

Anglican Schools: Responsive and Evolving Faith Communities.

The Church and challenges facing us.

Thank you for the invitation to attend your conference. It is some time since I have had first hand experience of Anglican schools. In the 1990's I was a member of an Anglican girls' school council in Melbourne. In the 1980's I was a 'Cranbrook mother' in Sydney. I do, however, hear snippets of school life on a daily basis. My husband has been the chaplain to Merton Hall, Melbourne Girls' Grammar School since 2003, and before that associate chaplain. That is his ministry, and his work place of course, not mine! My own ministry has been in theological education, in parishes in Sydney and Melbourne, and in the wider church. So, perhaps like me you are wondering what I am doing here!

To add to that anxiety, I am your first key note speaker. Of course, I am comforted by the fact that as yet you have no one to compare me with! Nevertheless, mine is a daunting task. I suspect my task is to give you the bad news, the challenges facing the Church and by association, church schools. Have no fear, I will not disappoint you. There is much that is not easy to hear or understand about the times we live in. There is however, much to be brought to bear on those challenges from within the riches of the Christian tradition as given expression by Anglicans.

Introduction.

I have chosen three challenges I believe we all face as Christians, and that you face in particular ways as educators. There are others, some of them to do with the survival of church structures or internal matters related to beliefs and practices. I will not address those. The three I have identified concern the life of the world and the engagement of the Christian faith with that world. That world is of God's continual making, and so rightly the Church's concern. We humans radically remake and disfigure the world in our own image yet God has radically remedied that disfigurement. The Christian faith teaches that God is at work through Jesus Christ to transfigure and renew the whole creation. God invites humanity to make that remedy our own by the patterning of our lives on that of Jesus Christ, our risen brother. Flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, he is also the one human in whom the fullness of God dwells. God's concerns encompass all that we are and all that we do. God's actions towards the world are for love of the world. A global world takes our attention these days, and yet each person's world is also home and family, classroom and parish as well as the interior world of each human heart.

The challenges are big and their scope is daunting. They are perennial challenges; they are always with us one way or another, though I consider they have a particular urgency in our times. I do not have the answers. The challenges I have chosen as my focus are,

- Challenge 1: to tell the Christian story in today's world.
- Challenge 2: to nurture hope in a cynical world.
- Challenge 3: to educate peace makers in a violent world.

Telling the Christian story in today's world.

Peter Drucker, whose insights will be known to many of you, has written,

Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation...Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself - its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structure, its arts, its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born. We are currently living through such a transformation.¹

Drucker succinctly states what mothers describe at length. I think we agree the changes western society has experienced in our own lifetimes, let alone prior to that, are enough to cause us to acknowledge that the Christian faith addresses a significantly different worldview to any before encountered. Stability and unlimited progress used to be taken for granted, but not any more! The dominant thinking for the past three hundred years has been that through unaided human reason and technological skills, humanity could solve any problem, improve any situation and create any utopia we imagined. This way of thinking, labelled “modernity” originated in the renaissance and reformation and flourished until the mid twentieth century. The realities of two world wars, continuing intractable regional and ethnic strife, the ecological devastation and continuing threats caused by industrialisation, the impact of global corporations on work and the shift to framing life in terms of economics, and the widening gap between rich and poor even in a once much more egalitarian Australia have impacted on our confidence in unlimited growth or increasing control of our world.

While none of us wants to renounce the advantages gained by among others, clean water, electronic communications, medical knowledge or the oversupply of cheap consumer goods, people, especially young people, are questioning the situation we find ourselves in. They are deeply suspicious of the underpinnings of modernity. Many people, especially young people are uneasy with universalising, so called meta-narratives, of which unlimited human progress is one and biblical story another example. The widespread term to describe the ethos that replaces modernity is ‘post modernity.’ A post modern, stance assumes that any over-arching story is being told by those whose own interests are invested in its adoption, and who misuse both the story and their power to exploit the less powerful. The younger generations we are trying to reach with the Christian message are deeply influenced by these changes, whether or not they are consciously aware of them or can articulate them clearly.

As Anglicans we are the inheritors of a story, the Christian story of God at work in Jesus, risen Christ, for the good of all creation. That story is told through the stories, poetry, imagery and wisdom of the Hebrew-Christian scriptures and interpreted afresh in every age as it is lived by women and men in a myriad of places and circumstances. It is a good news story because it concerns God’s comedy of engagement with human life.

