the diaconate.

After Bill's health improved I was suddenly taken down with several very severe Gall attacks. The Flying Doctor who served Menindee suggested that I go to Sydney to have it removed. This took me away from Menindee for two weeks, and during that time our youngest son developed a very debilitating kidney disease and was put into Broken Hill hospital for six weeks bed rest without being able to put a foot on the ground.

This happened just as Pam was to go back into fulltime teaching. Fortunately her Mum was with her while I was away so she valiantly undertook the daily visits to hospital to try and keep a very sick boy at least stable.

I came back from hospital and took over the hospital duties at Broken Hill during my recuperation, and then when my sick leave ran out my Mum took over.

On top of all this our older son, James was admitted to Broken Hill Hospital twice during David's stay, running an unexplained but very high temperature. In some ways I think he wanted to be able to make sure his little brother was being cared for appropriately.

We all heaved a sigh of relief when holidays came and David got out of hospital.

God was very good to us in that time. A kidney specialist from Adelaide hospital happened to be on a roster at Broken Hill during David's time there. My operation went well except for some reaction to two heavy doses of anaesthetic in six months. Neither David nor James had any repercussions from their illnesses.

As well we had a wonderful medical service in Menindee staffed by nurses from the Methodist Church and served by the Flying Doctor. We may have been a long way away, but we have never been better served medically.

The parish of Menindee, at the time was staffed by a priest from the Bush Church Aid Society. Pam and I developed a real love for and understanding of BCA and the ministry it offers in the far flung parts of our country. Our priest, Chris, learned to fly and this was probably a really good thing because for a long part of the time we were there, Menindee also looked after the parish of Wilcannia. That meant that Chris was responsible for an area covering Ivanhoe in the east, down to below Pooncarie in the south, out into South Australia to the community of Olary in the west, and Tibbooburra and Cameron's Corner in the north, as well as Tilpa and White Cliffs and the main centres of Menindee and Wilcannia. Flying meant Chris could undertake regular services in the centres as well as visiting each station at least once a year. Few of us realise the wonderful work priests like Chris undertake to ensure the gospel is heard in the wide expanses of our land.

My time at Menindee was spent developing a curriculum appropriate to the needs of the students there. I was supported in

this by Department of Education officials, and with finances from the Disadvantaged School's Programme. We used themes to draw subject areas together and used a system of timetabling which was to be called in later years, vertical timetabling. Secondary students were not isolated in subject areas according to age or year level, but rather pursued their interests. All the way along the line students were a part of the process of choice.

In my fourth year at Menindee it was suggested that I should apply for inspection again to proceed to the fourth list, and the top rung of the ladder for Primary principals. This involved two inspectors and a three day close inspection of the school. By the beginning of day two I realised there were some cracks appearing and by the end of the day I knew the result of the inspection would be a "no". The questions they were asking were not moving in the direction I could see myself going.

At the end of day three the inspectors gathered in my office so that they could give their verdict. They explained that they had to inspect on the basis of me possibly being given a school with a thousand children and up to a hundred staff. My local inspector was nearly in tears when he said that their decision was in the negative, that I was not tough enough on staff. He and I had built up a friendship and we were both Christians and I knew this was very hard for him. I tried to explain to him that I totally agreed. I was not the sort of person to take on that sort of position. I was not a tough principal, whatever that might mean. I did things in other ways.

We moved at the end of that year to Murrumburrah Harden where I took on the role of principal of the Primary School, and Pam was able to go from secondary classes back to her much more favoured infant's classes.

We had left Menindee satisfied that we had done our best for those students and I thought that I would probably not return to secondary teaching.

However at the beginning of my fourth year at Murrumburrah my world caved in. I had a breakdown and suffered from deep,

clinical depression. I could not understand what God was doing with me. I had been successful as a teacher. I had been a successful and innovative administrator even if I was not a tough one. Yet here I faced medical retirement. I discovered afterwards that I was one of several hundred administrators who had suffered breakdowns. The Department of Education didn't know what to do with us so their solution at the time was to send me from psychiatrist to psychiatrist seeking constantly differing opinions. Fifteen months later I came back from one Sydney trip to say to Pam that I had had enough. I was going to resign.

We bought a house in Harden because we wanted our two boys to be able to finish their schooling in that community. I went to see the regional director to submit my resignation and there I was without gainful employment and still very sick.

Eventually I was offered a two day a week job as local correspondent for our newspaper which belonged to a chain of papers based in Temora. This began my lessons in coming to grips with writing skills.

Then an offer came of two days music teaching at the local high school.

Finally, quite out of the blue, I got into conversation with Dr Julia Atkin who was science teacher at the local Catholic school. Julia started talking about her frustrations with the curriculum she was trying to work with. I told her about my Menindee experiences. Straight away she invited me to a meeting of staff, and before I knew what I was helping them revolutionize what they did. Firstly it was two days a week and within six months I had the offer of a full time contract. Our little Catholic secondary school became what was called a "lighthouse school" and we had visits from teachers all over Australia, as well as speaking at numerous conferences.

Nineteen happy years were spent in Catholic education. As well as some fascinating curriculum development, the thing I loved most was helping students explore literature and to develop their writing skills (there is that writing again). Having thought

teaching was gone forever I found that here I was enjoying the most interesting years of my teaching life. However they were really different years.

Then at age 55 another huge change beckoned. Under a new bishop our diocese began the exploration of the diaconate. I felt a strong calling from God to this. The weird thing was that I felt I was being called to older people.

In exploring the calling to diaconal ministry I looked back to my stepfather, Bill. He had died in our first year at Murrumburrah Harden and we were both glad to be so much closer to my mother when this happened. In some ways he was an “accidental” deacon. It was originally meant that he should have been priested, but his health problems prevented this. Yet when I looked back on the ministry to which he was called, that ministry was diaconal. The life background from which God called him made it so much easier for Bill to relate to people on the margins. He had a unique ministry in hospital visiting that helped him reach out to and communicate the love of God to people who might well not have found that understanding from anyone else. He connected so readily to the families of the people to whom he ministered, and from this connection came much “unexpected” ministry. Bill, the “accidental” deacon ministered as a real deacon in our diocese, almost twenty years before the rest of us caught up with what God was doing. His example helped me to understand and explore much better my own calling.

As I undertook theological training, I continued with some relief teaching and some casual teaching. However following ordination I knew the time had come to leave the career I loved and move fulltime into aged care. I was very dependent upon my wife in this move, because there was no paid employment where I was called. Our parish had a hard enough time employing a priest without paying for a deacon as well. Because I had left the Education Department and had to take lump sum superannuation which went into our house and then left Catholic education with only a lump sum option there was no super to live on. Somehow

we managed. However doing work on a voluntary basis was a wonderful gift because it meant that I could spend the time that was needed with each older person I visited, without questioning whether I making best use of the time someone else was paying for.

Then the opportunity came to do some voluntary work with the Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies part of St Mark's National Theological Centre and Charles Sturt University as well. Here I tried my hand at writing a couple of books on pastoral care aimed at volunteers and others working with older people.

I hope that the pattern of this story is beginning to show you what I see when I look back. Each step of the journey I have taken, there has been something happening that prepares me for the next step. God has connected the dots of my life journey, even when I thought I had crashed out of what I had set as my life career. Preparation in one area connected to the next thing God had on the agenda of life and ministry for me.

The shocks however were not finished for me. Five years ago I went through a frightening health crisis. I was finally diagnosed with a complaint called Myasthenia Gravis, a muscle weakening disease, which at its worst, can stop your breathing and swallowing muscles from working. Due to a specialist mis-diagnosis early in the illness I came very close to dying. It was only the determination of a visiting VMO at our local hospital, to send me to Canberra Hospital that ensured a proper diagnosis. I was told that had I not made that late afternoon ambulance trip to Canberra I would have died during the night.

I couldn't understand what God was doing with me. Again, just as I seemed to be making a difference in the area of aged care I became totally unreliable. This disease would be with me for life and would require medication four times a day to continue some form of normal body functioning. I didn't know what to make of it. For a short while I lost sight of what God had done in the past. I was angry and easily depressed again, and almost gave up altogether.

Then I realised that this was exactly the life the older people with whom I was working, faced. They were no longer in control of their lives. At least I had some control, even if my life revolved around a regime of medication.

The major medication can have some difficult side effects and the supplementary medications which are used to try and find some remission are far from pleasant. From one day to the next I don't know if I will be able to do what I have planned. Yet my experience tells me there is some purpose in this.

If for no other reason than a better appreciation and understanding of what life is like for older people, then there is purpose here. I can come alongside the people to whom God calls me, and share in and understand their disappointments. In a small way, I can see how powerless they feel as their decaying bodies control what they can no longer do.

I'm learning to live with my own restrictions, and I hope that I can minister now with a greater empathy.

That is a lot of life story there, and I hope that it has not been too long winded, or that it has not appeared too self-indulgent.

What do I hope you might be able to see coming through the story?

I believe that

- ♦ God is in control of our lives, often when we are not aware of it;
- ♦ we have the opportunity to build on the experiences God gives us, to enhance the ministry to which God calls us;
- ♦ God prepares us for a future which is as yet unknown to us;
- ♦ there is a uniqueness about the preparation and connection God brings to our lives;
- ♦ there are times when we believe that we are in control, but looking back we really didn't have a clue what was happening;

- ♦ like everyone else, believer or unbeliever, there are rough times in life, and our pain often stops us from seeing any purpose in what is happening to us;
- ♦ there will be a purpose;
- ♦ God is the connector, bringing our past and our future experiences into focus;
- ♦ God will never put us in a place where God is not there to protect us;
- ♦ and, our ministry will always improve if we are open to the preparation and experiences God gives us.

In the next session I want to try to draw out how story, connection and life symbols work together and draw our lives into focus as pilgrims. However you might like to react to some of the things I have said.

Discussion

You might like to take the opportunity in groups of three or four to explore your reactions to this story and the suppositions I have made. Draw on your own story to agree or disagree with some of the ideas I have suggested at the end of my story.

Try to group with people from dioceses other than your own, so that you are able to explore what different experiences there are out there.

Where Do Pilgrims Fit In?

There have been stories and there have been connections, but so far not a lot about symbols and certainly nothing about the deacon as a pilgrim. Let me try and fix that.

Every now and then Gods hits me over the head with an idea. I think this happens because, heading into my 72nd year my brain is probably not what it used to be. When I think of something, if I don't write it down immediately it will be gone from my consciousness. God needs to remind me often that something is important.

