THE MISSIONARY VALUE OF PARABLES AND PASTORAL CARE IN SYDNEY'S POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

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Mission is an ongoing imperative for the Christian church, whose vocation is to live a faithfulness expressed through worship and witness. But how is mission to be conducted, and how may witness be effective, in a post-Christian society? This is the broader perspective from which Sydney Diocese's Mission must be viewed, and which Anglicans Together must address.

The key question, which underlies the question of witness, is "What is the Church's vocation *qua* Church in this place at this time?" Everything stands or falls on this question.

All who truly love and serve the Lord will recognise the appropriateness of mission and Sydney's 2002 Synod was right in its call to prayer and proclamation. This is why it is incumbent on Anglicans Together and other like-minded Anglicans to address the challenges of mission in our post-Christian society in a constructive way.

This paper is in three parts. The first explores the concept of a "post-Christian" society and distinguishes it from a "post-modern" society; this helps provide conceptual clarity and eliminates some confusion about the target area of our mission. I believe the biggest determinant of the strategy and conduct of our mission is not philosophical (the notional post-modernism currently in vogue), but cultural (the post-Christian nature of our society).

The second part outlines an important distinction between myth and parable, following work of John Dominic Crossan and applying it to mission in a post-Christian context.

The third and final part addresses the broader question: What aspects of our expression of Anglicanism provide potentially valuable resources for faithful and effective witness in a post-Christian context? The areas selected are the provision of pastoral care and to the maintenance of Anglicanism's liturgical heritage. I focus at length on two questions:

- How may pastoral care, especially within the Anglican tradition, contribute to effective Christian witness?
- How may the Anglican liturgical tradition contribute to effective Christian witness?

After drafting the bulk of this paper, I was pleased to discover that the focus areas of pastoral care and liturgy coincide with those described in one of the earliest accounts we have outside the Bible of Christians at worship, namely the First Apology of Justin Martyr, §67 (dated approximately 150 CE). I decided this was no accident. When the Christian church is under pressure (as it was in Justin's time), it sheds its excess baggage and travels light, carrying only the essentials. Justin's essentials remain essential for Anglicans today, and may contribute much to mission in our post-Christian society.

This paper in no way suggests that pastoral care and liturgy are the only effective avenues of outreach and that all others should be abandoned - by no means! The Catechumenal Process and Alpha and a wide range of other programs have won the respect and loyal commitment of many parishes sympathetic to Anglicans Together. My point in choosing pastoral care and liturgy for special attention is that they constitute core values for Anglicans Together parishes; conservative evangelicals hold them in suspicion because they allegedly distract from "the Gospel"; and they have rich potential for effective Christian witness, regardless of whether they "save souls" or increase church attendances.

I offer my thoughts for debate, criticism etc. They reflect my parish ministry and theological education experience over many years. They could be given greater precision and conceptual polish, but that is not the point: it is more important to make the endeavour and reality-test it. Hopefully, that way everyone will at least be challenged towards mission and stimulated towards a suitable framework for action.

I have made several indented insertions into the main text, mostly more technical in content than the other material. They can be skipped without loss of continuity, but I hope those who read them will find they add substance.

PART 1

Sign language
I was recently stuck in traffic behind a car whose number plate holder had the affirmation JESUS IS LORD, and whose rear windscreen carried two more stickers: "Salvation. Don't miss it for the world. Accept Jesus now", and "Don't worry, God is in control". I pondered the underlying theology, the language in which it was expressed, and the effectiveness of this witness.

On the New England Highway to the north of Warwick, Q, there are two biblical proverbs back to back on the one billboard (Proverbs 13.11, 12). Neither is specifically Christian, though I presume they were placed there by Christians for Christian witness. They reinforce the image of Christianity as concerned with morality.

At his first press conference after being elected Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen said at the very outset: "I want to stake my life on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That's the agenda; that's the news as far as I am concerned" (7 June 2001). He thereby went directly to the heart of Christian belief in a way that no doubt surprised many of his hearers for whom Christianity to that point may have seemed simply moralistic or sentimental or "mythic" (in the technical sense of Part 2). Dr Jensen's statement was "parabolic", again in the technical sense of Part 2. Parable, I will contend, is the most effective way of proclaiming the gospel in a post-Christian society where Christianity has become part of the society's cultural fabric ("mythology").

I turn now to the key concept for Part 1.

A "post-Christian" society
Sydneysiders, and those of the affluent western world generally, live in a post-Christian society. To the degree that this is not recognised and factored into Christian witness and mission strategies, their effectiveness is correspondingly reduced.

The term "post-Christian" needs some clarification. What follows is more my attempt at a "working description" than a definition.

To describe a society as "post-Christian" is to gauge the relationship of Christianity to its prevailing culture. My description does not presuppose that the society had once been "Christian" but has now somehow "fallen from grace" or "lost its nerve". I attribute the change of Christianity's place in Australian society over the last fifty years to irreversible philosophical and socio-cultural changes, which have brought new challenges to Christian faithfulness, and provide new opportunities for God's Spirit and our obedience.

I define a society to be post-Christian when it exhibits the following key features:

- its prevailing culture is permeated by Christian symbols and references (crosses; Christian holy days such as Christmas and Easter; the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Bible; etc);
- the classic Christian institution of the Church has been marginalized in influence and credibility;
- Christian words and concepts ("God", "sin", "salvation", "grace") have been "domesticated" by incorporation into everyday speech and lost their power to confront and reveal; and
- the various distinctively Christian offices (the pastoral offices of infant baptism, confirmation, weddings, funerals) have become socialised into rites of passage with more socio-cultural than Christian community reference.