As educators, whatever your personal beliefs, you need to teach the biblical stories so that young people have informed access to the literature, music, art and history of western society. As Anglicans we need to communicate this story to each new

¹ Quoted by Peter Granger, minister at Charlotte Chapel Baptist Church, Edinburgh in a report on mission at the beginning of the third millennium.
<http://www.charlottechapel.org/2/resources/articles/peter.php>

generation in response to our own reception of it. We must do it in faithfulness to the command to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28).

There are signs of a new openness to the telling of stories to mediate the sacred. The Jewish mystics say that God created people because God loves stories. God it seems enjoys seeing how we all turn out! Since the mid 1990's a new movement has arisen among young people. Called 'emerging church,'² it draws eclectically on the visual and non rational. Systematic theology gives way to narratives. Worship is likely to include the use of candles, icons, readings from the early church writings as well as scripture and the latest music. Culturally sensitive, this style of worship searches to build community which is deep, vulnerable, local *and* hyperlinked!

To conclude this section here is one retelling of the scriptural story:

Constantly creating all that is, God who is a holy community of love though also a unity (Christians call this community of persons, the Holy Trinity) and makes humans to be social creatures in God's own image and likeness. God continues to make humans for companionship with God's own self and with each other. Generation after generation, humans reject this friendship preferring to imagine they are God and from this failure flows all the wrong doing, the sorrow and hurt from which the world is never free. God is grieved by this rejection, yet never rejects in return. God's heart recoils from repudiating the world since God's own pronouncement on creation is that it is very good. God continually promised to remedy the failure and in the fullness of time one human life was lived in complete and unbroken obedience to God's original purpose. We humans however, found this good man Jesus from Nazareth in Palestine, abhorrent, as we so frequently hate what is good, plot against it and give ourselves over to what is wrong, though we find our subsequent feelings of guilt, and the hurt we inflict even upon ourselves, almost beyond bearing. We killed this one good man and considered the story ended. God, whose purposes are always to bring life from death, raised this man to show us that our actions are not the last word to prevail. The non violence of the just man Jesus was answered by the love of God in whose image Jesus had acted with complete fidelity. Those who had known him, and others to whom he continues to make himself known, recognised this man in his risen, transformed life and found that far from blaming them for his death, he offered forgiveness and the path to a new way to live with hope and trust in God's love. What God accomplishes in one life, and made known through one life, is what God will do in and through every life since the one who died, died for all and now lives for all. This is the story of God who makes all that is and who continues to remake in love every one who will allow God to be God and live with growing delight the human life God made them for.

God speaks only one language, and tells only one story: I love you. In each generation that story must be retold if it is to be heard³ for the first time.

² For a description of this phenomenon see www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent_church and www.emergingchurch.info

³ My assertion in this retelling is that God's purposes are for the transformation of the whole creation from its bondage to decay to the glory originally intended. This is accomplished through Jesus, risen Christ who is known in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians confuse God's purposes – the renewal of humanity – with God's means, the Church.

Nurturing hope in a cynical world.

You are no doubt familiar with the alleged Chinese curse, “May you be born in interesting times.” “Interesting times” of course is a euphemism for complex and difficult times. Since events of September 2001 in New York, the dominant perception of the western world is that we live in “terrible” times, liable to terrorist attack anywhere, anytime. Ours is a cynical world. It is hardly surprising that a mistrust of modernity’s once unquestioned power throws people back upon themselves. If there is no overarching purpose in life beyond my own interests, the only sensible alternative motivation is self interest. This is what I mean by cynicism. This is the world into which the children and young adults you are educating now will emerge as beginning adults. The challenge is to nurture hope in worthwhile purposes beyond the individual. It is almost a hunger these days.

“Welcome to twenty fours centres of the universe,” the grade two teacher said as I arrived for the first religious education class of the year. Twenty four bright, well behaved middle class children already imbued with the characteristic attitude of our society, “I am the purpose of my own life.” Even allowing for children’s’ developmental growth, any diminishment of a sense of belonging to the class group as an entity and therefore ‘fitting in’ with others who also have legitimate needs erodes group cohesion and fails to foster a sense of self beyond *my* concerns and *my* desires. I do not mean simply training children to fit it. I do mean finding those ways to challenge and support the growth of children that coaches them along a path to healthy interdependence.