The idea of the deacon as a pilgrim came to me one Sunday morning when I happened to be home to see an episode of "Songs of Praise".³ The presenter, Martin Palmer, spoke about the concept of pilgrimage, in terms of being something quite different to what we have in church. In church there is a preacher and we sit and listen to that person's words, but there is little chance for us to react to the message. On a pilgrimage however, as pilgrims move from sacred place to sacred place there is a conversation going on about belief and faith. This conversation is a genuine exploration, rather than a presentation coming from one person to another.

The concept of pilgrimage combines journeying in the real world, conversation about the real world, and the connection of the spiritual and that real world/normal life concept. The conversation happens in the rough and tumble of real life. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a perfect example of this.

I mentioned earlier Dave Male's idea about the "dangerous deacon"⁴. Male expressed this in the context of the church today, its impact on the world, and the need to seek out "fresh expressions" of church. He spoke about the three eccentrics of *The Acts of the Apostles*. The Phillips (the dangerous deacon), the Cornelius characters (who evangelises who?) and the Pauls (who do it differently).

I hope I don't interpret Male the wrong way, but the idea of "dangerous deacon" really appealed to me. There was Phillip out on

3 'Songs of Praise' telecast on ABC1, NSW on 5 July, 2009.

4 See footnote 1.

a wilderness road, at the behest of an angel. He met the Ethiopian puzzling over an excerpt from Isaiah, and the two of them began a conversation as they journeyed together. This ended in baptism, before Phillip was spirited away.⁵

When Male talked about this it immediately connected for me with the idea of the deacon as a pilgrim, ever ready for the call of God, to journey with another and converse about how life was, and how faith and belief fitted into the reality of that person's life. Phillip was on the "wilderness" road when this happened. For me that is a reminder of our status of bringing ministry to the boundaries and margins of life in the world in which we live. Not only are we "dangerous" as we "loiter" at the margins, but it is a dangerous place for us to be. We must never forget the God to whom we belong. We must never forget that we need to be anchored in our parish situation for our nurture and support, but we are pilgrims meeting people on their life journey. These were two occasions God put that idea of "pilgrim" in my head; "Songs of Praise" and Dave Male. In case I hadn't got the point as yet there were more reminders.

One morning in our Op Shop I happened to spot a book called "Dangerous Journey: The story of Pilgrim's Progress"⁶ It immediately took me back to my childhood and a church mission run at Manly Vale. The missionary used the wonderful story of "Pilgrim's Progress", complete with original lantern slides, I think, to encourage us to understand better our journey of life. That mission and that story had a huge impact on my thinking as a twelve year old.

"But that's not all", as they say on the small screen. Early one Sunday morning at a service at one of our country churches, we

5 Acts 8. 26-40.

6 Oliver Hunkin, Alan Parry (illustrations), and Yorkshire Television Ltd from the original text of John Bunyan. (1985). *Dangerous Journey: The story of Pilgrim's Progress*, Marshall Pickering/Eerdmans/Collins Dove.

sang hymn number 467 – “To be a pilgrim”.⁷ I love the hymn but some of the words have a tendency to be unreal in the context of modern life eg., “Hobgoblin or foul fiend”. However it reminded me again of the concept of pilgrim. Then came the 11th Sunday after Pentecost and the collect which says:

Kindle in our hearts, Father, the same faith that impelled Abraham to set out from his home and to live as a pilgrim in a foreign land.⁸

By that time, I think I had the message. This was important!

Then I remembered a young student of mine from some years earlier at the local Catholic Secondary School. She was a very faithful young girl, and we often spoke of spiritual things, and particularly her experiences of Medugorje. As she was finishing school she gave me a simple set of Rosary beads which had come from Medugorje, an important place of pilgrimage for some Catholics. I love their simplicity and though I am not in the habit of saying the Rosary, I found them a powerful statement of the belief and life journey of a large number of faithful people. In fact they are an important part of the prayer life of several people that I visit.

My conversations with that young girl, reminded me of the importance of the journeying process, and the weaving of our beliefs and faith into the normal fabric of life.

If we explore the possibilities of a “pilgrim” role for deacons, what does it mean? What does it involve?

Initially I believe that it means we need to be focussed strongly on a life of prayer, from which God can lead us to the right spot and the right person on the “wilderness” road. This involves an openness to the voice of God. That openness will work best if we

7 *The Australian Hymn Book*. (1997). Collins Liturgical Press. Hymn 467 – Words John Bunyan (1628-1688 and Music – English Traditional melody adapted and arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams 1872-1958.

8 The Anglican Church of Australia – General Synod. (1995), *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books. pp. 571-2, Prayer of the Day, Year C.

spend some of our prayer time in silence, allowing space and time for God to communicate. Remember the words of the psalmist, *Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*⁹ Then again, *Be still and know that I am God!*¹⁰

Another road map, as it were to the “wilderness” road, can be found in a deep understanding of the scriptures. Again we need the stillness and the silence, and the discipline to listen for God’s personal direction to us in the words of the scriptures.

Then once we are on the “wilderness” road and the pilgrim’s journey has begun we need to find out how to engage, and then how to listen to the person with whom we journey.

When I think about engaging I am reminded about a short film I saw recently, when I attended a seminar on dementia. The film was called “Ex Memoria”, and it told the story of Lydia, a wheelchair bound woman with dementia. Lydia lived in an aged care facility. Her state of mind, influenced by her dementia, and by some devastating life experiences made her agitated and very distressed. A number of staff members tried to help, but it was not until one man came along and knelt down beside her so that her eyes and his were on the same level that any real contact came. This man listened to her and she gradually calmed down. He did not try to bring Lydia back to reality. He let himself encounter what life was like for her and in doing that he engaged with her and he allowed her to talk as he listened. He could not solve all her problems but he engaged and he listened.¹¹

In thinking about this it drew me back to an incident in my own ministry. An elderly gentleman arrived at our Nursing Home. He had no local family, but we had a vacancy and he accepted it. I met him and we talked for some time. When I discovered he was an 8th Division man and had been a POW of the Japanese, I told him about my father. He responded to that and we became quite friendly. One night about 7pm I had a call from the Manager of

9 Psalm 37.7 NRSV

10 Psalm 46.10 NRSV

11 “Ex Memoria” Details available from <http://exmemoriafilm.co.uk>.

our facility asking for my help. This man had become extremely distressed and refused to go to bed. He wandered up and down the hallway, and none of the staff could seem to help him.

I went up, and as I entered he saw me and recognised me. He ran to me and talked very quickly about people who were trying to kill him. I asked him to sit down with me and tell me all about it. In his mind he saw the facility surrounded by Japanese soldiers, all with very sharp swords. They were there to kill him and cut him into small pieces. This was what his world was like at that moment. There was no point in me trying to tell him this was not so, because if I was to help him I had to engage with his reality, and seek to solve the problem from that reality.

I asked the man to accompany me as we checked all the exterior opening doors of the facilities. When he was satisfied that they were locked and alarmed, he asked could we ensure all blinds were down. When this task was complete, I suggested that we could now safely go to his room. He agreed, then got in to bed and accepted the medication the nurse gave him. I promised him that I would stay until he was safely asleep. Before long he dozed off and had a good night's sleep.

Finding the reality of a person's world, engaging with the person in that reality, and then listening, are vital to us if we genuinely want to be involved in being part of someone else's journey.

Christians are not necessarily good listeners. I think we probably feel that we hold the wonderful story of salvation, and that we need to get it to as many people as we can, as quickly as we can. Some years ago I came across a quotation from the great Christian thinker, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I go back to it time after time just to remind myself of its importance.

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking when they should be listening. He who no longer listens to his brother [sister] will soon no longer be listening to God either. One

who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it.¹²

One of the important things about being a pilgrim comes in the journeying. We do not need to be in control of this journey. Just like our inability to listen, all too often we have to be in control of each situation in which we find ourselves, or else we feel that we will be unable to get the message of the good news across. It is, in fact, our presence which is the important thing. The fact that we are prepared to be there, in the reality of the world of the other person or persons, that marks us as someone the other “travellers” can call upon.

So we engage, we listen, we discover the reality of the other’s world, and we are present with them on their journey.

As we listen we hear the needs expressed by our fellow traveller. Once we hear those needs we bring them back to the early process of prayer and scriptures, and again we listen for the voice of God in our time of silence. God will draw us into a process where we can help, but that won’t happen unless we have listened carefully to both the expression of needs and to the voice of God. I have heard this called the “art of double listening” from exponents of the Mission Shaped Church movement in England.¹³

We will never be able to solve all the needs which are brought to us, nor should we try. If, in love, we seek to find some ways of reaching people based on the needs they have expressed and what we have been led to by God, then we will help the person/persons to feel that they belong with us. Once the feeling of belonging comes, believing will not be too far behind.

Often we will be faced with critical situations where we will not have a lot of time to engage and listen. Nor will we have a lot

12 Bonhoeffer, D. (1959). *Life Together*. Harper and Brothers. pp 97-98.

13 Bob and Mary Hopkins, Anglican Church Planting Initiatives UK – at “Unleashing the Mission Shaped Church Conference” at St Mark’s National Theological Centre. 16 June, 2006.

of time to listen in the silence for God's directions. However if we are faithful on the occasions when we have the time, God will be there, as well when we don't.

Let me give you a couple of examples.

One day I received a call from the parish next door. Our priest was away and the priest of the parish concerned was very ill. A baby had died and they needed someone to take the funeral. Immediately I visited the couple in hospital and listened as they told me their story. If I remember correctly they had had a number of miscarriages, and then this beautiful baby boy had been born. He weighed over 8 pounds and looked healthy in all respects, but then things started to go wrong. The baby was quickly flown to Sydney, but died before the problem could be solved.

I had no answers for them, other than to assure them that the baby was dearly loved by God and was in his hands.

On the day of the service, the church was filled to capacity, mainly with young couples, all of whom were strongly affected by the situation. The couple had asked for a song to be played. It was not a hymn, but it was a song which meant much to them. I was not in a good state myself, I must admit. The sobbing all around the church was pushing me to tears as well. The song however gave me time to pray again, and by the time it finished, remarkably the sobbing had stopped, and I was back in control of my own emotions.

I admitted to the congregation and particularly to the parents that I wished I could tell them why this had happened, but I couldn't. I suggested to them that I might be able to suggest a symbol which might help them find a way through their devastation. I lit a large candle and explained that this was a symbol, not of a high powered light, but of a light which could be used to take one step at a time. Though, in reality they were in a very dark place, this candle symbolised for them a light which, hand in hand with God, they could take one step at a time until at some time in the future the light was there for them again.