These features can be easily recognised in our experiences of Christian life, the media, social life, etc.

The domestication identified in the third feature shows in the character of the average citizen's Christianity, which is an insipid mix of trite moralism, sentimentalism, and nationalism. But there is also an interesting complication. What might loosely be called the "Christian myth" has received widespread social credence and uncritical acceptance. This myth holds two key dimensions of particular import in affluent Western societies.

First, belief in God assures the deity's protection and favour for the nation (cf Pr 14.34) – as exemplified by Queen Victoria's famous reference to the Bible as "what has made Britain Great". Second – and in consequence - a high standard of living represents the deity's favour and reward, without creating any obligation to share resources with other "less godly" nations. [1] This standard of living is to be jealously protected, and not to be shared with the ungodly who have not earned it as we have; so everyone can be "relaxed and comfortable" - because we assume our tribal deity will protect its own.1 It is really a post-Christian civic mythology. Popular Christian belief has been reduced to unquestioning acceptance of a pseudo-Christian civic myth, and passive acquiescence where the only activities required are social: at life's milestones (baptism, wedding, and funeral – rituals followed uncritically) and obligatory spending at Christmas. Hence the fourth feature.

The particular challenge for contemporary Australian Christians is to bear effective witness in a society both post-modern and post-Christian.

Another complication

There is another unfortunate and perplexing feature to Christian witness in our context, beyond the post-modern and the post-Christian complications. Prominent Christians, with the churches and other associated institutions have squandered their credibility. This has happened at two levels, both in Australia and overseas. The first has been occasioned by proven clergy sexual abuse and attempted cover-ups, in several denominations including the two statistically largest (the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches). Less publicly, but still powerfully eroding society's goodwill towards Christianity, financial abuses by prominent Christians have provided a regrettable second cause for society's suspicion.[2] Add to this the prevailing post-modern suspicion of ideologies and the institutions they drive, and the reasons for scepticism are evident: why would anyone trust the church or its office bearers or its institutions?[3]

In the affluent western post-Christian post-modern world, the Christian terms and symbols etc have become detached from their faith-roots and become socialised. The historical processes leading to this are lengthy and complex, and it is not my purpose to explore them.[4] This loss is irretrievable because its triggers lie deep in our Western European heritage; it cannot be repaired by shouting louder in the expectation that people will hear, listen, understand, and immediately be convinced to turn back and retrieve the lost content. We have now passed the point of no return. Christian witness must therefore find new strategies and a new voice. Much as we might wish, it is impossible to return to any allegedly golden age of a Christian Sydney. If the Strategy is aimed at such a return, it shows the extent to which the Diocese is collectively in denial.

My description of a post-Christian society suggests that, ironically, it pays unconscious tribute to the success of the Christian ethos in permeating its host culture. The secular celebration of Christmas illustrates this pre-eminently.

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[1] I use "tribal deity", because I cannot bring myself to use the word "god" in this context, entirely in lower case - because I do not accept that the deity of the Christian myth is the God Christians know and worship as the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It seems more Unitarian than Trinitarian, and utterly impersonal.

[2] SCCEGGS Redlands in the 1970s; in the 1990s, the $US2m embezzlement by Ellen Clarke (Treasurer of the American Episcopal equivalent of General Synod); recently, various diocesan registrars; etc. A survey in the US recently reported that clergy sexual abuse scandals especially in the Catholic Church) had caused the popular opinion of clergy to plummet. We have seen similar here in Australia.

[3] Except, perhaps, to enrol their children in one of the prestige church schools, in hope of maximising their children's social advantage (ie social advantage is the deity's reward for good citizenship in a "Christian" nation; see note 7 below). This attitude also reflects some of the moralist interpretation of Christianity. However, the development of low-fee schools (all denominations) has perhaps helped provide a healthy corrective to such attitudes.

[4] David A Scott, "Teaching the Authority of the Bible", *Anglican Theological Review* 84 #1 (Winter 2002), 11-24.

The idea of a society being "post-Christian" contrasts with the concept of syncretism. Syncretism is an effect of the cultural context on the church – a church becomes more syncretistic by adopting practices from the cultural context that may or may not sit easily with Christian teaching and practice. No church is immune from syncretism, even when it is thoroughly sectarian and attempts to withdraw from its society.

The process of becoming post-Christian is the mirror image of syncretism. Australian society describes itself broadly as "Christian", in that Christian words, concepts and morality have been adopted by Australian society as part of its heritage and self-understanding. A society becomes post-Christian when it is influenced by the church to use church language and stories and symbols (albeit by modulating them into a secular or other socially acceptable key), adopt them as its own, and use them as defining elements of citizenship.[5]

It is important to distinguish "post-Christian" from post-modern. In some ways, a society in which Christian ideas and institutions predominate is always at risk of becoming post-Christian, since distinctively Christian understandings of terms, symbols and rituals are inevitably domesticated and socialised in such a society. The distinctive feature of "post-Christian" is the sociological weakness of Christian institutions (eg lack of influence, credibility, declining church attendance, etc).[6] By contrast, the term "post-modern" describes a philosophical approach anchored to a particular period of history, with identifiable antecedents, which will in its turn eventually be supplanted.[7]

History suggests at least two twentieth-century examples of post-Christian societies which are not post-modern: Russia after the Communist Revolution (1917), and Germany under the Third Reich. In Russia, Christianity was supplanted by Communism but not eradicated, so the society moved rapidly from notionally Christian into a brief post-Christian phase and then became actively hostile to Christians. In the Third Reich, there was sustained prophetic resistance against the drafting of mainstream Christian institutions into the Reich's ideology. Both situations galvanised strong prophetic Christian witness, including martyrdom.

