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The Role of the Christian Churches in Australia Today

A safe place for unsafe ideas

It seems highly appropriate to have this opportunity to consider with you this evening the role of the Christian Churches in Australia today given that we have just celebrated Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit – because I think many of us feel that there is a *big* role for the Holy Spirit in the Church today.

I bring to my talk this evening the experience of being a Catholic woman who has lived and worked extensively across the Christian Church. My current paid work in Adelaide is in an ecumenical centre for the promotion of ethics in business and government. I'm also involved in ecumenism locally and at the national level and, as Chair of the Commission for Australian Catholic Women, I am in touch and working with various communities across the country in promoting and facilitating the greater participation women in the Catholic Church across Australia. All these have shaped the content and spirit of what I have to say about the role of the Christian Church today but it has been through my many life experiences, particularly from the time of growing up in Glasgow, that my engagement with questions about the role of the Church began.

In 1950's Scotland, the image of two fortresses loomed large. One was Catholic, the other Protestant. Both seemed to convey the sense of being separate places of equal certainty and of safety from each other.

Life, as far as being a Catholic, was quite clearly delineated – we knew the parameters, we knew the expectations and we knew the consequences. There was no room for doubt or questioning – no space for exploration – and conversation on matters of faith and life didn't happen. Listening was a one way process and obedience to a higher power meant submission to whatever the head teacher and the parish priest had to say.

Public confession was a regular feature of our Monday mornings at school when the children who hadn't been to Sunday Mass were asked to come up to the stage in front of the whole school assembly. I remember one girl in particular. I knew her parents never went to Mass and I remember wondering how Alice, at the age of 8 could be expected to carry out this responsibility when her parents didn't.

As we all stood there each Monday morning, it felt quite clearly a decidedly **unsafe place** as we wondered what other sins might be held up to the school community.

Moreover, I was beginning to feel a bit scared about some of the emerging "**unsafe ideas**" that were forming in my mind. Mainly they centred around our relationship with the Protestants from whom, we were told, we needed to remain apart. This was a very difficult matter as we lived in a community in which Protestantism was the dominant culture. But it was even more difficult to reconcile in the light of what my parents were teaching me about a compassionate and caring God who loved us all equally.

The very hope that the Church might encourage some exploration of this apparent ambiguity – this “unsafe thinking” – was one which I realise was premature. This sat uncomfortably with me, even as a child and raised questions for me about the role of the Church in our journey of faith.

And here I find myself in another part of the world, several decades on, reflecting with you about the role of Church and how we, as Church, are being faithful to the Gospel message.

In the intervening years I have been delighted at the movement towards ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. And I have been delighted at the new insights we have gleaned from talking, working and praying together. I rejoice too in the many works of care and education that the Christian Church carries out for many people across Australia and overseas. I'm sure that God is also delighted and must be celebrating these acts of love on earth with the angels and the saints!

At the same time, some of our Churches are facing new challenges in terms of the abuses of power that are now being named and acknowledged and it reminds us of other times over many centuries, when we have crushed or diminished people and cultures in different ways, sometimes even under the guise of our faith. As part of the Church, I regret deeply the pain and suffering that people and communities have carried for many years.

However, I realise too that it has been through my life within the Christian Church that I have been able to come to a deeper relationship with my faith and that overall I have a sense of the God of surprises and of being on a journey of discovery and delight. I have been inspired by the modelling of many Christian people, past and present and through all kinds of encounters and experiences – some good, others less so – I have found myself being drawn more closely and more deeply towards God and the presence of Jesus in the encounters and events of ordinary everyday life.

And while I have found it painful to face the transgressions of the Church and have questioned the integrity of the institution, I find too that it is in this vulnerable space that I belong. Perhaps it is because of these ambiguities that I realise that this Church and I are inextricably bound up and belong together. I am only too well aware of my own transgressions and frailty and this leads me to understand more deeply the frailty of the Church as a human organism striving towards the perfection that God invites us.