As we processed out of the church, I carried the burning candle in front of the father who carried the simple white casket.

As we left the church we had to negotiate about thirty metres in the open air to the hearse. The wind blew in huge gusts but that candle stayed burning right to the hearse. I believe that God was there in the sadness and the tears, hurting as we hurt, but ensuring that the symbol was lit to bring them some surety of God's presence.

Just before Easter the next year that couple had a beautiful baby girl, who was baptised as a part of the Easter Saturday liturgy. Some people couldn't understand why the couple wanted a large number of godparents, but I could.

More recently I was called up to the A and E part of our hospital, early one Saturday morning. A young couple, who had recently had twins, had come in because they could not awaken the boy twin. Unfortunately the baby was dead. The couple were terribly distressed as were the nursing staff. The worst thing nurses face I believe is the death of a baby.

I tried to offer comfort but soon realised that it was better for me to just listen. Eventually one part of their distress surfaced. They were desperately frightened that God would not accept the baby because they had not had time to baptise the little fellow. With that out in the open I was able to help a little. For some reason God had prompted me to put a baptismal candle and matches in my pocket. I lit the candle, and prayed for them and for their child, at the same time placing the mark of the cross on the baby's forehead. I could not baptise the child but I could help them to feel the presence of God with them. I explained to them that God suffered with them, at the loss of their son, because God too had gone through the death of his own Son. I explained that I believed that the love of God had already reached out to their son, and taken the baby to be with God.

I'm supposed to minister in the area of aged care, but God seems to draw me into all sorts of situations with babies as well.

One area in which God has encouraged me to engage is baptism. I really didn't want to get involved in garden baptisms etc, and when the first call came I told the couple that I had to run

it past the Bishop, sensing that he might well say no, and get me out of it. He didn't! In fact he suggested a few things to try. I was short sighted. The bishop was much more far sighted.

Let me just explain a few of the things he suggested I might try.

Firstly he encouraged me to have the couple set up the altar in the garden, decorate the baptismal candle and choose the reading to be used as a part of the service. Then I was to talk to the godparents and ask them speak on the day about their hopes and dreams for their godchild. When it came time to make the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead the Bishop suggested that I invite parents, godparents, grandparents etc to do this as well, so that they all felt a part of this process of baptism.

This sort of thing may sound somewhat radical, and I guess it is. But, it works! It draws in the godparents and the parents much more. It involves all the family. Suddenly there is an ownership and a belonging that might never have been there before.

One of the things that appeals to me most is that when I baptise a baby outside of the church, I do so in the parent's choice of place. In the church I am in control. The power is, in a sense, vested in me. Out there I am in their territory! Their world! It took a while to feel comfortable about that. Now I love that part of it.

It goes back to that idea of the pilgrim. I am in the reality of their world. I am on a journey with them. I have engaged with them and listened to what they want and need, and I have spent time in prayer and listening for what God is saying about this.

One of the greatest highlights came for me when I baptised my great nephew in a wool shed on a beautiful property outside of Colac in Victoria. I invited one of the godmothers to speak about her hopes and dreams for Angus, and she said lots of important things, then in conclusion she said something like this:

"I don't know whether I should say this, but I would really love it if Angus could play full forward for the Cats."

For me those words were so important. In Victoria people are much more devoted to their Aussie Rules club, than people in other parts of Australia seem to be. This family have been followers of the



Angus Stuart Sutherland being baptised by Pam and Don Jamieson.

© (Photo reproduced by courtesy of Jan Smith of Colac, Victoria)

Geelong Cats for generations. I thought to myself this young lady had got it right. Of course we want all the proper spiritual things to happen for little Angus, after all we are making him a member of God's Church! But as well as that we want those faith things to shine out in a busy and active life, where he experiences all the things that are important to him and to everyone around him.

As deacons our task is not to draw people away from life into some sort of cloistered spiritual place. We want to be able to help them find the God who already loves them; the God who is already there in their lives; the God who wants them to be fellow pilgrims on the journey of life.

In his last meeting with the deacons of this diocese, Bishop George Browning, the bishop who gave permission for the baptisms to proceed, suggested that he should explain what he felt was the theology behind what he had suggested. For him the important thing was that in an approach like this our prime purpose was to enable the family and their baby to engage with God in this process, and let God act with and upon them.

I hope that deacons acting as pilgrims might see this same opportunity before them. As you journey with, engage, listen to, pray and spend time listening to God in the scriptures and the silence, I hope your pilgrimage is focussing on creating situations in which your fellow travellers can engage with God in life giving experiences.

I have said a lot today, and I could say a lot more, and tell a few more stories. However I feel that perhaps, having planted a few seeds, I should leave the watering, weeding and growing process to God.

May God bless you all in the diverse ministries to which he has called you.

I would love to hear your reactions to some of the things I have said.

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Appendix One: More ministry stories.

A Holding Cross.

The day I began my new ministry I ventured to our local hospital before heading for the Nursing Home.

The first room I entered was a single room occupied by a lady. I introduced myself and explained why I was there. Then I asked this lady how she was. She burst into tears. I sat down beside her and invited her to tell me all about her problem if she felt she could.

She told me all about the depression which had been smothering her life for some time. I just let her talk about how life was for her. More and more I understood where she was, because I had been into that black hole myself on more than one occasion.

As best I could, I tried to explain a few things that had helped me. She thanked me for taking the time to listen to her. It seemed that what she appreciated most was that someone had taken that time.

I had put a holding cross around my neck that morning and I felt I should offer to leave it with her. I explained how I had found it helpful and she happily took it.

Over thirteen years we have bumped into each other a number of times, and she is on our parish Telecare programme. The “black dog” continues to be there every now and then, but she seems to have more ways of coping now.

When I think of this lady I thank God for his confirmation to me of my new ministry, and I realise more and more that while we are unable to solve all the problems of the people God puts in our way, being with them and listening to them is a wonderful way of sharing the love of God.

Family History

Have you ever thought of family history as an area of ministry?

I have two really good friends who I will call Mona and Fred. I have known this couple for many years, but got to know them a lot better when Mona's mother was admitted to the Nursing Home. Mona and Fred continued their strong involvement with the Home even after the death of Mona's mother. Mona is a wonderful leader and a very hard worker. Fred is probably the most natural pastoral carer I have ever encountered. His ability to engage with complete strangers in the hospital or aged care facility is quite astonishing, and he quickly gets to know people and they open up to him in an extraordinary way.

One day recently Fred showed me a scrapbook in which there were cuttings about his family. He had been brought up by a church family in the country not far from his present home. He had been told some stories about his mother and his father, which had been very hurtful to him.

The cuttings gave me some clues as to how we might find out more about his family, and after a couple of hours on the internet I was able to show him where his grandparents had come from in Wales, and even a photograph of the street in which the family had lived. The further we searched the more we discovered that the stories he had been told were not true, and without going into any detail, his parents had obviously welcomed his arrival, rather the opposite story which had been conveyed to him. The things he had been told were motivated by what the family who cared for him had hoped to achieve from their dealings with him. What they didn't realise was that their stories had hurt his own perceptions of himself.

I don't know how far Fred will want to take his family history research. I do know that finding out what he has, has been a real boost to how he feels about himself. His new understanding has made a really good pastoral carer into an even better one. And all for a couple of hours internet research in the first place.

Appendix Two

Listening

I first came across this material in a course called *First Aid in Mental Health*. It was so good that I sought to use it in my book, *Walking with Forgotten People*. I made contact with Betty Kitchener and Anthony Jorm of the Australian National University, who had put the mental health course together. Unfortunately, though they had searched extensively, they could not find the original author. Further internet searches found the material in various forms but always without a distinct author. In thankfulness to whoever it was who prepared it I offer it to you as a source of valuable information:

You are not listening to me when:

- ◆ You say you understand.
- ◆ You have an answer for my problem before I have finished telling you my problem.
- ◆ You cut me off before I've finished speaking.
- ◆ You finish my sentences for me.
- ◆ You are dying to tell me something.
- ◆ You tell me about your experiences, making mine seem unimportant.
- ◆ You refuse my thanks by saying you really haven't done anything.
- ◆ You are listening when:
- ◆ You really try to understand me, even if I'm not making sense.
- ◆ You grasp my point of view, even when it is against your own sincere conviction.
- ◆ You realise the hour I took from you has left you a bit tired and a bit drained.

- ◆ You allow me the dignity of making my own decisions, even though they may be wrong.
- ◆ You do not take my problem from me, but allow me to deal with it in my own way.
- ◆ You hold back the desire to give me good advice.
- ◆ You do not offer me religious solace when you sense I am not ready for it.
- ◆ You give me room to discover for myself what is really going on.
- ◆ You accept my gratitude by telling me how good it makes you feel to know that you have been helpful.

The five marks of mission

- ◆ to proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- ◆ to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- ◆ to respond to human need by loving acts of service
- ◆ to seek to transform unjust structures of society
- ◆ to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

(*Bonds of Affection* -1984 ACC-6 p49, *Mission in a Broken World*- 1990 ACC – 8 p.101)

Facing up to Richard Dawkins and the New Atheism

Scott Cowdell

Richard Dawkins is a leading biologist whose job at Oxford and around the world these days is to help the public understand science better. Popular science writing does not come much better than Dawkins' books, starting with *The Selfish Gene* in the 1970s. Dawkins' subject is the way life on earth has changed: how over vast aeons of time, single-celled organisms in the primordial soup have given rise to more complicated multicellular forms of life, and how that life has diversified to fill every niche in the natural environment.

For many of us all this is perfectly obvious and we have no problem reconciling our religious and spiritual vision with the world according to modern science. But many religious people are very anti-science, and very 'anti-much-else' about the modern world, too. In many places, human freedoms that we enjoy are denied in the name of religion, while religious ideology is taught in place of proper science and proper history. Richard Dawkins condemns such bad religion, in company with a great many of the faithful. But his critique of bad religion becomes a critique of all religion, and his scientific vision is used to justify militant atheism, turning science into an all-encompassing ideology leaving no room for religion in general and for Christian faith in particular. This is a highly contentious view and I reject it outright.

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But if Dawkins goes way too far in his critique of religion, way beyond where his science can reliably take him, nevertheless I do agree with him on the science. What is more, there is much in his critique of religion that I share, especially his criticism of religion that remains closed and fearful towards scientific findings. I also think that Dawkins exposes some bad practice in the way we have regularly sought to commend Christian faith: we have used God to account for gaps in our scientific account of the world, but when science advances those gaps are often closed and we do not need to invoke God any more. In short, I think that Dawkins helps us think about God more maturely, by undermining our spiritually immature attempts to use God as an explanation, as a prop for a reassuringly stable view of things. Real Christian faith is edgier than that.