I have foreshadowed some discussion of the terms "myth" and "parable", because of their importance in understanding the post-Christian nature of our mission context, and their usefulness in formulating and implementing appropriate mission strategies. To that I now turn.

PART 2

The literary concepts of myth and parable provide important insights into our mission context, our provision of pastoral care, and our conduct of liturgy.

Myth and parable

The term "myth" has received a bad press amongst Christians, especially in the light of such texts as 2 Peter 1.16 which contrast "cleverly devised myths" with Christian truth (the other four biblical references to myth occur in the Pastoral Epistles, and are similarly dismissive). Conservative Christians are suspicious of the use of "myth" in the study of the Pentateuch. More recently, some may remember a controversial book with titled *The myth of God incarnate* which drew a prompt rejoinder titled *The truth of God incarnate*.

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[5] See Richard Horsley and James Tracy (eds) *Christmas Unwrapped. Consumerism, Christ and Culture* 2001. Tracy notes the following dimension to Christmas observance in the US (p13):

> The modern American Christmas has such plasticity that it can be grafted easily onto many cultures (including, for example, non-Christians in Asia who now give gifts under evergreen trees). The secular Christmas of Santa Claus and family domesticity, coupled with aspects of traditional if domesticated peasant mid-winter carnivals, has been a celebration that was easily appropriated by immigrant groups seeking cultural enfranchisement. Christmas has functioned for holidays much as baseball has functioned for sports – as a readily accessible means of cultural assimilation within the immigrant experience.

[6] Anglican schools may be an exception, as the community may perceive them as morally superior training grounds with the potential to generate useful life connections for their pupils. This may depend primarily on an interpretation of Christianity that emphasises its moral dimension. To that extent (and this is a chronic dilemma for those principals of Christian schools who take their Christian commitment very seriously), the schools may be strong while the other Christian institutions are comparatively weak.

[7] Scott, "Teaching the Authority of the Bible".

The literary term "myth" does not refer primarily to truth value (or lack of it) but to genre.

Myth and parable are basically types of stories. The story of a nation or culture may be couched in mythic terms, which encapsulate its identity, recount its history and its role in the world, and maybe its destiny. Ancient Rome had as its founding myth the story of the twins and the she-wolf (Romulus and Remus). Early in the nineteenth century, the United States articulated a myth of Manifest American Destiny. Some nations hold to a mythic story of a Christian society comparable to and inheriting the ancient promises to Israel as a covenant society.

The stories of our lives generally, the way we tell them to others and interpret them to ourselves, and the rituals we conduct at various milestones of our lives (birth/baptism, wedding, death/funeral, as well as Eucharist) may exhibit mythic or parabolic features. Parable need not be literary; it may be visual, as in the political cartoon. Here I am using the terms "mythic" and "parabolic" to refer – by extension –not so much to a particular story as a myth or a parable, but instead *as ways to describe how the story is told*. The same story may be told to either mythic or parabolic effect, as William Willimon shows by example with the Parable of the Last Judgment [Matthew 25.31-46] in his theology of preaching to the unbaptised, titled *The Intrusive Word*.[8]

I am relying on the definitions of myth and parable derived from the work of biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan, in his 1975 book *The Dark Interval.* [9] Willimon's summary is worth quoting at length, because of its application to the preaching task:

> Myth, says Crossan, attempts to mediate opposites, explain mystery, reconcile polarities, to take the randomness out of life and weave it into a believable pattern. In myth, bad guys get what they deserve, and the good are rewarded. Through myth, there are explanations for the apparent incongruities of life, reasons given by the gods….
>
> Myth explains, settles, closes the gaps in our consciousness.
>
> Crossan says myth's polar opposite is *parable*. "Parable brings not peace but a sword, … parable casts fire upon the earth." Literary critic Frank Kermode says "Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change." Parable is meant to change us, not reassure us. Parable is always a somewhat unnerving experience. The standard reaction to parable is "I don't know what you mean by that story, but I'm certain I don't like it." Crossan argues that myth has as its function the creation of a belief in the possibility of permanent reconciliation between the polarities and contradictions that bedevil us. Parable hopes to create contradiction within our complacent securities. "You have built a lovely home, myth assures us; but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault." Myth establishes world. Parable subverts world. Parable creates humility by reminding us of limits, by enticing us right up to the very edge of certitude, forcing us to peer over into the terrifying abyss of a world we do not know.
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> Now Jesus' primary, and certainly most distinctive, mode of communication was parable….
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> In most any parable, there is a reversal of expectation, a dislocation of the hearer. Right there, at the point where conventional expectations are reversed, where the listener is dislodged, dislocated, right there is the evangelical moment, there where God has room to move upon us and upon our present constructions of reality.[10]

The above makes clear how Willimon applies Crossan's definitions to the preaching task: "Christian evangelism arises within the gaps between God and ourselves, not with our conventional ways of bridging the gap, but with God's ways" (p 59).

Application to the preaching task need detain us no further, since Willimon's book does it so expertly. How do Crossan's definitions help us understand our post-Christian society?

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[8] William H Willimon, *The Intrusive Word. Preaching to the Unbaptized* 1994, 64*f*.
[9] John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* 1975.
[10] Willimon, *The Intrusive Word.* Willimon provides the appropriate references for his citations from Crossan and Kermode.

Civic religion
Most Australians would regard Australia as a "Christian nation", though without any clear sense of what that might signify to others. This raises profound issues of self-understanding and heritage.

