

CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS THIS FAITH? INTERFAITH FESTIVAL – 23.11.08

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- **Introduction:**

“What if God was one of us?” Joan Osborne

What indeed if God was one of us. But then I suppose that is the essence of the Christian faith – that God, the eternal mystery, the divine grace, the light beyond all light, the Love beyond all names, the creator and source of all that is, the essence and the very ground of our being – God became one of us, embodied, vulnerable, limited as we are, but rich in all that is human goodness and potential – God became one of us so that we could become one with God.

Jesus came, born in a particular time and place, as we are, to teach us how to be human and to awaken again in us that ultimate yearning for God, for union with God, that yearning we were born with deep in our souls.

God became incarnate, enfleshed, embodied, so that we too could embody God in the world, be the presence of God where we are, in the midst of ordinary human life, in the midst of suffering, and in relationship with all creation.

The followers of Jesus saw in him someone unique, not just a great teacher, healer and prophet, but someone who turned their worlds upside down, challenging the authorities of their day, welcoming the poor and outcast, and calling people back to relationship with God. He was concerned, not with the outer works of religion, but with inner qualities and the work of the heart.

After his death, they continued to encounter him amongst them. Death had not held him. Those who discovered the empty tomb were met by angels who announced that he had risen from the dead, that he remained present with them. They came to believe that in Jesus, God indeed had come to be present amongst humankind.

- **Jesus Christ!!!!**

Unfortunately today many people only know the name of this man as a swear word. The name of Jesus is more often associated with things going wrong – when someone hits their thumb with a hammer – whose name is on their lips?!

And too often today, we see the media having a field day reporting on the latest instance of conflict, abuse or mediocrity in the Christian community.

But maybe that is the price we pay for taking for granted our place as the dominant religion in the Western world for so many centuries.

So today, before I say more about the Christian faith and my own commitment to it, I need to acknowledge before you the failings of the institution that has grown up around the person of Jesus over these centuries. We have been arrogant and ignorant often. Our faith has become enmeshed in a dominant culture and we have not respected other faiths and cultures. We have

taken for granted our power in the world, and we have allowed many acts of violence and abuse to be done in the name of the church.

I have no authority to say this – I am just a humble parish priest, but as a representative of what has been the dominant religion for so long, I need to acknowledge our wrong-doing and say I am sorry for what the church has done over the centuries that has not been of God.

There has been much that is good that continues to arise out of the Christian faith and the Church, but on this weekend we celebrate that now we, the Christian community, simply take our place alongside other traditions, for the sharing of the wisdom of all faiths for the good of all people and for the sake of the world itself.

This weekend in particular we celebrate the new awareness of indigenous spirituality. Our forebears came to this land bringing a foreign faith, not recognising that the Spirit had been here long before. So now is the time for us to listen and learn from the ancient wisdom held in this land and entrusted to our indigenous brothers and sisters thousands of years ago.

- **Christianity**

But what of Christianity - let me go back a step now and tell you a little more about our faith. As I said, the Christian faith is focused around the person of Jesus Christ, a man born a Jew at a time when there was great yearning for the coming of the Messiah, one long-awaited, who would lead the people into a new freedom, one who would restore the kingdom of old.

Jesus appeared on the scene, teaching with a new authority and calling people back to the essence of their faith, calling people back to the true law of God summed up in two great commandments – love God and love your neighbour as yourself. People soon began to ask, ‘Who is this man?’

Jesus’ teaching of course upset the religious authorities of his day – who was this young upstart who was winning the hearts and minds of the people?

Jesus also came as a healer, freeing people from long-held ailments and releasing them into life. There were even stories that he could calm storms on the water, and make 5 loaves and 2 fish enough to feed a crowd of 5,000! Who was this man who seemed to work miracles in the most ordinary of circumstances, this man who was doing things they thought only God could do?