I have a card at home with the black and white photograph of an Edwardian dandy in fine array. Underneath the caption says, “I used to be an atheist, until I decided *I was God.*” If humanity is ‘god’ in a terrible world, there is every cause to fear. As Thomas Merton, one of the great mystics of our times once said, “Fear is the root cause of war.” It is the root cause of much else besides. Initially fear is an involuntary response to danger or threat. But unexamined feelings of fear can be used as a weapon against people or to manipulate them. It happens in families; it happens within and between nations. Consider how acquiescent people have been as western governments have shifted foreign policy towards a policy of pre-emptive military action, increased spending on the surveillance of citizens and suspending long held legal rights and processes in the name of ‘the war on terrorism.’ Without our fear these changes would be unacceptable. None of these measures removes fear; in fact they reinforce or even escalate our fears of those different from us.

Whether it is the fear that another child will attract the teacher’s attention more than me, another nation may withhold the oil we need, another school build a better campus or gain better results, fear robs humans of freedom. Wishing and wanting are attempts at control; they leave the human ego in the driving seat. Hope is a kind of surrender, in which ‘I’ play a far more modest part in shaping events, and may even discover unexpected insights and revelations through not giving into the illusion of control. The Christian virtue of hope frees people from merely wanting or wishing, and lifts our horizon beyond a life focussed on what I can get out of it to a more global, more existential condition of trust that life will give me what I need. Hope has a realistic assessment of the world, and yet in assessing the world does not take the shortcut to despair. It is borne out of a sound worldview and understanding of what it

means to be human. For Christians, the object of that trust is God. The apostle Paul names hope as one of the three abiding virtues: faith, hope and love.

What does the Christians tradition bring to a cynical, narcissistic world view? A simple injunction, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus speaks these words to his followers more than any other in the gospels. Fear is at the root of some much that shapes the behaviour of individuals and of governments. Modernity offers the myths of invulnerability and abundance. When people fear that there will not be enough of what is necessary to go around, or that they are at risk in a dangerous world, fear will motivate cynical even narcissistic attitudes and responses. A mythical approach to science holds over-reaching promises of solutions to and even the elimination of illnesses, natural disasters, ecological damage, even death itself through the use of cryogenics. Yes, there is much we can do now that once seemed impossible, but who are we kidding that we can do and have it all? Ourselves, of course!

There are real dangers to be faced in our worlds – global and domestic. Hope can seem foolish but is not. Evil behaviour is a reality on our doorsteps and on the other side of the world. Vigilance is needed and prudence also a virtue for these times. Courage and hope counter, in truth are, the remedy for cynicism and fear. Dark and fearful places exist within us and in our world. We long for it to be otherwise. It is no surprise to me that people flock to churches and footpaths to light candles when terrible things happen. The light of hope is a potent symbol in the darkest of events. Creation begins with God’s command, “Let there be light.”⁴ In the prologue to John’s gospel we hear these words, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”⁵

To educate peace makers in a violent world.

You may recall a conversation between the new headmaster of the fictitious Brookfield School and the elderly teacher Mr Chips. Headmaster: “The school has no cadet corps?” Mr Chips: “Oh no, headmaster. We are trying to keep violence out of the school, not bring it in.” At the time, the First World War is imminent. The headmaster’s preference for cadets over peacemaking eventually prevails at Brookfield. Dozens of former boys die in the conflict which between the nations and Mr Chips, who has taught them, and in truth, loved and formed them as a teacher ought, wonders to what end. Can schools do other than conform to the prevailing ethos of the world around them? Brookfield’s new headmaster positively embraced his warring world. What of you, in your schools?

Does it seem to you that violence in its many forms has increased in our times? Although I don’t have statistics to quote, I think that perception is pretty true. Our tolerance of some forms of violence has also changed. Abuse of family members, once overlooked by society and even the police, is now labelled ‘domestic abuse,’ a criminal offence. Violence is most pronounced in times of social change. This has been the case in the western world since the 1970’s. Questioning norms is important. Some norms should change and will in any event. Think back to the trials of alleged witches in Europe and North America as the mediaeval world gave way to modernity. Irrationality seemed to flourish just as the age of reason was dawning. Consider the

⁴ Genesis 1.2

⁵ John 1. 5

street riots in the UK and France earlier this year. Examples abound. There are many theories about the origins of violence, and many useful observations have been made. One is that the more bureaucratic institutions become, so the potential for violence increases. When public and political life is the domain of bureaucrats, forgetful ministers of portfolios and the spin doctors, who is accountable and with whom do we remonstrate to any effect? But that is an aside.