I sense that the role of Christianity in Australian society can be accurately described as "mythic" – that is, the Christian faith is understood to affirm Australian society and its values. This civic religion is moralistic, sentimental (as seen at Christmas), and nationalist. It seems to assume that all citizens are Christians by default, regardless of faith stance, unless either they declare themselves otherwise (atheists, agnostics, adherents of another religion), or they fail to meet agreed moral standards relating to the Ten Commandments and general respectability (criminals, alcoholics, etc).

This civic religion falls short of Christian orthodoxy, since it affirms some aspects but ignores other very significant aspects. It affirms that:

- there is one God, who is a loving God;
- this God has made himself known to us in the person of Jesus;
- the teaching of Jesus has divine authority;
- Jesus died so that our sins could be forgiven;
- Jesus was raised from the dead;
- God blesses those people and nations who adhere to this teaching.

The implications of many of these are accepted without thoughtful attention to their implications. For example, Jesus' teaching is viewed simply as a personal moral code (the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan being the high points); and the impact of Jesus' resurrection remains unexplored.

Australian civic religion fails to affirm that:

- the Christian God is Trinitarian (rather than a generic deity);
- God is not a tribal deity – instead, we are accountable to this God individually and as a nation, and the divine favour may be withheld (as it was withheld from Israel in its pre-Christian history);
- there is a resurrection and a final judgement.

Sign language
The west window at St Mark's Granville is a memorial to those of the parish who served in the First World War. Unusually, their names are painted onto the glass itself. Over the names there are four panels depicting the four evangelists; two roundels above them contain the mottoes "Fight the good fight of faith" and "Be faithful unto death"; at the apex a third (larger) roundel has the motto "Greater love hath no man than this".

It seems to assume that as long as the Christian institutions are functioning and this civic Christianity remains an integral part of our culture, the deity will continue to bless Australia. The institutions maintaining Christianity in our society are seen not only as church schools, but approximate ("good-enough") observance of the Ten Commandments, prayers in Parliament, service clubs etc; church attendance (with politely minimal participation) occurs at rites of passage (christenings, weddings, funerals) and at emotional times (anniversaries; Anzac Day). Interestingly, the churches themselves are not seen as important Christian institutions for the civic religion - they are perceived as either having distorted the purity of Jesus' moral teaching, or as being havens for those who take their religion more seriously than is polite.

I noted that the civic religion views the teaching of Jesus as having divine authority. What of the Bible? It is primarily viewed as a source text for Jesus' teaching, for his basic biography (the source of the Christmas and Easter stories), and for the general underwriting and endorsement of our "Christian nation". The Bible also has cultural importance, as the source of many allusions (Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, forbidden fruit, tower of Babel etc) and should be taught in schools for its literary-cultural relevance as well as its moral content. There is little interest in hearing other parts of the Bible, setting it in its historical context etc, because the prevailing assumption is that the civic religion has extracted all that is needful. People are therefore unwilling to give time or attention to deeper exploration or understanding, and "close down" when others attempt to introduce such matters.

The Bible is therefore understood at a minimal level. While some of it is admittedly hard to understand, some simply distasteful and even abhorrent to modern sensibilities, anything awkward is conveniently ignored. The awkward portions unsettle and confront; they question the complacent assumptions of our civic religion; they are parabolic in their effect; civic religion ducks and weaves around them.

The civic religion is a religion of comfort –in other words, mythic in its function and effect.

Mythic liturgies

Our funeral liturgies sometimes betray us. The prayers in our contemporary Australian prayer books help reinforce the impression that no matter what the deceased's faith commitment or manner of life, he/she is with Jesus. The bereaved are comforted inappropriately. For example, the minister thanks the Father that "you gave us life when you created us, and in your redeeming love you have given us new life in Christ Jesus …" (*AAPB* p591). In *APBA* we use virtually the same words congregationally just before the committal (p722). In each instance "you offer us new life" would be more to appropriate for most of those gathered.

The baptismal liturgies similarly provide inappropriate comfort. Congregants can hear the reading of Mk 10.13-16 (enjoined by *AAPB*) as a citizenship statement, reinforced by the Anglican tradition's "citizenship" practice of baptism inherited from England. The child is "done", it is one of the necessary rites of early childhood. The *APBA* congregational response to the Apostles' Creed (This is the faith of the Church. **This is our faith …**) seems utterly beyond the understanding of many present. Indeed, I have concluded in the last few years that many couples who bring a child for baptism are demonstrating by their action a basic (if uninformed and inchoate) level of Christian witness to their friends. For them, baptism still counts (even if they cannot articulate their reasons in ways acceptable to orthodox Christian belief).

I would love the Liturgical Commission to produce baptism/wedding/funeral services for those whose faith is uncertain, or who have enough faith to make some tentative steps but whose friends are foreigners to Christian ideas and language and faith. This could be an excellent resource for Christian witness in our post-Christian context.

I noted earlier that a post-Christian society pays unconscious tribute to the success of the Christian ethos in permeating its host culture. This has profound relevance at this consideration of mission. For when well-meaning Christians advertise that "Christ died for our sins" (with or without biblical citation), this simply reinforces the myth of the prevailing civic religion, that Australian citizens are covered by the Christian system (as they understand it). To add a rider - "Conditions apply" - would be deliciously parabolic in effect!

There is another dimension. When Christian faith is narrowly conceived as about forgiveness of sins, and Christ's salvation limited to atoning for moral lapse, this merely reinforces the moralism of the civic religion, by colluding with the notion that God is only concerned with life's moral dimensions. It does not take much reading of the gospels to see that Jesus was concerned with much more than the forgiveness of an individual's sins: God's kingdom was Jesus' driving concern, which included physical and spiritual healing for individuals, right worship ("in spirit and in truth"), and social justice - as well as forgiveness of sins.