So in what follows, I first introduce the science, so we understand where the controversy begins. Then I set out the way inadequate religion responds to this extraordinary picture revealed by science. Ironically, however, we will see that in his un-subtle dismissal of all religion, Dawkins most clearly resembles the worst excesses of religion. I then ask how good religion integrates modern science, and how we might spiritually and theologically accommodate the story of life's journey that Dawkins so compellingly sets out. Last of all, I reflect briefly on how Christians might respond to Dawkins and to his kind more generally, how we might respond to our many brilliant but insufferably smug opponents. How do we best understand them, and how do we best respond?

Introducing the science

First of all, let us talk about the science and the story Dawkins tells of life's journey from the first single cells billions of years ago to the mind-boggling diversity of plants and animals we see around us today, ourselves included. How has all this happened?

Essentially, it is because creatures moving into different environments – on the earth, underground, in the sea, in the air, in hot places, and cold – have all had to either adapt or perish.

Occasionally an individual plant or animal proves better at it than the norm, thereby gaining the edge in survival and passing on this advantage to its descendents. Consider this example: there were light-coloured moths in Victorian England that were invisible against the bark of trees, so predatory birds could not see them. The rarer black moths that emerged by the combination of recessive genes in this population of moths were quickly spotted. But when industrial pollution blackened the bark of trees, it was the light-coloured moths that stood out, so they were picked off by the birds. Eventually, the black moths were the ones who survived and reproduced so the population of moths became almost entirely black. In more recent times, environmental improvements have reduced the pollution, and the bark is light again, with the result that this population of moths is once again mostly light coloured. What is true in this example of a population adapting to its environment in a single human lifetime provides an illustration for what is happened with all life, across geological time.

It is a very simple process, really: given enough time, the pressures of survival working on creatures will occasionally favour a random mutation in the gene pool of a species, and in time that species will change, and new species will emerge. This is how creatures in the sea eventually gave rise to random offspring who could survive out of the water, and their offspring in turn began to adapt to all the new opportunities that life on land offered. Eventually the great family of running, swimming and flying lizards called the dinosaurs perished. This gave the bright-eyed little mammals their chance to take over, and today our family of warm-blooded creatures extends from tiny mice to giant sperm whales, each having emerged to best exploit a particular niche market in nature. Somewhere along the way, the primates and the earliest humans emerged as two forks in the road, and today we humans with our toolmaking brains and hands have transformed the world.

All this is called evolution by natural selection. It is an idea that became prominent with the English biologist Charles Darwin from the 1850s. Later, thanks to an Austrian monk called Gregor Mendel who bred garden peas and so began the scientific study of

genetics, what has been called ‘Darwin’s dangerous idea’ became a simple and powerful theory to account for all the diversity of life that we see. Nowadays, molecular genetics shows us the roots of our own human genetic material in forms of life emerging earlier in the evolutionary process. It turns out that we share a lot of genetic material with insects, more with reptiles, more again with other mammals, and all but two per cent of our DNA with our nearest relatives, the chimpanzees. In these ways, the newer discipline of molecular genetics helps us to trace accurately our human family tree. And we trace it not just to ‘grandpa’, who gave us our blue eyes or our big nose, but right back before our particular family emerged, to the origins of human life in Africa and, before that, to pre-human life, to the age of the dinosaurs and life in the seas. Our genes carry the whole history of life on earth.

Richard Dawkins coins the term ‘the selfish gene’ to explain the driving force of this impersonal, natural process. The protein molecules called genes replicate themselves in ever-new individual creatures. He points out that the selfish gene drives our desire to survive and reproduce, making us care particularly for our children and our siblings (because they share the most genetic material with us). The selfish gene even drives us to be reasonably responsible and moral people, because working together gave pre-historic human communities their best chance in the struggle for survival. Another important part of Dawkins case is that these natural processes are entirely blind. That is, there is no prior plan being worked out here. Given enough time and enough randomness and enough ill-fitted individual creatures perishing to make room for fitter, stronger, more adaptable ones, we eventually get the whole teeming diversity of creatures that we see. Dawkins shows us how life always finds a way, with his simple Darwinian algorithm. This is undoubtedly powerful and elegant science.

Science and religion at enmity?

So far so good, right? Wrong! And here I raise the whole matter of religion in general, and Christian faith in particular. One of

the things human beings always do is reflect on the wonder and complexity of the world of which we are a part. All cultures have their own philosophical and speculative tools for understanding and coping with life, most of which we group together under the catch-all title 'religion'. And for most people in history it is religion they have turned to for understanding the origins of our world and life. This was certainly true before science came up with its own powerful account of how things got to be the way they are, and it is still true for a great many people today, many of whom look to the Bible.

Whatever else it does as the emerging faith testimony of a particular people, our Christian Bible tried to provide answers for a pre-scientific world. It is still looked to for such answers today. There is nothing about evolution in the Bible, however, and until the nineteenth century the Bible's world of animal species fixed from the first week of creation, with a finite list of named human ancestors taking us back to those beginnings, could still seem plausible. But thanks to new discoveries in geology, from the nineteenth century we came to see that the world was much more ancient than just 6000 years, say, while we begun to appreciate that the fossils we had long been digging up pointed to whole families of creatures that had flourished and perished long ago. With Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection capping-off these discoveries, the Bible and modern science seemed to be in opposition. What were we to do?

Some Christians resolved this apparent conflict by denying modern science and its view of a closed, self-sustaining natural world altogether. According to them, God pulls all the strings and the so-called laws of nature that modern science reveals are just a veil we humans invent, drawn over the actual details of God's hidden working. John Calvin thought this way in sixteenth-century protestant theology, before we had a sense of nature's laws operating on their own, but so did Karl Barth in twentieth-century theology. This was their way of insisting on God's absolute sovereignty, with nothing else, not even the laws of nature, allowed to compete with

God. Such insistence on divine sovereignty hatches the view that all things, even bad things, happen for a reason and that every natural occurrence is really God's consciously intentional act.

The most extreme version of such views comes with biblical fundamentalism, which has no place for an independent natural order, or an independent human mind for that matter. The creation science movement is an influential current example. It attempts to fit-together scientific findings about the journey of life with the Bible, insisting that all the different types of creature were really all together on the earth at once, right from the start (some even include the dinosaurs) and that the earth, made and populated in six days according to a literal reading of Genesis, is really only a few thousand years old. According to creationism, all scientific evidence to the contrary is either a misunderstanding or a trick of the devil to trip us up in our pride.

Creation science is bad science of course, because scientific method is based on the idea that things have to be understood on their own terms, and not just because the Bible says so. Also, science works all of a piece, so that if the universe is only six thousand years old, then all our theoretical physics, our astronomy, our thermodynamics is wrong, not just our evolutionary biology.

Of course scientific method involves assumptions, but they are such fruitful assumptions. The fact that natural explanations keep being found for everything makes a literal, fundamentalist view of the Bible seem ever more desperate and contrary. But, of course, I would argue that being contrary is the real political motive behind creation science. I would argue the same applies also for a related ideology called intelligent design, which is a kind of 'creation science lite' (that is, creation science in which the religious basis is kept out of sight, pretending that the conclusions come from unbiased science alone, and not from the Bible).

Creationism, like all fundamentalism, is really about asserting the power of the fundamentalist religious group over the power of the modern imagination, over the independent-mindedness of modern people and over the secular freedom of today's societies to

go their own way beyond anybody's controlling religious agenda. Like an aggrieved ex-spouse, the fundamentalist is resentful that the culture to which religion was once wedded is now able to get along without it, and is moving on. Religion like this, that wants to be in charge, is not interested in the sort of mature theological conversation that might bring the Bible and the culture into some sort of mutually fruitful dialogue, so that science might help us understand the Bible and the Bible's vision might help us put science into a broader imaginative context. I will say more on this shortly.

Dawkins is certainly right to criticise fundamentalism, but he is certainly wrong to tar all religion with the fundamentalist brush. Ironically, he is very like a fundamentalist himself in the way he 'absolutises' the scientific method into a quasi-religious crusade. This is the other way to go in the face of a perceived conflict between science and religion, the way of 'scientific fundamentalism' if you like, and we find it among many of today's militant atheists.

Where the religious fundamentalist dismisses science, Dawkins takes the fundamentalist path in reverse, dismissing religion as entirely incompatible with science. His most controversial book, *The God Delusion*, which has sold over a million copies, in many ways resembles a fundamentalist rant but in this case not a religious one. Dawkins insists that scientific method, which has revealed the wonder of evolution and of so much else about our world, is the only valid type of human inquiry and imagination. We have heard that the biblical fundamentalist sees all questions as essentially religious questions with God as the sole actor in every event and the sole explanation for every outcome, and that any other view is seen to dishonour God. In the same way, Dawkins insists that nothing worth knowing is inaccessible to scientific investigation and everything humanly worthwhile can be fully accounted for.

It seems to me that this is a battle of methodologies: 'you show me your Bible and I'll show you my science'. Here are two competing priesthoods, rather like the story of Elijah and his contest with the priests of Baal in the first book of Kings, with Dawkins the high priest of science winning hands down over religion. Is this

all about power and winning too, like religious fundamentalism? Dawkins denies this of course, insisting that scientific method is open to examination and disproof, while religious conviction is not open to testing and hence puts itself beyond criticism. But here Dawkins shows his failure to understand both bad science and good theology.

Latest philosophy of science, which many working scientists ignore at best and despise at worst, views science on par with other areas of human culture like art and literature and religion. To be sure science has a powerful method, but that method can only address part of reality. It can tell us why the scattering of light rays from the sun in our atmosphere makes the sky blue for instance, but it can not account for just how good it feels after days of cloud and rain to open our curtains in the morning to reveal a clear blue sky. Likewise scientists like Dawkins insist that theirs is an unbiased and dispassionate discipline but the history of science tells a different story. It shows how the scientific community clings to outmoded ideas and suspects new developments until the contrary evidence proves overwhelming, with many advances in scientific understanding resisted from within the scientific community itself, not just from outside. The scientific community is political, and structured by power relations just as religious communities are, and if science does eventually move on in its understanding, then so too do healthy religious communities.