As educators, one of your tasks is to interpret the world to the young and to lead them to form their own sound views as they mature. The escalation of violence and how we respond is a key moral issue in these times. Schools are not immune from the issues and young people need to make choices as they relate to the world of the classroom and sporting field, and later the world of the ballot box. You will know better than I do what measures are effective to enable young people to face the consequences of unacceptable behaviour and to discipline offenders against good order in the school. I appreciate how difficult it is for you if parents are not co-operative or effective in their roles, but that will not be the impediment it can be in the state schools system, I assume. Everything a school does to deal with irresponsible, destructive and wrong behaviours is dealing with violence and teaches students how and where to find the resources to resist the violence within them and the world around them.

The church itself faces a form of violent opposition in assertive secularism. This may well increase in the next decade or so. Calls to remove funding from church schools are often born from envy, a violent motivation in itself. The once comfortable relationship between church and state, never established in law in Australia though frequently favourable to Anglicans, is breaking down not only fast, but sometimes aggressively. The separation of church and state is seen more clearly as the differences between the values of the state and those of the churches become more evident. I do not simply have in mind issues of sexual morality. Churches and their members disagree on those matters and on the extent to which Christians should expect legislation to support so called 'Judeo-Christian values.' However, we may be entering a new phase of church-state relating that signals a new energy among proponents of the strict separation of the religious and the secular. I recently became aware of proposed changes in religious instruction in Queensland⁶ state schools. It did strike me as I listened to them that the proponents of change were full of quasi religious zeal! I assume that will have little impact on your schools and may even lead to an increase in enrolments! This may prove to be a further example of the sharpening contrast between the ethos of the wider world and the Church.

Could we, do we want to, are we willing to educate the young in such ways that violence is not a choice they will make? Before I say more, I should distinguish between violence and force. Force, like power can be used to benefit people. As educators you have the force of sanctions and punishments at your disposal for the good of children who need to learn the limits and consequences of certain behaviours. The police force is called a 'force' because its members have the power to deal with offenders against the laws made by the legitimate authorities. The force they may use is only against offenders, has set limits and is accountable. Peace-keepers are a form of international policing.

⁶ My knowledge is limited at the time of writing to hearing the discussion on ABC Radio National Religion Report of 10 May 2006.

Peace-makers are another thing! Peace makers do not deny the reality of violence but refuse to speak its language. Revenge is one language in which to respond to violence, abuse or hurt. It can seem the obvious or natural response. In Psalm 137 we hear, 'let *their* children die horribly, let *them* know what humiliation and exile are like.' That is not the way of Jesus. He said to the crowds in Jerusalem, "If you ... had only recognised the things that make for peace."⁷ The details of those things change with changing circumstances. What does not change is the commitment of the Christian faith (indeed it is a biblical and so also Jewish insight) to the just resolution of conflicts so that peace may be built upon sure foundations. Reflecting upon his experience of being in New York, in lower Manhattan, on the morning of 11 September 2001, Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote,

The hardest thing in the world is to know how to act so as to make the difference that *can* be made; to know how and why that differs from the act that only releases or expresses the basic impotence of resentment.⁸

Conclusion.

The confidence in progress that most of us knew during our own school years is fast disappearing. A younger generation is ready for a new and better story to live by. The students in your schools, no matter how young, will already be living in accord with some story about the world and their place in it. That story is likely to be a blend of messages which have come from parents, the media and from you. What story does your school mediate? Do you replicate the society around you, seek success only as the culture defines it and offer the Christian story as primarily a moral tale: be good, do good? The Christian story is a one of facing what is wrong, and in truth often best called evil in order to unmask its power, and turn to Christ as the source of a transforming alternative character in which to be formed.

Thrown back upon ourselves, humans turn to cynical, even narcissistic attitudes which can lead to despair in the face of a very diverse and complex world. Highly functioning people can be quietly despairing underneath! Educating young people to face and go beyond fear offers the freedom to grow in hope – much more than optimism – and to live with their eyes open about the world yet willing to engage with it as salt and light. Now, more than ever, the world needs the blessing of peace-makers whose capacity to resist violence in its many disguises will unmask

If I had the answers I would write the book, come to conferences to sell and sign them, and retire! I offer these modest thoughts from the perspective of a parish priest who wants our Anglican schools to be faith communities in partnership with the local Church, communities where the receptive young are formed in Christ likeness to be salt and light in our light, not merely trained or even only educated to make that world work for them.

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⁷ Luke 19.42

⁸ Williams, Rowan. *Writing in the Dust. Reflections on 11th September and its aftermath.* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 51.

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