I have many reservations about Sydney's Mission Strategy, but to me this is the most serious. In failing to take sufficient account of the post-Christian tenor of our society, it allows itself unwittingly to collude in and reinforce the very same civic religion it urgently needs to supplant.

Following Crossan, parable is the corrective myth requires. To shake the post-Christian society out of its complacent civic religion, it is necessary to find parabolic and prophetic ways of telling the authentic Christian story in its abrasive fullness. At the Archbishop's first press conference (see above), his forthright comment about Christ's resurrection was brilliantly parabolic. This is something like the situation Jeremiah and Ezekiel encountered prior to the exile, when the Temple was viewed as providing inviolable security to Jerusalem's complacent populace. Both prophets preached and used prophetic acts (enacted parables) to make their message as stark and clear as possible. Similarly, much of the opposition to Jesus was on the basis of what Scripture allegedly taught. But Jesus taught predominantly in parables and was unable to shake their understanding (John 5.39, 7.40-52). All of which may suggest that our prospects are none too good …

Mission in a post-Christian society can begin only on the basis that effective Christian witness requires new strategies and a new voice. The right to a hearing, and any respect for a Christian voice, must be won "on the merits". The trusted and proven methods of the past are no longer as effective, if effective at all. How, then, to communicate? To that I now turn.

PART 3

The third and final part addresses the broader question: What aspects of Anglicanism provide potentially valuable resources for faithful and effective witness in a post-Christian context? Parishes broadly sympathetic to Anglicans Together seem to share a joint emphasis on pastoral care and liturgical worship. Such Anglicans have a powerful resource for faithful witness, by virtue of that emphasis.

Therefore I focus at length on two questions:

- How may pastoral care, especially within the Anglican tradition, contribute to effective Christian witness?
- How may the Anglican liturgical tradition contribute to effective Christian witness?

It is no accident that the focus areas of pastoral care and liturgy are almost identical to those described in one of the earliest accounts we have outside the Bible of Christians at worship, namely the First Apology of Justin Martyr, §67, written about 150 CE.[11] When the Christian church is under pressure (as it was in the second century) it travels light, carrying only the essentials. Justin's essentials may contribute much to mission in our post-Christian society, precisely because they remain essential.

These essentials may help earn such Anglicans a hearing, or at least some public credibility. There are opportunities to be viewed afresh or retrieved with authentic Christian witness (ie mission) as the touchstone. This must be done with three criteria of authenticity in mind.

Criteria

Whatever is done in the name of Christian witness must satisfy some stringent criteria if it is to be authentic, ie true to itself as Christian witness. Is it genuinely Christian? Is it true? Is it appropriate to its context? These questions drive historical theology, philosophical theology, and practical theology respectively. These three dimensions of critical theological enquiry have different aims but are inseparably interdependent, with any two of them necessary to inform the third.[12] The opportunities for witness described below must all be assessed stringently not for their increases in church attendance (a misplaced measure of effectiveness!) but for their genuine Christian content, their truth, and their appropriateness to their context.

I now address pastoral care and liturgy in turn.

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[11] Justin Martyr's First Apology includes the following description of Christian worship:

> Those who have the means help all those who are in want, and we continually meet together. And over all that we take to eat we bless the creator of all things through God's Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. And on the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer. And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the *amen.* There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present. Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one's own choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are sojourning here. In short, the presider is a guardian to all those who are in need. We all hold this meeting together on the day of the sun since it is the first day, on which day God, having transformed darkness and matter, made the world. On the same day Jesus Christ our saviour rose from the dead. ... (*1 Apology 67*).

Gordon W Lathrop, *Holy things. A liturgical theology* 1993,. p45 (Lathrop's translation).

[12] Charles M Wood, *Vision and discernment* (1985, a proposal about theological education) and discussed in summary form by David H Kelsey *Between Athens and Berlin* (1993, ch 6).

Pastoral care

Australians value "practical Christianity", which practices compassion as well as preaching it. Australians also pride themselves on pulling together in an emergency, helping each other out, etc. Anglicare and other compassionate ministries such as Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, Brotherhood of St Laurence etc do a power of good in humanitarian terms; they help maintain and enhance the credibility of their various sponsoring churches; and they fulfil on behalf of those churches the biblical imperative of works of mercy and justice.

However, the anecdotal evidence suggests that for many Sydney ideologues, pastoral care is seen to be secondary or even in conflict with evangelism, and therefore receives low or minimal attention from parish clergy. "Forget weddings – how many souls do you save at a wedding?" Such an attitude will generate resentment in the community, reduce Christian credibility, and lead into the two grave sins of Manicheism, and of disobeying the strong biblical mandates to works of compassion and justice.[13]

It is slightly more complicated with regard to the pastoral offices in a post-Christian society. My impression is that many telephone the Rectory with a view to the provision of a social ritual as part of their perceived obligation as good citizens of a "Christian" society (as they understand it, ie they adhere to the civic Christian mythology and fulfil the relevant observances). This is particularly true of infant baptisms and weddings, because of their socialisation. Such people are often in search of the mythic ("the perfect wedding"; the baptism as social inclusion). As Crossan points out, parable is the corrective myth needs (see Part 2, above).

In their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals,* Herbert Anderson and Ed Foley draw from family histories, personal and community experiences, and the milestones associated with them.[14] They also use Crossan's work on myth and parable, to examine these stories and their associated rituals.[15]

Both myth and parable are essential to an authentic pastoral care narrative:

> Our bodies struggle to live, and with every ounce of strength they reject the ultimate parable of our own death. It is the death parable, however, which ultimately must be embraced in order to make the transition to the myth of eternal life. (p16).