The Church has advanced and reformed and responded with humility to perceived challenges and invitations from God over time, in just the same way that the scientific community has eventually embraced new theories and paradigms of understanding. Dawkins is perhaps at his least scientific here, despising the Church and religion to the extent that he fails to observe it with sufficient scientific rigour. Religion can be bad and fearful and political, yes; yet the Old Testament prophets challenged all that, just as did Jesus and Saint Paul. The earliest monks challenged it by retreating to the desert from the corruptions of an only loosely-Christianised Empire; the Protestant Reformers challenged it, and today all the mainstream theologians and Churches that Dawkins refuses

to acknowledge challenge the fundamentalist control of religion. Dawkins' obvious hatred of the Church and its claims blinds him to everything that is plainly good in the Church, despite its many faults. Dawkins is unscientifically-minded in his assessment of religion and, if you will, he is religiously-minded in his uncritical endorsement of science as the only path to truth and the only purely moral human undertaking.

Surely both bad religion and bad science need condemnation. Dawkins rightly points to the horrors committed in the name of religion, but he refuses to admit the violence that arrogant atheism entails, with its entirely closed and unaccountable world view. Look what happens to science when it is shorn of any broader context of meaning and moral purpose, rendered entirely instrumental and detached from any religious vision of the worth of the human person. This leads to a range of identifiable abuses, from the medical experiments of the Nazis, for instance, to the worst excesses of environmental abuse and unjustifiable cruelty in animal experimentation. Look, too, at the anti-religious mania of Stalin's purges. For every free-thinker punished by bad religion, there was a priest or a nun murdered in Stalin's Gulag. Dawkins says that you can not blame atheism for such atrocities committed by atheist regimes. But if he is right, then neither can you blame religion *per se* for the faults of some religious groups and individuals. Rather human arrogance is to blame, and that can be found equally in the world of science and atheism as it can in the world of religion. So if good science is healthily self-critical as Dawkins rightly points out, then so is good religion, as he seems scarcely able to comprehend, let alone admit.

Scientific and Christian?

Let us now consider how we might move beyond the alleged incompatibility of science and religion. Dawkins is not impressed by the fact that many scientists are religious, holding together their commitment to evolutionary biology, for instance, with their profound sense that God is nevertheless creating the world through

evolutionary means. In other words, he rejects any third option beyond the fundamentalism of religion, which allows no challenge or insight from science, and also beyond the fundamentalism of his own scientific understanding, which insists on a closed world of scientific explanation leaving no room for God. I want to point to this third, non-fundamentalist way for us to go, beyond these two options to which Dawkins' imagination is confined.

First, let me say what will not work, and Richard Dawkins helps us see this all the more clearly. What will not work any more is using God as a scientific explanation. Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century had discovered universal gravitation and the mathematics of planetary motion, but he could not work out why the orbits of planets did not decay. So Newton suggested that God used angels to keep the planets in their stable orbits. But, before long, the French mathematician Laplace improved on Newton's explanation, providing a purely scientific account of stable planetary orbits. Napoleon supposedly asked Laplace where God was in this new, self-contained celestial mechanics, to which Laplace supposedly replied, 'I have no need of that hypothesis.' This little story provides a salutary warning. If God is used to fill a gap in our scientific explanation of nature, what happens to our God when scientific understanding advances to fill that gap?

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an English Archdeacon called William Paley produced a classic argument in his book *Natural Theology*. He said that if you found a watch while walking on the heath, you would not imagine it had just taken form there by purely natural means. Rather, you would rightly suppose that a watchmaker had crafted it. In the same way, the natural world (much beloved of English parson naturalists) must be the detailed creation of a designer God. This so-called argument from design has a venerable history, and many Christians still argue for belief in God based on the sheer improbability of life's wonderful complexity. But Dawkins knows how genetic mutation plus natural selection plus enough time can produce all we see by purely blind and random processes, with each new stage building fortuitously on what went before. In books with titles like

The Blind Watchmaker and *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Dawkins shows that the complexity of life is built up by stages. Eventually, by trial and error and feedback from the environment, the blind-folded partygoer succeeds in pinning the tail on the donkey, just as the Easter egg-hunting children finally discover the whole stash. There is no map. There is just exploration of the environment by trial and error over time, much as over time we find all the buried mineral deposits, building up the map as we go.

Nowadays there are more sophisticated versions of the argument from design. The so-called 'strong anthropic principle' is based on our recent discovery that the fundamental building blocks of matter and energy in our universe have to be just as they are for the universe to be able to support life, especially human life. Without the speed of light, the mass of the electron and the exact balance of forces in the atomic nucleus being just as they are, for instance, to many decimal points of accuracy, our universe would not have got going. The 'Big Bang' might have petered out in a fraction of a second, or the universe might not have advanced beyond hydrogen and maybe helium, let alone the carbon and all the heavier elements made in collapsing stars that provide the base matter for organic life. And on the macro level, if our Earth was not just the right distance from the sun for the temperature to be favourable, and if Earth's axis was not tilted just right for there to be proper seasons, then there would be no human life.

All this is true, of course, and our wonder at these mind-boggling facts of physical science helps explain why so many scientists are open to religious feeling. But the 'strong anthropic principle' does not work as a *proof* for the existence of God. Remember, there is no map available in advance. The universe built itself up over time, with each stage making the next stage possible. If these fundamental constants of physics were different, any universe that emerged and proved stable enough would take a different direction from our universe and, if life emerged in it, that life would evolve quite differently from life on Earth. It is one thing to discern a pattern in events with hindsight, but that does not mean a detailed plan was being worked out from

the beginning. Humans have evolved because it was possible in this sort of universe, not because this sort of universe was set up from the beginning so humans could evolve in it.

So if we are to believe in God today, it will not be because of what we learn from physics and biology. They may contribute to the sense of wonder that is at the heart of a religious temperament, but our faith is based on more than that; it is based on an overall sense of God. It is based on our experience of finding an unaccountable power at work in our hearts to guide and reorient our lives, with the greatest miracles always being those of personal change. It is based on a sense of forgiveness and transformation of life beyond the paralysis and shame so typical of human moral experience. For Christians, it is also based on how the story of Jesus Christ and the Bible as a whole so powerfully illuminates our experience of living, so that faith essentially becomes self-authenticating.

Even a relative conservative like the recently canonised nineteenth-century theologian John Henry Newman rejected Archdeacon Paley's version of the argument from design, acknowledging that people of faith do not arrive at their conviction by any sort of proof based on nature. So Richard Dawkins, in effectively demolishing the argument from design, leaves intact the basis of faith. Faith in God certainly respects the facts of life, including those of science, but faith is not the product of a chain of right reasoning. Coming to faith is like falling in love, which can not be reduced to a compelling list of someone's attributes, as if you could specify exactly, in advance, the appearance, habits and qualities of the person with whom you will fall in love. The frequently-married Dawkins certainly understands falling in love, but not I suggest the related set of dynamics whereby all sorts of people are grasped by the conviction of God's reality and fall in love with God.

God's action in the world

If we do believe in God as creator of the universe and as still at work within it through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, yet if we also believe that Richard Dawkins has got the science more or less

right, as I do, so that the universe makes itself, then how do we hold these convictions together? I think there are essentially two ways.

One way is to see God as a kind of parent who sets up the household and mostly leaves the children to do their own thing because it is good for them to learn and explore on their own, making them grow into more confident, competent adults. But occasionally this God steps in when it is important to do so, preventing a kitchen accident here, or introducing a new opportunity there, to protect the children and to guide them towards worthwhile possibilities. All parents understand this finely-tuned program of remote supervision with occasional intervention, and this is how many Christians imagine God at work in Dawkins' universe. Life evolves naturally, but occasionally God steps in and helps the next stage of life to emerge. Maybe all it took was for God to help a particular creature make a particular advantageous discovery, a new food source perhaps, for what God knew to be the next big thing in evolution to kick off. In the same way within the more familiar timescale and events of our own lifetimes, many people believe that God intervenes to guide and protect us, putting the right people along our path in life for instance, and perhaps also guarding us from harm.

Some theologians speculate that God might be directing things from within the closed weave of our most sophisticated scientific understanding, so that at a level too small to see, too subtle to measure, God makes all these sorts of things happen. The outcomes that occur with statistical randomness according to quantum mechanics for instance may cloak the hidden action of God, just as the sort of global effects that chaos theory explores might allow God to be tweaking the weather system as a whole say, in order that our prayers for rain might be answered.

All this is certainly conceivable. But there is a downside to this approach. Part of it we have seen already. As far as we know, life evolves and finds ways to greater complexity without need for such special interventions. Also, people of faith come to internalise the presence of their divine parent, so in time we learn the spiritual

discernment that does not need God to be explicitly guiding our steps or opening doors for us. We experience God's allowing us genuine choices and helping us deal with the stuff that happens, enabling us to learn and grow through it all, rather than directing our lives to a particular outcome in a more or less hands-on way. There are two other problems with the intervening God. One involves the so-called 'problem of evil'. If God intervenes to help and guide, then why does God not intervene more to restrain more of life's great evils, both natural and human? This is a question Dawkins and other atheists have long been asking, and rightly. Another problem with an intervening God is that such a God becomes an outsider to God's own world. Modern science has done such a good job in explaining things that all this God can do is intervene in the game from the sidelines.

A better account of God's action in the world involves a small but significant shift of imaginative perspective. Instead of imagining God's being an outsider to a closed world of scientific law, instead of imagining his being like a gremlin who invades nature's system from the outside, or like a computer virus, what if we imagined God as immanent within the processes of nature? What if our transcendent God of awe and majesty, beyond nature and history, is also the immanent principle of all nature and history, so that God inhabits God's own creation, providing life with its broad impulse toward adapting? If so, God's way with the world can be seen in the way a viable physical universe has created the conditions for life bit by bit, and also in the way life has adapted, with the selfish gene seen to be God's instrument of life's emergence within the closed weave of natural causality, though without specifying the details in advance.

In the same way that I can lift, throw or run within the limits of my body's physical capacities, so God can be imagined at work 'inside' natural causality, as the broad spirit of life, but also bringing particular outcomes when God wishes, though only by acting entirely within nature's 'free processes' (as John Polkinghorne calls them) and humans' own free will. Thus all miracles are really natural events in which God's action and natural processes are

indistinguishable. In the same way, when God guides and leads us humans, we experience ourselves at the same time choosing and acting entirely freely, without compulsion. It is not that we are the glove puppets and God is the hand, it is more intimate and personal than that. It is most like the way the salutary influence of a wise guide works through us as we freely choose the wise course of action which they would have recommended. Or it is like the intimacy of life partners, having lived and fitted together so much that they regularly think and speak as one.