The other reason that makes me hang in there is that I long for a Church that is really in touch with the needs and hopes of people of today. Not to convert nor to preach at, but to be there with them and to love them, not only when infirm or imprisoned, but at each stage of the human and spiritual journey with all the attendant weaknesses and limitations, and with all the joys and challenges.

Vatican II was urging us to be such a Church and while much of the spirit of Council has been picked up over the years, some of it is still to be harnessed. I'd like to harness one tiny piece of what emerged from the Council and suggest that it holds a seed of promise for the role of the Church in Australia today.

Let me read the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*:

“The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

I believe that it's in listening to the deepest hopes and the deepest fears of people that we hear the voice of God.

That it's in the listening to people's stories that we build bridges.

And that it's in the listening that the Church can discover ways forward to respond to the needs and hopes of people today.

Here are two stories which describe some of the needs and hopes of two very ordinary people:

One Sunday a young mother presented her baby for the welcoming ceremony in our local parish. She was asked what name she had given her child and she responded "Natasha". When asked by the Celebrant, *what do you ask of God's Church for Natasha*, the mother smiled, gazed at the baby held secure in her arms, and replied "Happiness".

As that young mother named her deepest desire for her baby, there was among the community, initially, a sense of embarrassment – she had failed to give the correct answer, which was Baptism – and then a ripple of peace passed through the congregation as the deeper meaning of the mother's response resonated with them.

No matter the circumstances of parents around the world, each echoes this desire that their child should be happy. As loving parents want only the best for their children, so too does God want the best for us. In fact, God's will is that we be outrageously happy in this life and in the next. God wants us to live life to the fullest.

The thief comes only to kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full. John 10:10

And like that baby, this desire of God for our happiness is happening within us even before we are aware of it or can name it for ourselves.

The next story explains this desire of God well.

I heard a few years ago about a guy who was facing a mid life crisis. His life was materially full and rich yet it felt empty. He was surrounded by good relationships and yet he felt lonely. He was approaching 50, in good physical health and yet felt impoverished inside.

He wasn't what he would call a religious person. Judaism was the faith of his parents but he had never been able to relate to it: he said that he found that there was too much ritual, and he the angry and dogmatic God didn't work for him.

He went on to describe that though he didn't believe in God, he had never stopped hoping for some spiritual life, having a sense that it was lying in wait inside him, waiting for the right moment to emerge. He felt, he said, left out by the main religions with their heavy emphasis on dogma, ritual and symbolism. He said that he would like to believe in God but couldn't. For him, the best he felt he could do was to respond the inner spirit and seek out whatever change he was being drawn towards.

However, he felt unsure about what to do and where to go. He was aware of how all this would seem to family and friends around him because any whenever anyone steps outside one's conventional, comfortable and careful existence it's usually interpreted as a sign of some deeper problem and he commented on how limiting our culture can be in confining people to safe, predictable choices.

The nudgings did not go away and eventually he chose to take some time out on his own in a quiet place. I found it interesting that he drew on some of the great Christian monastic traditions to accompany him on this search and in them and in the space he gave himself, he found ways forward to help make sense of his life. Through his explorations he found happiness and new ways of being at peace and of appreciating what is around him. And while he would not yet claim to have found

God, I suspect that God has already found him.

These stories have really struck a chord with me. I hear in them echoes of many conversations with family, with friends, with people on planes and in trains. With people in parishes and in pubs. In magazine articles and on radio. And I hear deeply the invitation of God to enter more deeply into the heart and love of God.

This human story of restlessness and the search for happiness is not new. It was St Augustine who said **"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."**

At the same time we know that life is much more complex than it has ever been before and so it's helpful for the stories of people's desire for happiness to be placed alongside the reality of daily life in 21st century Australia.

Education

Over the years, education has changed its focus from learning by rote to engagement with the search for knowledge, using a variety of skills and techniques, according to the style and approach of the particular individual.

