

Pentecost (A), St Paul's Sale: 31 May 2020

Acts 2:1-21; Ps 104; 1 Cor 12:1-13; Jn 20:19-23

It was evening on the first day of the week (John 20:19).

And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day (Gen 1:5b).

As the Spirit of God swept over the unruly primeval waters in Genesis in that creation story, so the Word of God in John's gospel, the Risen Christ, on the first Easter evening breathes over his confused disciples, creating out of their formless void – to use the language of Genesis – something new.

And this freshly animated community, like those dry bones in Ezekiel, this newly formed priestly people – is immediately sent out to exercise a priestly ministry: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.'

This is the ministry of reconciliation – the term now commonly used for sacramental confession in the Roman Catholic church – a ministry which St Paul places at the heart of God's creative and redemptive work – and ours. Elsewhere in his correspondence to the Corinthians, from which we just heard, Paul writes:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-18).

Reconciliation – the bringing together again of what has become divided – always requires someone to stand in that 'breach' where the cause of the separation lies, with all of its pain, and hurt, and to mediate forgiveness.

Such is the priestly calling; a costly one, lived emblematically by our great High Priest, and a responsibility entrusted by the Risen Christ to his priestly people, his body, his Church, in the power of Holy Spirit.

Falling in the middle of National Reconciliation Week this year, Pentecost invites us to see reconciling and thus re-creative activity of Holy Spirit in our country, starting, of course, with ourselves through the same Spirit at work in us.

Bishop John McIntyre has been much on my mind lately. You may have seen the conversation Phil Muston and I recorded last week?¹ Phil emailed me later with some things he wished he'd said: "I should have mentioned Mac's undoubted charisma, especially with younger and marginalized people; I should have mentioned his 'crazy brave' side . . . [that] got him into so much trouble with his fellow bishops, but in a prophetic way it nudged the Church forward."

It was in that light that I knew of Johnny Mac, even though I never met him. A collection of essays published in 2013, including one from me, was dedicated by the editor, Alan Cadwallader, 'To a bishop who has displayed exemplary courage in inviting the Church to live into the gospel of justice, love, and grace . . . John McIntyre of Gippsland.'²

¹

<https://www.gippsanglican.org.au/news/articles/getting-to-know-philip-muston>

²

Pieces of Ease and Grace: Biblical Essays on Sexuality and Welcome. ATF Theology: Adelaide, 2013.

Less than a year later, Bishop John died tragically and unexpectedly. June 6, 2014 was the Friday evening before Pentecost. In my sermon at Christ Church South Yarra on the Sunday morning I reflected as follows:

Today the Anglican Church of Australia mourns the [untimely] passing of the Bishop of Gippsland . . . and we unite with the clergy and people of that Diocese . . . in the spirit of prayer for them and for Bp John[’s] family. We have lost a priestly bishop; one who truly understood the vocation, and the cost, of the Church’s ministry of reconciliation, and who embodied its Spirit.

There were many examples of this in Bishop John’s ministry, both here in Gippsland and elsewhere. Chief among them was John’s advocacy for our First Nations people. Preaching at Evensong in this Cathedral during Reconciliation Week seven years ago he said:

There is an unhealed wound in the soul of this nation . . . Australian history is replete with examples of horrific injustice and even attempted genocide of our Indigenous peoples . . . In Gippsland massacres like that at Warragul Creek were amongst the worst on the Australian mainland . . . For there to be reconciliation there must be repentance. Repentance is far more than saying sorry, and it took us until 2008 before we even [did that] . . . It is about living in a whole new way with each other . . . walking forward on a whole new path.³

It was evening on the first day of the week.

And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.

The theme for National Reconciliation Week this year is ‘In this together’ – a self-evident truth in the face of a pandemic, and yet less obvious perhaps when confronted with the crisis of an unhealed wound – a sin retained – in our national soul. Why is that, I wonder?

As Bishop John put it in his first address to the Synod of this Diocese, ‘Because we refuse to confront our original injustices, we are incapacitated in other areas . . . Our inability to respond properly to our first nations in this country . . . stifles our capacity to go forward on other issues of justice as well.’⁴

Why do we still retain that structural sin – Australia’s ‘original sin’, as it were?

I encourage you to watch on the diocesan website the conversation Edie Ashley and I had with our two Indigenous clergy, Phyllis Andy and Kathy Dalton, to hear about the work they do in their communities, what Reconciliation means for them, and to support that ministry if you possibly can.

Reconciliation in its many real, concrete, lived forms, is not peripheral to the Gospel; it is the Gospel: inseparable from the good news of our being reconciled to God in Christ; the mission breathed by the Risen Christ into his followers.

³ Reproduced in *TGA*, July 2013.

⁴ Muriel Porter, ed., *A man called Johnny Mac: Selected writings of Bishop John McIntyre* (Melbourne: Morning Star, 2015), 175.

I concluded that Pentecost sermon six years ago with these words:

As we reflect on Bishop John's life and legacy, do we have the courage to stand in that breach: to bear the pain of estrangement and brokenness in such a way as also to bear witness to the possibility and the force of new life? May John McIntyre rest in the peace of his new creation in the Risen Christ; and may we be rest-less in that same peace, until we have learned what it means to 'live tomorrow's life today'.⁵

To learn what this means – to live tomorrow's life today – is to let the Risen Christ 'breathe on us', the title of a poem by Didier Rimaud:

What can he still do with hands now nailed,
those hands he placed on wounds, and fed the hungry,
they gave sight to the blind, and broke the bread of thanks?

What can he still do, a slave in torment,
whose feet now are pierced that once strode the sea,
and walked the desert to fight and conquer evil?

What can he still do, his heart wide open,
if he returned his breath from where he received it,
and brought to fulfilment the words of the Book?

What can he still do? He gives his Spirit:
no longer above the deep to hold it in place,
but now is over us who do the work of Genesis.

Breathe upon us, Jesus, your breath of life,
may the earth from which we are shaped be brought into life,
may the waters divide where we should pass through.

Breathe upon us, Jesus, your Spirit of life,
your Spirit which comes to bring both pardon and joy,
may it send us out into the world, watching for peace.

Translated from the French by Christopher Willcock, SJ

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The refrain for the gradual hymn at this service, *Together in Song* 414