Dawkins, like many atheists, would ask at this point, ‘if you say “God makes the world make itself”, isn’t this just a poetic but strictly unnecessary way of saying “the world makes itself”?’ In other words, Dawkins would say that it is not necessary to postulate the unnecessary existence of God to underpin imaginatively our dynamic cosmos, on the basis of a range of human feelings that he insists can be naturally accounted for. Why propose God as a simplifying explanation of life’s complexity when by invoking God you make the whole thing impossibly more complicated?

This is a good question, and it would be a knockdown argument if we were using God as a scientific explanation. But I do not think we are. I think that while we acknowledge with Dawkins the power of purely natural explanations, nevertheless we know that there is an unprovable, strictly unnecessary but nevertheless compelling claim that is mediated through our human experience and through the Christian story. Our God can not be used as a theory; we sense that that would be taking our God’s name in vain. Nevertheless, we can indicate by modest analogy the way our God’s action could be imagined throughout the natural world, and also within our own hearts and minds, as the deepest principle of the world’s life and our life, blessing and guiding us in accord with the capacities of nature and human psychology. In other words, we can imagine how God works in Dawkins’ universe, so that we do violence neither to our science or our faith, without being able to prove a thing. But, do you know what? That does not matter much to us.

Who is afraid of Richard Dawkins?

Last of all, how do we best respond to Dawkins' hostility toward religion in general and Christianity in particular? Let me offer a couple of thoughts here.

First of all, I think that fundamentalism is basically a pastoral problem, including Dawkins' belligerent 'scientific fundamentalism.' Many militantly contrary positions often tell us more about the personal and emotional issues of the protagonist than they do about the matter in question. So I answer fundamentalists not by theological argument, which never works, but by Christian presence and witness, hoping that if they do not meet God in my arguments, God might meet them in my actions.

As for more specifically intellectual and theological responses, there is of course the ancient Christian craft of apologetics. I have been doing some of it in this lecture, trying to show how Christian faith can escape the sceptic's net. But while apologetics can help the wavering, it does not seem to help the hard-headed sceptics themselves. Their minds are made up. So while I certainly believe that apologetics, the giving of a reasoned case for Christian belief, is an important part of faith and mission, nevertheless I acknowledge its limitations. I believe the old-fashioned response to unbelief, of commending repentance and amendment of life, is equally important. There just are people who need to be told that their minds are closed to the truth, and that they are keeping God at bay. Some, indeed, are enemies of God, and they need to hear that.

Jesus counsels us in such situations to refrain from casting our pearls before swine. Jesus never fretted over those who sought to bandy words with him, never bending over backwards to convince the contemptuous. He gave it to them straight, advising his followers to shake the dust off their feet when hard-heartedness greeted their proclamation. Unfortunately, there is a religious hard-heartedness that both Jesus and Richard Dawkins have recognised and opposed. But there is also an atheistic hard-heartedness that

hides behind scientific method. We have seen how science and faith can be imagined together. Richard Dawkins understands little of this, however, and cares less.

Getting it right (not wrong) on human sexuality

Scott Cowdell

When we enter into the realm of human sexuality, we venture onto holy ground. I see this to be the case because sexuality is such an endlessly fascinating, intoxicating, promising, yet alarming part of our life together; it is the realm of intense yearning, unique vulnerability and such scope for both joy and misery. The fact of our sexuality shows us what we are, both individually and together; it reveals our nature as incomplete creatures, in search of another to be made whole, just as it challenges our sense of being rational, ‘in-control’ people by its insistent drives. And it draws us into relationships, so that households and communities will form the bases of our lives together. Consequently, our reflection on the sexual must also be a reflection on the social, the political, the economic and the cultural. It must be a reflection on these because sexuality is the basis of human reality beyond the biological, beyond the personal.¹

Christian theology nowadays laments its long ambivalence about sexuality, wishing to reclaim it in its potential sacramental richness. To this end, a major theme in this paper is that dualism

1 See David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, SCM, London, 2001, who very helpfully extends contemporary Christian ethics beyond the realm of personal considerations where the field has languished somewhat, into a more bracing and realistic engagement with the stabilising context for marriage and family life provided by community networks and wider social responsibilities, and the political role of Christian marriage and family life more generally. On the Christian family as a site of moral formation, and the challenges it faces, see also Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN, 2000.

no longer has a place in Christian talk of sexuality. Rather, sexuality is discussed here as of a piece with spirituality, contributing also to the political vocation of Christ's body in the world.

However, for the sake of human thriving and the quality of our life together, as part of the Church's witness in our world, a Christian sexual ethic remains appropriate. I consider it to be appropriate not for the restraining of something malign, nor for the punishment of human frailty, but out of respect for the very yearning and yielding that makes us who we are. It is rigidity and repression of the unwelcome 'other' that lies at the root of so much human tragedy after all, and I will seek to take very seriously what is revealed by our sexuality, our incompleteness, which is our need for 'the other'. And on that basis we should also think about Christian marriage and family life as a political witness against the isolating, functional agenda that late-capitalist culture sets for human sexuality.

In what follows I outline an approach to sexuality and relationships that avoids the pitfalls of much popular Christian teaching. Can we find a third way, beyond life-denying rectitude on the one hand and a therapeutically-minded liberalism on the other: a liberalism that buys into today's withdrawal of sexual meaning from the public to the entirely private, freedom-of-choice realm? And can we thus form a less dualistic 'sexual discipleship', a 'vocational sexuality', as I like to call it, for the emerging Church, one that does not deny or unhealthily repress the basic sexual fact of our nature, but commends a 'joyful discipline' for the building-up of human identity and solidarity? Can we rehabilitate Christian values concerning sexual relationships in a new way, seeing chastity in terms of radical politics rather than head-in-the-sand conservatism? And, because gay and lesbian Christians have long been offered a stone when asking the Church for bread, can we view monogamous same-sex unions as a valid doctrinal development, extending the internal logic of traditional Christian teaching on marriage and fidelity?

I want to challenge the over-simple reduction of Christian sexual morality to rules and blanket taboos that has characterised yesterday's ethics of control. This no longer makes sense to people, and rightly so. But I also want to up-end today's secular rhetoric of sexual libertinism by claiming that Christianity most truly offers us 'sexuality unplugged'. By that I mean that Christianity offers us sexuality achieving its fullest potential, not distorted, controlled and imprisoned in a consumer culture unequal to its significance and its promise.

Christian sexual morality: old and new

A lot of sexual morality has seen sex as unspiritual and not properly personal; it has seen sex as an ill-fitting component of lives that should be lived on a higher plane. It has been widely held, for instance, that sexuality is a force needing to be managed in the interests of social peace and cohesion. The belief that responsibility and culture-building require control of the passions was important to the Romans, while the regulation of sexual commerce and kinship was at the heart of social arrangements from antiquity well into modern times. From this environment Christianity inherited *a sexual ethic of control for the sake of social order*.

Many early Christians also feared what sexuality told us about ourselves. They believed it told us that we are not just calm, reasonable creatures of spirit but, as much or more so, are we creatures of flesh and urgent desires. And this frightened them. Christianity perennially struggles with what Hans Küng has called 'Platonic-Augustinian-Cartesian body-soul dualism',² and repression of the body's natural affections in favour of rational, instrumental control still flourishes. Thus we have often set forth *a sexual ethic for the anxious control of nature*.

But on all fronts these dualistic suspicions of the natural are under challenge. Against all sexual repression and awkwardness, a more-or-less coherent youth culture has emerged to challenge

2 Hans Küng, *Eternal Life*, Collins, London, 1984, p. 141.

these repressions, while many adults too are settling into a variety of post-traditional lifestyle options. In part, this reaction since the 1960s is characterised by excess, and a failure to appreciate either the relational depth or the wider commitments revealed by our sexual nature. But there is wisdom in it, too, because it affirms the positive, celebratory quality of human sexuality, and rejects the grey, life-denying culture of a repressive Church, or else the apparent bland perfunctoriness of many older-style marriages. The time is right, then, for a Christian sexual ethic that enjoys sex, not instrumentally and narrowly, however, but in all its potential depth and breadth. We must not forget, too, that the sexual revolution has also freed middle-aged and older people from a repressive straitjacket, allowing many to find love and comfort in new relationships, beyond desperately unhappy marriages, escaping the often-punishing aloneness of post-modern urban life. So we need a sexual ethic that values sexuality for all it means, personally, vocationally, holistically and politically, as God's good gift for us and for our salvation.

So much for older, rule-based Christian approaches to sexuality, then. What of themes in sexual ethics emerging today? Does a newly sexually deregulated environment like ours in the post-modern West mean that sexual unease and repression are now things of the past? On the contrary, it seems that fear of our finite, frail, physical dependencies is hard to shake. Fear survives even in the sexual revolution, where there is freedom to do a lot of things but, in reality, sexuality remains firmly under control. What do I mean here?

I mean that sex is often talked about nowadays as a matter of personal freedom in response to physical and emotional urges, or 'intimacy needs'. As elsewhere in our culture, the self and its demands are deemed to be paramount, and sexuality is viewed as a tool of personal enjoyment, happiness, psychic healing and fulfilment. The widespread secular sexual ethic today is 'do what makes you feel good as long as no-one gets hurt', based on the view that 'what consenting adults do in private is their own business'. So we come out from our cool, 'under-control' selves to dabble

in the sexual from time to time, but very much under control. This is an ethic strictly confining sex to the personal, the private and the functional. Instead of an ethic of control for the sake of the social order, or for the conscious repression of the natural, we have *a new controlling ethic limiting sexuality to the maximising of personal enjoyment or happiness* and, with this end in view, sexual relationships cannot be allowed to get too complicated.

We fear the other, to whom our sexuality draws us, threatening to overwhelm and subdue us, catching us up in unwelcome longer-term commitments, for instance with consequent loss of freedom. So we retain control. But we do so no longer for the sake of society, or out of any conscious dualism, but to ensure that the 'real me', the sovereign Western individual ego, is not compromised and is not swept away by the urges of the body it inhabits. We do not want it ensnared by the intrusive claims of another person.

Even when sexual adventures are deliciously transgressive, full of 'out of control' experiences, things can remain really quite controlled. We are speaking here, as Episcopalian Bishop Tom Breidenthal puts it, of 'a brief and titillating exercise in gamesmanship in which two selves "play" at availability with one another'.³ So 'sexual expression' comes to consist of limited outbursts from a personal centre that remains untouched. And when that centre does get touched some people back off; we witness today's widespread 'fear of commitment'.