Anderson and Foley describe ways Crossan's insights can be applied in pastoral theology to help the Church minister pastorally with integrity, ie being true to its life as grounded in the gospel of Christ. A deep theological appreciation of the pastoral offices may help promote the Christian cause and encourage parents or wedding couples or the bereaved to think "outside the square" – that Christianity is different from their (cultural) expectations, has deep implications for this life situation they are encountering, and has its own robust credibility. The minister has a uniquely privileged opportunity to help identify connections between the family's life stories and the continuing story of God's relationship to the world; making the connection effectively can become vital pastoral care and may be evangelistic in its long-term impact. Their stories (and associated rituals) may include elements of both "myth" and "parable". Where the parabolic is more appropriate, the minister may be able to find ways of suitably incorporating the parabolic dimension into the ceremony.

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[13] The Manichees despised the flesh and found goodness only in spiritual life. To see salvation only in association with spiritual life (salvation of the soul) without reference to the needs of the body seems to me to be a besetting sin of evangelicalism, though with notable exceptions such as William Wilberforce, the Clapham Sect, and more recently the TEAR Fund.
The biblical mandates to works of compassion and justice are extensive, well known, compelling, and unambiguous. To my mind, they present the faithful with opportunities to incarnate God's extravagant compassion and God's zeal for justice. The recent reduction of ministry service by Anglicare was necessitated by the downturn in its investments - to my mind it was morally and spiritually imperative for the diocese to make up the financial shortfall rather than reduce Anglicare's welfare services, and the Diocese is diminished by its failure to do so.

[14] Herbert Anderson and Ed Foley, *Mighty stories, dangerous rituals* 1998.

[15] Crossan, *The Dark Interval*

"Work in progress" – the wedding vows

I have titled this insertion "work in progress" because it is exploratory for me. Before the wedding vows in the Anglican service, groom and bride are each asked a question of self-giving: "*N*, will you give yourself to *N* to be her husband …?" "I will." The wedding vows are exchanged using the language of taking: "I, *N*, take you, *N* …" This taking is inherently risky, as the vow subsequently acknowledges: "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, …" That is, the party "taking" the other is willingly allowing another to influence his/her life, "as long as [they] both shall live". Both the self-giving and the taking require the emotional maturity to enter such a commitment with sufficient understanding of what it potentially entails; a capacity to trust the future to another person, openly and without reserve; and it publicly establishes a vulnerability to the other person. These can be fruitful areas for pastoral exploration.

In practical terms, the living out of these vows requires a lifetime of devoted commitment, self-examination, and grace – grace to forgive, grace to seek forgiveness. Forgiveness is the common coin of Christianity.

The other party's willingness to be taken is confirmed at the self-giving and reaffirmed implicitly in the reciprocal taking. They mutually take each other exclusively, and for life, sufficiently mindful of the risks. The wedding represents a mutual self-offering.

Thus the wedding ceremony itself may also resonate with evangelistic nuances: to love and serve the Lord carries very similar entry requirements regarding emotional maturity, trust and vulnerability. The language has overtones of "Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice …"

Why, then, a wedding service in a church? A number of considerations apply. First, because such self-offering represents primarily a conversion of life, from living singly to living together in such a way as to bring out the best in the other but concurrently (and paradoxically) to be lovingly independent together. *Metanoia*, too, is part of the Christian currency. Alongside this is the lesson of human experience, that one can truly hold on to the beloved only by letting go.[16] This necessary (parabolic) lesson is particularly poignant between a parent and a child as the child matures into adulthood, independence, and choosing a life partner – ie, at the child's wedding. So parents and spouses must let each other go, yet surrender themselves to each other, taking the risks of vulnerability. Is this not exactly what God has done for us? Given us the freedom to reject … and submitting in Jesus to the vulnerability of humiliation and execution … "Christ loved his bride the church and gave himself for her" [Eph 5.25] What better place to pray for God's blessing on a marriage - than a church?[17] The church also has the experience and the language to describe what happens in the marriage context. It knows honest communication is necessary in an intimate relationship, and sometimes only a spouse will love you enough to tell you the truth ("speaking the truth in love" [Eph 4.15]). It knows love may require one to "lay down one's life" for another [Jn 15.13; Eph 5.25-28], and the paradoxical necessity of losing your life in order to save it [Mt 16.24-25]. This is truly parabolic. And can be truly evangelistic!

I have detailed this example at length, because it helps illustrate that faithful pastoral ministry may provide opportunities for spiritual challenge, or conversion or growth. Those who abandon the pastoral offices as unprofitable for soul winning have either underestimated them as mere social rituals, or failed to appreciate both their potential benefit to the church's mission and why the church offers them at all.

Liturgy

In this section, I build on the work of Anderson and Foley to explore the potential of eucharistic liturgy to be parabolic in genre and impact.

It lies in the nature of parable to be domesticated and eventually become mythic as the new insight crystallises and becomes the new way of perceiving the world. Willimon commented: "Let us preachers note: [there is] a relentless movement, in the history of interpretation of parables, from story of subversion to story of example."[18]

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[16] Some of the 1662 Collects are suggestively parabolic (in form: oxymoron): at Morning Prayer, " … whose service is perfect freedom"; Trinity 14, "that we may obtain what you promised, make us love what you command".

[17] Cf also Claus Westermann's useful study, *Blessing in the Bible and the life of the Church* (1968, ET 1978), where the concept of blessing is explored within the context of theology of creation rather than soteriology.

[18] *Intrusive Word*, 70.