Jesus spoke a truth and did things others did not. More and more people began to follow him and he began to disturb the status quo. The authorities became uneasy. He needed to be stopped. And so the man Jesus, who many hoped would be the one who would lead them into freedom, was crucified, and his followers fell into despair.

But 3 days after his death his tomb was found to be empty. People began to encounter him unexpectedly present with them, talking and walking, familiar yet somehow new. News spread that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Some weeks later many of his followers had a strange spiritual experience. They suddenly found themselves empowered to do the things that Jesus did. They gathered in communities sharing their possessions, teaching, and carrying on the work of Jesus.

And so was born the Christian faith. We cannot know really what happened, but something extraordinary did happen after Jesus' death, enough to cause his followers to suffer persecution for this faith, enough to create a community that continues 2000 years later.

- **The Sacraments:**

There were two particular rituals which marked the early Christian communities from the beginning which we still practice today.

The first is baptism, the sign of Christian initiation, involving a washing with water signifying new birth, the new life that begins as a follower of Jesus.

The second is Holy Communion or Eucharist – a meal of thanksgiving – which some of us have just shared – established at the Last Supper, the last meal Jesus shared with his friends before he died. He gave thanks for bread and wine and then shared these with his disciples, saying to them – this is my body and blood – signaling to them that he was about to die, but that in sharing this meal in remembrance of him, the bread and wine would become much more – a sign of his presence and life still amongst them.

Baptism and Eucharist are what we call sacraments of the church – outward signs of an inner and invisible grace.

- **The Church:**

Jesus originally didn't come to establish a new faith but to reform his own and to bring people back to God. Jesus broke down barriers of exclusion and difference, welcoming and healing all who came to him. Here was a man with good news for everyone – he showed that God welcomes all people, and everyone can have a relationship directly with God.

As the early Christian communities experienced worsening persecution, they became more dispersed, and so the stories about Jesus spread far beyond the Jewish world. In spite of their vulnerability and fragmentation, the communities continued to grow, developing distinct identities depending on the circumstances in which they found themselves.

It was not until the early 4th century when Constantine, emperor of Rome, adopted Christianity that the faith became tied closely to the state. The fragile Christian community became an institution and membership of the church through baptism was automatic for all people of the empire. The Christian faith became enmeshed with the culture and politics of its day.

- **Christianity Today**

Many comings and goings of history have led us to where we are now. A changing world, new knowledge, and the greater interaction between people of other faiths have challenged the church's secure place in the world. We can no longer rest on the apparent strengths of our past.

But these are excellent times for us, because our newfound fragility and the questions which challenge our faith are forcing us back to discover the person of Jesus, and his call to deeper relationship with God. More and more people are turning now to the great prayer and meditation traditions which have been part of the Christian way for centuries, sadly forgotten amidst our preoccupations with doctrines and the intellectual beliefs of our faith. Many are rediscovering the mysteries of faith and the joys of prayer and deepened encounter with God.

- **The Bible**

The main source of teaching and inspiration for the Christian community is the Bible, the book of Christian scriptures. It is not a clearly defined set of beliefs or even a single story. Rather it is a collection of many different kinds of writings – stories, poetry, letters, history, legend and wisdom. All of it is the result of reflection on the experience of God present and active in the lives of human beings.

Some in the church take the Bible more literally, as fact – for instance those who still believe the world was created in 7 days. But serious scholarship shows that the Bible is much richer. It can be read on many levels and cannot be reduced to a single narrative or a set of neat beliefs.

It is made up of two parts:

- the Old Testament or the Hebrew scriptures – the writings of the ancient Hebrew people which foretold the coming of one who would save the people from their oppression and lead them into a new place of hope, and
- the New Testament – writings following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But Christians also rely on other sources of inspiration:

The writings of the desert fathers and mothers, and the teachers, community leaders and people we call saints who have done great things inspired by their faith eg. Julian of Norwich and Theresa of Avila, Martin Luther King, St Francis and St Benedict.