To maintain a post-modern sexual coolness, transgressive yet fundamentally aloof, it is necessary to assume that others are similarly in control and will not be hurt by being used, being shut out or set aside when playtime is over. It is necessary to assume that their sexuality is something not fundamentally a part of them, either, just as it is not fundamentally a part of us. That way we can relate sexually and safely with neither person really being involved or at risk.

3 Thomas E Breidenthal, 'Sanctifying Nearness', in Charles Hefling (ed.), *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, Cowley, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p. 51.

But of course the world of relationships is full of hurt people: jilted lovers, divorced spouses, abandoned children, those who feel driven to crimes of passion. Are all these people hurt by relationships simply immature? Or, for many of them is there something mature, honest and appropriate about suffering for a self divided or betrayed, or for a deeply connected loved-one torn away? And then there are the grisly abortion statistics, with a whole faceless horde of humans-in-waiting consigned to oblivion. And dare we ask after their mothers, at least some of whom are scarred emotionally for life, representative of an impact of abortion regularly suppressed and denied for the harm it would do to the cause of abortion on demand?⁴

The underlying logic of this widespread sexual coolness remains not only controlling however, but also dualistic in a new way. It is still the case, according to this approach, that our body is not what we most truly *are*. We evaluate our body, adorn it, exercise it, shape it, tattoo it, pierce it, erotically deploy it and, across the board, treat it as an instrument to be used. As a consequence we have a generation of sexually adventurous women who, nevertheless, feel alienated from their bodies, ill-at-ease in their own skin. They display the body, thin it down, but do they confidently just live in it? Who would have thought that in our age of the body beautiful we would still be dualistic? But we are dualistic, preferring body image to actual bodies.

I do not suggest that this current secular position is one the Church will endorse. But the Church does buy into it when we accept today's emphasis on intimacy and personal relationship agendas as primary and see sex as instrumental in fostering them. When we endorse today's Western cultural obsession with romantic love, and the sexual intensity it relies on, as we do when we accept

4 It is not easy to dismiss the case as put by Melinda Tankard-Reist in *Giving Sorrow Words: Women's Stories of Grief After Abortion*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 2000.

as normal the wedding industry and the bridal fantasy world it spawns, then we too endorse a vision of sexuality confined to the personal, the intimate, the private. And all of this is sub-Christian.

So both traditional repressive morality and today's more 'liberated' sexual mores share a resistance to the basic fact of our human nature: that we are sexual, that we are creatures of the flesh, that we are constituted with a powerful attraction to other people and a desire to merge with them that threatens to turn our lives upside down. This is a wonderful discovery, and it takes us to a deep understanding of our selves and our humanity if we let it. A humane sexual ethic needs to acknowledge this yearning incompleteness, not sidestep it in the interests of control, regardless of whether the motives be ancient or modern.

Distorted sexuality is controlling sexuality

On the basis of the line I develop here, the outline of a richer and more humane sexual ethic begins to emerge. I suggest that the Christian ethical vision is of sexuality achieving its full potential in the formation of Christian covenants and households. These covenants and households embody the richly complex relational being of God the Holy Trinity, prefiguring the dream of God for human communities. Accordingly, while the joyful discipline of coming to know Christ in all aspects of life will infuse our imagination and action as sexual beings as well, there will be nothing dualistic or controlling about this discipline. The centrality, power and claim of our sexuality will be admitted, not denied or repressed. Alternatively, an immoral approach to sexuality will be a controlling approach, in which sexuality is kept on a leash for the sake of the sovereign ego and its wants. I refer here to risk-free sexual expression, in the sense that sexual activity is not allowed to touch and claim and transform what we most deeply are, individually and collectively.

When living in Adelaide I drove to work at St Barnabas' College in the inner-West along Sir Donald Bradman Drive, past a much commented-upon sex shop and brothel devoted to

sado-masochism, called ‘The Ultimate Risk’. The name of this enterprise irritated me, not for reasons of prudery so much as for its affront to less extreme lifestyles, as if an ordinary married life like mine was by comparison entirely tame, risk-free and unchallenging. I reflected as I drove that the ultimate risk for a Christian is giving oneself to God and to another for life, in the challenge of a personal covenant with community obligations, and classically, to marriage and the establishment of a Christian household as sites of personal and moral formation for all involved. The ultimate risk did not strike me as likely to manifest itself during business hours via a closely-scripted encounter in a tacky cubicle with Madam Spank!

In commercial sado-masochism like this we see not a sexual celebration, I suggest, but a spin-off of repression in which the sexual urge can only find expression when either punishing or being punished. Resisting the risk, keeping tight control, is the truth behind this kind of sex, which is all about concealment and the dysfunctional relief of repression. I suggest that a similar spirit of control is at the heart of every sexual distortion.

Rape and sexual violence provide the most obvious example. They constitute the criminal, limiting case of sex stripped of openness to the other and to the wider obligations of community. Torture and rape as political weapons are also widely used as attacks on the social body, for instance accompanying the murderous violence of genocide. So, perversely, the wider implications of sexuality are grasped but in an entirely distorted way. A related issue concerns what one writer calls ‘sex in the forbidden zone’,⁵ referring to abuse of the weak by men in positions of power over them. The limiting case here is child abuse, but sexual harassment in the workplace is related. Also, there is the widespread phenomenon of men in power crossing the line with vulnerable women in their care, depriving

5 Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers and Others—Betray Women’s Trust*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1990.

them of reliable support and encouragement that might make all the difference for them in building or rebuilding their boundaries and capacities.

I mention prostitution and pornography here too, despite widespread claims that they are harmless. Instead, these related objectifications of women represent the economic exploitation of female sexuality, involving actual personal degradation and harm to the individuals involved in them. I refuse to believe that any properly self-regarding person would willingly submit to sex on demand with strangers or to the theatrical contempt and servitude forming the mainstay of pornographic imagery. Here is sex very much under control.

Because it is now such a mainstream industry in the West, thanks to the Internet, I will say a little more about pornography. My sense is that rather than celebrating sexuality, the pornographer hates and fears it, filling his pages with images of women being degraded and dehumanised. Their sexuality is removed from the realm of mutual belonging and participation in the dimension of family and community where the rest of human life is lived. I agree with American anti-pornography campaigner Susan Griffin, then: rather than truthfully presenting human sexuality, the pornographer is really a censor; he censors out real sexuality and tenderness, projecting instead his own fear of natural urges and sexuality onto women, portraying women as shallowly material and wantonly out-of-control while he and his male customers cast themselves in the role of controlled domination.⁶ Pornography can thus be seen as the underground literature of weak men. As for the growing number of women who use pornography, championed for instance by Sydney media academic and libertarian Catharine Lumby, they seem to me to be swallowing whole a sadly one-dimensional, patriarchal view of women.⁷

6 Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature*, Harper & Row, New York, 1981.

7 Catharine Lumby, 'Why Feminists Need Porn', in *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, pp. 94–116.

Another instance of sex under tight control is lesbian protest rhetoric, in which lesbian feminists dismiss men as unworthy sexual partners for liberated women. Even feminist theologians are among those who insist on a woman's right to choose, in this as in every other area.⁸ A certain male attitude tries to normalise lesbianism, seeing it as purely natural. But feminist protest at this masculine control of definitions celebrates lesbianism as an informed choice. And, if this is not undertaken with such ideological seriousness, it may simply be chosen as a lifestyle option—for instance, the 'LUG phenomenon' among university students: 'lesbian until graduation'. All this is different from lesbianism as the natural way of things for particular individuals, however. In its severely politicised form, the protest lesbianism advanced by some feminists represents the overcoming of what comes naturally, assuming the women involved would normally prefer a heterosexual relationship. It is controlling sexuality, for reasons of ideology or fashion. In both cases it is repressing the true self revealed in sexual desire.

I present one further example. Romance is a deeply ingrained preference for fantasy over reality throughout our late-modern culture in the West, and is universally held to provide the sole basis for heterosexual love and marriage. Now, I do not want to argue against mutual attraction and affection as highly significant indicators in making a choice for life partnership. Nor do I advocate arranged marriages which avoid the control of sexuality by romance and fantasy at the expense of its control by economic considerations and the demands of kinship networks. Both are instances of marriage, a Christian sacrament, inappropriately taken over by cultural forces. But I am advocating a closer look at how romantic attraction is culturally annexed.

Taking a depth-psychological line, I suggest that the essence of romance is relating to an idealised image of the other, rather than

8 See, for example, Elizabeth Stuart, 'Lesbian Perspectives in Feminist Theology', in Lisa Isherwood & Dorothy McEwan (eds), *An A-Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1996, pp. 118–21.

to the actual other.⁹ And this image fades, to be replaced in time by the real, ill-fitting person and hence we have the widespread fact of divorce after about three years. All clergy who take weddings have scratched their heads over such ‘starry eyed marriage’, and the elaborate consumer-driven bridal fantasy of the wedding industry, wondering if a vision able to sustain a lifetime together is really behind it all. Experience teaches that love grows, changes, matures, or else it dies. Pre-marriage education is important in bringing home such valuable but not always acknowledged facts of life to the young, who are assailed by sentiment and superficiality in everything consumer and popular culture tells them about relationships. But there is also a political vocation for marriage as a Christian sacrament. It tells an entirely different story from the one on offer through love songs, romance novels and bridal magazines. What might that story be?

Beyond control: our vocation as ‘sexuality unplugged’

In light of this discussion, the appropriate stance for Christians and for Christian ethics is to seek the full flowering of human sexuality, what I am calling ‘sexuality unplugged’. This has two dimensions. There is the personal realm and relationships, but that is not the whole of it. Christianity does not follow widespread cultural trends in reducing sexuality to the personal, the private and, hence, to the safely hidden-away. There is also an incorrigibly public, political dimension to Christian witness. In both cases, personal and public, the Christian vision stands against limiting accounts of what it is to be human and sexual, but also against the control of sexuality by commodifying forces that have no use for long-term stability, identity and solidarity.

In the realm of the personal and the relational, ‘vocational sexuality’ is clarified by the question Archbishop Rowan Williams

9 Robert A Johnson, *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984.

puts: ‘How much do we want our sexual activity to communicate?’¹⁰ It can communicate who we most truly are, meaning all our frail self, given to another in trust, whereas in ‘risk-free’ sex the true self and that of the other are not supposed to fully meet. This takes time; we cannot win trust if we do not commit our selves. Hence the Christian alternative is to stop seeking control of sexuality, and to embrace the sacrament of marriage, whereby we give our discovery of who we are and who we will become into the hands of another, accepting in turn the responsibility for helping that other shape who it is that they are to become. Sexuality understood along such Christian vocational lines communicates what we know of God, that God is committed passionately to us and our thriving, so that we in turn can be passionately committed to the other, and any others who might be born or shaped through that commitment.