The eucharistic liturgy has suffered a similar fate. It is a proud part of the heritage we liturgical Anglicans love and perpetuate, but easily becomes mythic in its performance - a set-piece rehearsal of familiar things. At its worst it can degenerate to a drama performed on stage by the cast, watched by an audience which may be moved and/or entertained, who then return to their real worlds as though nothing memorable or life-changing had happened. Liturgical change (words, movement, innovations such as dance or drama) is resisted. When liturgy is "performed" the same way every time, it maintains the status quo, reinforces the power of the clergy, and facilitates an uncritical acquiescence amongst the laity. The "liturgy" of the Roman Empire had the same effect – it reinforced loyalty to the Emperor, kept the populace moderately entertained and complacent ("bread and circuses"), and provided the brutal suppression of non-conformity (gladiators etc) by way of entertainment.[19]

American Roman Catholic liturgist Aidan Kavanagh has articulated some "general laws of liturgy", including the following:

> *Liturgy is essentially antistructural.*
> Since liturgy is a complex mode of divine and human communication, and must therefore draw upon human structures for all its elements of expression, it is easy to overlook the fact that liturgy … exists to undercut and overthrow the very structures it uses. This is so not because the Gospel is similarly antistructural, which it is, but because historic human wisdom has detected that human structures ossify and become oppressive or disintegrate when left to themselves.
>
> …
>
> Christian worship, it must not be forgotten, is deep *anamnesis*, remembering. It exists to tap the power of the assembly's memory about events, words, persons and deeds which jerked the world definitively onto new courses, to conjure that power in the present where it confronts nothing less than the powers resistive to such new courses – the powers of death and darkness, which do not accept being undercut, overturned, or reversed gladly.[20]

That is, unless our liturgy is subversive (truly parabolic) it is neither true to the God we worship, nor an appropriate remembering of our rich Christian heritage, but a relatively sterile religious formality.

This is not to say that myth (as reassurance) and mythic rites are inappropriate to Christian faith and worship. The Priestly Creation Story (for example), asserted God's sovereign control in an exilic context when God seemed powerless and all seemed chaotic and hopeless.[21] That creation myth proved sustaining in a time of deep spiritual crisis.

But myth's power to reassure is precisely its greatest danger. Myth can engender and reinforce moral complacency, as S Dennis Ford so convincingly demonstrated in his aptly titled study, *Sins of Omission*.[22] Hence also Kavanagh's comment about human structures ossifying or becoming oppressive or disintegrating "when left to themselves". They need attention and renewal according to their nature and purpose.

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[19] I am ambivalent (at best) about using vestments based on the garb of the Roman nobility. To me, their use demeans the faithfulness and the pious memory of those early Christian martyrs who, true to their higher allegiance, refused to worship the Emperor. Nor (to my mind) is the role of the clergy in the worshipping congregation comparable to that of the Roman nobility in the Empire. Instead, an alb and stole is sufficient for the celebrant; ideally, the congregation should all be in albs!

[20] *Elements of Rite. A Handbook of Liturgical Style.* 1982, ch 3 (Law 7). I was sorely tempted to replace Kavanagh's term "antistructural" with the term "subversive".

[21] Eg Anthony F Campbell *The Study Companion to Old Testament Literature* 1989, 62*ff*.
Anglican liturgy was defended in earlier generations as ordered, in contrast to the undisciplined disorderly worship of other traditions - because "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor 14.33, KJV). Such a defence articulates the complacent "ordered Christian society" myth of the Elizabethan Settlement. Such a mythical dimension to liturgy also has contemporary political relevance, as the American Empire seems to be flexing its muscles and implicitly claiming the deity's support for the Manifest American Destiny (George W Bush edition).

[22] S Dennis Ford. *Sins of Omission. A primer on moral indifference.* 1990. Two myths of American popular culture he examined (Chapter Four) were those of the entrepreneur "Through Pluck and Persistence" and "The American Cowboy".

Apart from the inherent dangers of formalism (so effectively excoriated by the Old Testament prophets), a mythic re-enactment of the Eucharist in the same way every Sunday may lend itself to a Constantinian interpretation, that because the rites are performed and the people attend faithfully, so the deity will bless the nation [cf Jeremiah 7.1-4]. The people feel secure under the auspices of God's blessing, and can therefore go about their lives without necessarily addressing the evils of the society or themselves. Amos and Micah addressed such situations with the fullness of prophetic indignation.

Such a mythic re-enactment of the Eucharist also lends itself to the illusion of control. This is a most seductive and insidious temptation, whose content includes the following. Religious obligations are fulfilled by compliant attendance at the ceremony that priest and other cast members conduct and control. The power of the clergy is reinforced by their conduct and control of the sacred rite. (This is exacerbated in congregations where the minister does not follow any lectionary and devises his own rite – such a congregation is truly at the mercy of its clergy!) Jesus is summoned by the priest's prayers, and obediently comes. Such a Eucharist suggests we control God, when truly the opposite is the case. Hence Annie Dillard's famous comment:

> Why do people in church seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C … [and the crew pays them more attention than the prevailing conditions].
>
> On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return. [23]

It is possible to insert parabolic elements into the ceremony without violating the rite or detracting from its dignity. Such is the notable insertion made by Archbishop William Laud into the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637. A rubric directs the celebrant to administer host and chalice to himself – and to adapt the words of administration used for all the other communicants. "The Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for me …" This signifies that the celebrant does not control the sacrament and invite others to share with him at *his* table, but instead eats and drinks as guest at *Christ's* table, equal in all respects with his fellow communicants. This parabolic rubric turns the Eucharist around. Suddenly the Eucharist is not to show how the Church triumphantly has Christ at her disposal, but for all of us, even the celebrant, to place ourselves at Christ's disposal.