As young people move from education into the world of work and new relationships, they face many choices and challenges – including ones about life style – and they draw readily on the processes of education to identify the issue, explore the options and reach a solution.

However, the processes are not always easily transferable to life and perhaps the high incidence of youth suicide in Australia is an example which indicates that there is a missing dimension in society which is above and beyond the best methods of education.

Science and medical research have become so sophisticated that they are generating more options and more benefits for ordinary people than ever before and will continue to do so. The world of medicine and scientific research is changing daily and our vocabulary has grown to embody the new concepts and choices that face us at all stages of life.

In his book, "Playing God: Ethics and Faith", Andrew Dutney, a Uniting Church theologian, takes the developments in understanding the disease, cystic fibrosis, as an example of how scientific medicine in the past 50 years has led people to face enormous moral and social questions. He describes the parents 50 years ago who have had a baby who is sick and who is diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

It was only in the 1950s, that cystic fibrosis was named and its pattern of behaviour described. It was at this time that the disease was discovered to be hereditary and that both parents must be carriers for the disease to be passed on to the child. However, there is only a 25% chance of the child inheriting the disease and so not every child born to the couple will be born with cystic fibrosis.

This knowledge presented the parents with choice, risk and responsibility. Does the couple proceed to have another child and risk having a second child with cystic fibrosis? Or do they decide to avoid conception, knowing at the same time that the child they have already will die very young and that they will then be childless?

Andrew goes on to describe the many further advances in the understanding of cystic fibrosis which have had the effect of multiplying the choices – and consequent risks – for parents. The more science has advanced, the more choices are available, the more risks we run and the greater the responsibility we have.

However, the research has also brought benefits, not just challenges, and we are

grateful for the quality and longevity of life that has resulted for those who have cystic fibrosis.

Workplaces in times past were largely built around an agrarian system. Seeds were planted, the tiny growth cared for, the crop appeared, and the harvest was gathered, stored and eaten as required. And from time to time fields lay fallow.

Workplaces today are mainly operating in what they call 24/7 mode – ie people are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week through ease of access to technology. In addition, industry and commerce are more complex with the need for compliance in many areas of legislation; there's continual responding to the changing nature of technology; and there's the constant striving for greater efficiency and profitability in workplace practices.

One businesswoman described to me recently that she spends no more than about 5 – 10 minutes on any particular task. The demands and nature of work are such that she has to flit from one to another, with interruptions occurring even within these quick grapplings with particular issues. Her mind is constantly preoccupied with the minutiae of business that she has no space nor energy for attending to the bigger issues of life.

Life expectancy in an organisation has moved from 40 years to 5 – 7 years and for many young people there is no guarantee beyond the current shift at the local supermarket! People expect to change careers several times in their working life and, regrettably, a growing number now accept that they will never access the paid workforce.

Social mobility was an alien concept up until recent times: people were born, lived and died in the same locality, with few opportunities for encounters with people who were different from themselves.

Social mobility has raised all kinds of benefits together with some downsides for individuals and for the community.

Work takes people to new places. Ease of travel and communications gives opportunities for developing new relationships and new insights.

We encounter people from different life experiences and different cultures and develop a broader outlook on life.

At the same time, however, people are describing a new kind of loneliness, feelings of isolation and a lack of connection with one another and with their past.

So how can this restlessness and the complexity of life respond to God's desire for our happiness?

We know that when our lives are too busy, too lonely, or too complex we become confused and scattered and that it is at these times we need a safe place where our spirit can be nourished and nurtured, where we can spend time in prayer and discernment, a where we can listen to the hidden voice within, where we can learn how to love again, and learn how to be happy and at peace.

We know that the Church can be this place but we know too that many people have walked away from the Church. And I think that many of us recognise that people are no longer content to be living and growing in a Church whose delivery of a message seems shaped for people from another age. People's lives have so many facets and the modern age offers so many options, that the time of having clear and certain answers for every situation is past.