Looking beyond the personal and the relational, Christian vocational sexuality can be a political witness against coarsening, commodifying forces. It suits this culture if we are preoccupied with pleasure, individualistic, and apolitical, because thus diverted we will not be thinking about challenging the status quo.

Among young people the challenge is particularly demanding. The sexual revolution institutionalises youthful hopelessness, so those sensing that economic and employment trends in today’s West are denying them a creative, prosperous future are offered diversions. Deprived of a world to shape, hedonistic excess and deregulated sexual expression in an essentially private, after-hours world is the best thing on offer.¹¹ Add to that the cult of romance we have considered, which is essentially a fantasy realm in which genuine world-transforming work cannot feature. This culture

10 Rowan Williams, ‘The Body’s Grace’, in Hefling (ed.), *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, p. 61.

11 See Gérard Fourrez, ‘The Sexual Revolution in Perspective’, in Gregory Baum & John Coleman (eds), *The Sexual Revolution* (Concilium 173), T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1984, pp. 3–10; also Jacques Lazure, ‘Young People, Sexuality and Political Contestation’, in Baum & Coleman (eds), *The Sexual Revolution*, pp. 65–70.

offers its own version of sexual conformism, in which uncertainty and hopelessness ensure that no concerted resistance is tolerated; nothing is to hinder our consuming the commodities emblematic of this uneasy lifestyle.

What then of marriage and life partnership? The God of the whole of life, public and private, calls Christians to believe in God, to claim God's promises, and discover hope in God's future. One manifestation of this is by committing to lifelong unions, and to the raising of children if we can have them, as a sign of faith that our future belongs to the risen Jesus Christ, whereas our culture offers only deep scepticism and uncertainty. Many people, including Christians, are same-sex oriented, and although they cannot have children they can form a monogamous union after the pattern of marriage, whether they choose to call it that or not. Thus gay and lesbian Christian couples can show God's faithfulness as do heterosexual married couples who cannot have children, sharing in God's political agenda for the Church.¹² Others still, gay as well as straight, are called to live their life without the support of a partner, in some cases alongside brothers or sisters in a religious community. Their lives are a sign that God's claim is total and, moreover, that God can be trusted to give us a future and a legacy even if we cannot give birth to it ourselves, and intimacy with love, too, even if not sexually expressed.¹³

12 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Virtue, Description and Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology', *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, 62, 1996–7, pp. 171–184. My own views on this matter are more fully worked-out in 'Anglican Moral Decision-Making and the Challenge of Same-Sex Unions', in a book of papers by the Doctrine Panel of the Anglican Church of Australia, *Faithfulness in Fellowship: Reflections on Homosexuality and the Church*, John Garratt Publishing, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 141–60.

13 The parity of vocations to marriage and the religious life is argued by Paul Evdokimov in *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985.

The quality of this discussion is not primarily private however, and its chief ethical aim is not about fostering private goals. This was the worrying thing for me in an edition of the ABC TV religious affairs program *Compass*, about celibacy among young evangelical Christians.¹⁴ Again and again the reasons given were entirely personal. One person interviewed on the program argued that if God had created sexuality, then by following God's rules we will maximise our enjoyment of that sexuality. Another insisted that by remaining chaste Christians, they can ensure that they will not be spoiled for a sexually satisfying marriage. Overall the case was for appropriate intimacy, with pre-marital sex betraying our truest 'intimacy needs'. I was intensely uneasy watching this program, and found myself siding with the secular therapists consulted who warned that this was a fragile position and, what's more, potentially disillusioning when the long-awaited marriage takes place and the long-idealised relationship fails to deliver.

I am far more convinced by the approach of the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas, who knows how little actual force such arguments have to restrain the hormone-fired urges of most young people, whipped-up by a world of sexualized images in which they live. Subtle pleas to delay sexual gratification for the sake of richer pickings later, or because some alleged 'right level' of intimacy is not yet reached, are hard to commend simply and straightforwardly to the young. Instead, why not admit how difficult all this is, and how non-obvious and counter-cultural it is to insist on chastity and renunciation in the face of sexual urges? But then go on to present such renunciation in terms broader than those of whether adequate love or personal commitment is present. Go on to see pre-marital chastity, rather, as an outworking of Christ's political task for his Church in the face of a coarsened and dehumanising culture. For Hauerwas, the key to success with this approach is the Church actually embodying it.

14 Entitled 'Saving Sex', this *Compass* program was screened on 22 September 2002.

To provide that kind of account for our children however, requires that we are able to presuppose a community with the practices and convictions that make such an ethic intelligible. Our children have to see that marriage and having children, and the correlative sexual ethic, are central to the community's political task. For only then can they be offered a vision and an enterprise that might make the disciplining of sex as interesting as its gratification.¹⁵

However, without a community taking this vocation seriously, and committed to the Christian formation of its younger members, there is little point in commending such a vision of pre-marital chastity. The expression 'a snowflake's chance in hell' comes to mind! No departure from the secular sexual norms of their peers could reasonably be expected of young Christians, because we will in fact have nothing to offer them by way of an alternative.

But what if we did? Then we could view the learning of sexual self-discipline as part of forming integrated, humane, poised and reliable people able to establish relationships and households reflecting the stability of Christ, resisting the instability in identity characteristic of a commodity culture. And by seeing sexuality as a gift for the building-up of a counter-cultural community, with 'family' shifting from the realm of romantic and conservative Christian discourse into the realm of hard-headed and political Christian witness, we complete the Christian redemption of sexuality from its confinement to the realm of the private and the personal. To put this sexual ethic in a hopefully memorable phrase, *Christianity prefers its sex in public*. There it can be deployed by God in the transformation of our human world, rather than represent a consolation for the defeated as they retreat from engagement with that world.

15 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Sex in Public: Toward a Christian Ethic of Sex,' in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1981, p. 183.

Gently does it

Of course we must not turn this good news into the bad news of rule, repression and pastoral harshness. Here I am helped by recent Roman Catholic moral theology that insists on attentiveness to the meaning and context of sexual acts.¹⁶ None of us is entirely what one or another of our actions shows us to be, and especially when we have a way to go in our moral and personal development. Consequently, the same act will have a different meaning for different people. So a young Christian might experience an occasional lapse in chastity, unable to resist either powerful cultural forces felt physically, or else just plain, personal yearning, while still growing toward readiness for marriage and personal maturity.

I know how difficult it is for seriously-minded young adults too, when lifelong marriage and childbearing are becoming harder to imagine, yet the urgent sexual demands of youth and the often lonely perplexity of those years make us cry out for companionship and solace. Not all young people wish to be superficial, easy-come-easy-go in the sexual realm. So responsible, mutual self-giving in the context of close friendships or partnerships 'for now' becomes the norm, even among Christians. What am I to say here? Many such younger people are aware that they are compromising, but it is a compromise they are unable to see past.

The appropriate pastoral stance is one of patience and guidance, with the encouragement available through personal confession and mentoring of the young, gently commending the Christian vision of sexuality and with not only its relational but also its political resonances. We must not be rigorists who pull up the weeds and

16 See, for example, Gareth Moore OP, *The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism*, SCM, London, 1992.

thus damage the wheat (Matthew 13: 24–30). The young wheat must be allowed to grow until its final nature becomes clear for all to see, in God's own good time.¹⁷

But what of those of us who are no longer young? The challenges of growing up and making a life with another can be negotiated, and the longed-for intimacy and stability be achieved, yet much can still go wrong and many challenges remain.

Even among Christians, our society is brimming with the unhappily married. Perhaps habit keeps them together, or is it the fear of risking a new venture? Perhaps it is a sense of duty, either to the children, to a sense of one's own best self, or to God perhaps, though stoic resolve remains widespread despite not being fully Christian. For those who separate and divorce, there are often overwhelming feelings of sadness and failure to be overcome, and then an understandable nervousness about negotiating new relationships. Western urban life can be so lonely, and the cultural pressures to form relationships and be sexually active can be so strong, that people finding themselves alone again can feel that they have few options.

Thanks be to God that most Churches will now allow divorced Christians who are demonstrably contracting a responsible and healthy new relationship to be remarried in Church. If in time a bad marriage is abandoned and such a new marriage is contracted, my sense is that God's cause has been served, even though the public witness of the marriage bond is severed. The new marriage, however, should be seen as a sign of faith in marriage and the Christian ideal of community that it stands for, just as dissolving a doomed and dysfunctional marriage should be seen primarily as a sign of repentance, faith and hope, rather than sin and faithlessness.

I am aware, however, that for many people life after marriage is more complicated, with children to care for and demanding

17 Kevin Kelly, 'Moral Theology in the Parish', *Priests & People*, October 1994, p. 369. Father Kelly further shows how a principled line can be held with pastoral generosity in *New Directions in Sexual Ethics: Moral Theology and the Challenge of AIDS*, Cassell, London, 1998.

careers. The establishment of a new marriage that can accommodate one's responsibilities as a parent and as a vocationally-driven professional, for instance, may not be easy, depending on how old one is and where one lives. Many such people make a conscientious decision to pursue intimate friendships that are compatible with their circumstances, effectively abandoning any hope of remarriage. Does one commend prayer, keeping busy and attending the Christian singles club to such people, or radical career and domestic reappraisal to allow scope for marriage? Commending the latter is not done, of course, in the belief that such answers will fix everything, for everyone.

So while the Church's political witness needs to be against the cheapening and coarsening of human life and love evident throughout our sexually-deregulated, post-modern culture, nevertheless we must also resist a comparable cheapening and coarsening of human life and love evident in harsh moralism regarding sexual matters. And this is just as true for middle-aged and older adults as it is for the young. Sexual libertinism can be harsh and can damage our humanity, compared with the liberating witness of healthy Christian marriage and family life. Yet so too can moral absolutes be harmful, when applied apart from the context of pastoral care. Moral harshness regarding sexuality, relationships and marriage can just as completely betray God's radical vision of love in community. Rather, the aim of Christian sexual ethics, and for the life of Christian discipleship expressing it, is to show the world a truly liberated sexuality, a sexuality liberated both from shallow libertinism and from inhumane legalism.