We also draw on books of prayer and songs shaped by centuries of Christian worship. For the Christian, prayer is both an individual and a gathered activity. We need both private prayer and worship as community.

- **My Journey:**

Christianity is a diverse and strange and beautiful faith, and so perhaps all I can really do is say now what it means for me.

I was blessed to grow up with a very strong sense of the presence and love of God. For me God has always been there. Since I can remember I had a sense of a greater presence around me, a Love way beyond anything I could explain or see or touch, a trust in Someone I could only contemplate with my heart, Someone who stirred deep within my soul. It was only as I grew and attended church and Sunday School that I learnt of the person of Jesus.

Jesus teaches me how to live. I have a long way to go, but Jesus keeps me grounded in that tension between the yearning for the divine and the daily demands of ordinary life, and for me it is in that tension we grow, daily refined in learning and awareness, in letting go and in the ability to love all people.

Prayer through contemplation and meditation draws me closer to God, into that unfathomable mystery of love, but Jesus brings that mystery home, grounds it in the daily journey of being human. Jesus is the one who teaches me how to be human, but he is also the one who calls me to offer myself so God can become more present in our world through me, though not through anything I can do or achieve. All I can do is make myself available to God, in service of others and in prayer.

Some years ago, I felt called to give myself more to this faith and so have now been ordained as an Anglican priest, a rather strange creature I think as we watch the church struggling to find its

way. However, this is where I feel called to be. But for me it is not enough – the church needs to deepen its life in God again and to reinvent itself as community.

For some years I have been visiting the Abbey, a community of Benedictine sisters in southern NSW. Some of you may have seen the recent TV programme about it and another about a monastery in England.

St Benedict lived in the 6th century. Concerned that the church had lost its way even then, he sought to call people back to the way of Jesus. He established a community of prayer. He wrote a rule of life for his community which became the basis for much of monastic life that followed down the centuries.

It is this rhythm of prayer, work and balance in life which I see modeled at The Abbey. So this year I became an Oblate of the Abbey – an Associate of the community – so that even as I live in the world, my days are also governed by a rhythm of prayer and meditation. It also reminds me to maintain a balance of life in this busy world. The interest generated by these two programmes confirms my sense that we are ready to find new ways of monastic life, new forms of community centered in prayer, new ways of being church in the world.

For me Christianity is not primarily about beliefs and religious practice but about a living relationship with God, the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

- **The Cross:**

Unfortunately the church got stuck a long time ago in a preoccupation with sin, our human capacity for wrong, going back to the story of Adam and Eve. This has coloured our image of humankind and all creation from the early centuries. It has shaped our understanding of Jesus, and it has never quite allowed us to grow into the fullness of life that God offers, the life that was lived out among us by Jesus.

Many now are trying to hold on to the other part of the story - that humans are made in the image of God. Essentially we are people full of potential called to live our lives to the full, ever growing in wholeness, wisdom and love.

But this is not to be a life lived in denial of the brokenness and woundedness that besets the human condition and all creation.

Each day I wear a cross, the most common symbol of the Christian faith. For me the cross of Christ is the ultimate symbol, because it holds in tension the reality of life and death and the new life that can grow out of even the most terrible circumstances. Jesus teaches that it is only by going through the darkness, the death, whatever it may be, where often it is most difficult to trust or feel God's love, that we can emerge fully into the light.

- **Legacy**

Although I have acknowledged the failings of the Christian church over the centuries, Christianity has brought much that is good. Even though it is long-forgotten, the teachings of Jesus continue to underlie our justice and welfare systems and our concerns for social justice, inspired too by such people as Martin Luther King, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale and Oscar Romero.

But Christianity has also given us great cultural benefits in art, education and music, and so I finish with a simple tribute to the one who continues to walk with us as we live out our lives in this world, sustained by love, by faith and by hope; a piece of music which can carry our prayer:

Agnus Dei – Barber