I like to think that what we are experiencing through the voices of the young and those who no longer are part of the regular worshipping community – as well as from

many who remain within the church - is God's call to a new way of being, a call to be faithful to the Gospel message, to let go of power and all its manifestations, to acknowledge our own limitations, and to be faithful in word and action, systems and processes, to the message we seek to proclaim.

I believe too that our society is urging us on to new and vibrant expressions of goodness. Some recent signs of this have been

- the great numbers participating in walks for Reconciliation,
- the thousands of people who have turned out at sessions all over the country to understand better our Muslim sisters and brothers
- the growing mobilisation of people challenging our national policy towards asylum seekers as being inhumane and inhospitable.

I believe that our world actively seeks out what is good – and recognises it, wherever it exists as well as wherever it is lacking.

Moreover, Christian values have helped shape modern day Australia and we give thanks for evolving processes of democracy in government and administration, a welfare system which is based on positive human values, and systems and processes which uphold the right to education and health care.

It would be unfortunate if the Gospel message ceased to have a place in the ongoing shaping of the life of people and of our society because our style of proclaiming its message had ceased to be appropriate and relevant.

If we truly want to journey with people and organisations and be with them in their search for happiness, we must witness more deeply to the style of leadership modelled by Jesus in the Gospel stories. Our practice of ministry would be renewed, our style of leadership would be experienced by people as one of service, and our processes would mean that most of the conversations would happen around the well – or over dinner at someone's house!

The Church can continue to grow towards being a people who listen, who can acknowledge vulnerability and imperfections and be accountable to the people we serve, not separate from or above them - in the same way that we encourage our leaders in business and public life to be.

I believe that the Church could acknowledge too the restlessness, the feelings of being overburdened and the need for spiritual nourishment that many within the Church are experiencing today and could take these feelings and, moving together in prayer, reflect on the challenges facing Australia and the Church today.

Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light. Mt 11: 28 - 30

As I draw to a conclusion I'd like to reflect with you on some possibilities for action by the Church in Australia, and in sharing these tonight, I'm going to claim this place here at the Lidcombe Catholic Club for a few minutes as a safe place to express what some may choose to call *unsafe ideas* – unsafe because if we were to pursue them, who knows what we would hear, and who knows how we might be changed.

- While we have said sorry to our indigenous peoples, there are many others we have hurt and alienated by our actions. I would like us to explore how we can acknowledge their pain and our part in it in ways that would help bring about healing and reconciliation.
- I would like the Church to be and to be seen to be a people of reflection and of contemplative prayer as a model for the world. We have the resources within our own tradition, particularly through Religious Orders, and we also have the experience of many cultures and religions to draw on, who could accompany us as we explore a more accessible renaissance in the ways of deeper meditation in the Christian tradition.

- People today face many choices, risks and responsibilities. Discernment in decision making is another process that is rich within our traditions. It would be wonderful if we could find ways of developing it as a tool for people in life in the ordinary - at work, at home and in life in general, to assist and support them as they seek to make the best possible decision.
- I would be interested in exploring some processes whereby we can as Church listen to people across Australia without feeling the need to be defensive or proselytising. I would like us to consider making space to listen to the hopes and joys, the grief and anxieties of politicians, business leaders, the trades unions, young people, homosexuals and lesbians, people who are childless, busy people, lonely people, and people who would like to believe in God but can't!
- I suggest that we as Church listen to some leaders in business and public life to hear from them how they integrate their values into the practice of a modern organisation.
- I would like to see us being a people of joy and hope, able to acknowledge our vulnerability and weakness, and to be truly the servants of our community in the manner of Jesus.

In these engagements with people across Australia today, let us find first the points of intersection and rejoice in these and then let us discover the points of difference - and rejoice in these too as the pointers for future conversation and action.

Geraldine Hawkes

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