Some suggestions, therefore, acknowledging that these too represent "work in progress".

> (1) Use silence generously and wisely. At St Mark's we use silences after the readings, to reflect on the sermon, and prepare ourselves for the General Confession. People have to learn how to use silence effectively, instead of counting slowly or filling it with their own anxious preoccupations or simply going into suspended animation.
>
> (2) Make better use of the Psalms and of the Intercessions. The Psalms have been thoroughly domesticated by Anglican chant in combination with their positioning as commentary on the first reading. I would like to see us use the Psalter in its own right, separated from the readings, maybe more in association with the Intercessions (where they belong!). Nor should they be sanitised. Here Eugene Peterson provides some valuable insights.[24] I find it helpful to use the Psalms (in my private prayers) as though I were next to the person, hearing their prayer, and trying to enter into their prayer with them.
>
> It goes without saying that the Intercessions themselves are (after the sermon) the most sensitive part of the service, and the most demanding on the one preparing and leading them.

[23] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk.* Quoted by Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment*, 117.
[24] Eugene Peterson, *Answering God* 1989.

(3) If resources permit, and the space is appropriate, dramatic enactments of Scripture passages can be very compelling and effective. However, I find most material available imposes simplistic interpretations on the text, and thereby limits people's thinking in response. Liturgical dance can also be very effective, as long as it is done well and is appropriate to the space and the congregation.

(4) Use opportunities to teach about the rite, its underlying logic and flow. I have found that people value this, and find themselves able to participate more meaningfully. This Lent, I preached a series of five sermons on the Eucharist. From time to time, I have also inserted brief explanatory notes about liturgical practice in the pew bulletin.

(5) Establish a food basket near the altar. It needs to be explained that this is more than social welfare. Giving to the poor in the context of the Eucharist speaks volumes about Jesus as the ideal king of Israel who cares for the poor [Ps 72.12-13], but also of the Eucharistic fact that we are richly and graciously fed, though utterly unworthy.[25] This is parabolic in a society where the user-pays means if you don't pay you don't get, and where additionally the poor are often dismissed with contempt as undeserving - parasites upon society.

(6) Above all, it will be the priest's and the congregation's ability to cope with the insecurities generated by parabolic liturgy that will enable them to break out of the safety of myth and bear authentic witness to Christ's gospel, rather than betray it by complacent liturgical routine. This requires special qualities in both clergy and congregation!

These will not necessarily bring people into church in large numbers. But that is not the point. The point is that liturgy can be a powerful resource for the Church to remain faithful to its vocation. We can use it more effectively - and we are obliged to use it more effectively.

This requires parabolic enactment, and this requires imagination. Provocatively, Professor Ellen Davis wrote recently of the need to read the Bible "confessionally"; I suggest we need to celebrate the Eucharist "confessionally" as well.[26] She also drew attention to the idea that in the *Sursum corda* the expression "Lift up your hearts" effectively means "lift up your imaginations, open them up to God" (p 27).

Parable and imagination open up the spaces in which God can meet us. When we are jolted out of the familiar and the comfort zone, when we are in a space without clear direction signs, we are more likely to seek God and more likely to be responsive to God.

The Eucharist as parable holds the key. It is an extended parabolic commentary on our baptism.

We gather. We hear the Word of God read, and preached. We hear in the Creed the result of the Church's prayerful reflection and intellectual labours on the question, "Who is this God we worship?" Then we pray, confess our sins, and are absolved. Thus far, it is a single process of dying to self, because we can do nothing else if we truly acknowledge God's claims upon us.

Since "we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his".[Rm 6:5] The new life is anticipated in baptism symbolically by our being raised out of the drowning; it is anticipated in the absolution in the Eucharist; it is then anticipated more fully in the Greeting of Peace and the Eucharistic Meal which follows immediately. This is the Messianic Banquet, which we celebrate on earth in longing anticipation. Its best evocation is found in the powerful poetic imagery and the intensely pastoral concern of the Book of Revelation. We partake. We as the Body of Christ are nourished and sustained by his very self – for our mission in the world, which is his mission undertaken through us. Blessed and commissioned, we leave for the world God loves.[27]

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[25] See also Justin Martyr's description of a contemporary Eucharist (*1 Apology 67*; note 1 to this section).
[26] "Reading the Bible confessionally in the Church", *Anglican Theological Review* 84 #1 (Winter 2002), 25-35.
[27] I rarely use the blessing based on Php 4.7 – "The peace of God, which passes all understanding …" – because it fosters complacency. I much prefer the missionary blessing for Pentecost: "God stir up within you the gift of the Spirit …" (*APBA* p 157).

But what does it mean for an adult to be baptised?

I close, fittingly, with a parable. I cannot remember its source, or when I heard it, though it must be ten years ago or more.

> A young man, new to the Christian faith and zealous, sought out an old hermit to seek baptism from him. The hermit received him graciously, they talked, and the young man respectfully asked the hermit to baptise him. The hermit asked him Do you repent of your sins? Yes. Do you believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God? Yes. Do you love him and want to follow him all your life? Yes. Do you love him more than life itself? Yes.
>
> So the hermit agreed to baptise the young man.
>
> They walked to the river and into the water. The hermit repeated the questions, and the young man answered as before.
>
> I baptise you in the name of the Father (into the water); and of the Son (into the water); and of the Holy Spirit (into the water).
>
> At the third plunge, the hermit held the young man down as long as he could.
>
> The young man rose gasping and furious out of the water, and began abusing the hermit. But the hermit held his peace, then asked gently, “Why did you struggle?”

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