



Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

**Let's make
change
that lasts**

2023 Tucker Oration

Faith and Justice in a Secular Age

24 May 2023

Christ Church South Yarra

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.

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It's the people

People have always been at the heart of BSL. People were what mattered to Gerard Kennedy Tucker, and people are at the heart of this Oration on faith and justice in a secular age.

Let me tell you the story of Chima¹ who works with young people in one of BSL's community programs. He arrived in Australia a decade ago as a refugee and first started work with us through the COVID Work for Victoria initiative of the State government and we were lucky to keep him. Chima is passionate about helping program participants and thinks of them not as KPIs but as members of his multicultural community in the West of Melbourne where he is actively involved in sports clubs and his faith community. Chima is convinced that both sport and faith are critical supports and keys to success for his young people. He himself is humble, disciplined and generous because – he says – of his faith. Chima's faith, incidentally, is Sikh (and his sport is cricket).

Transitions

In the final months of 1947, when the last of the brothers resigned from the order to return to mission work in the Queensland bush, Father Tucker, Superior of The Brotherhood of St. Laurence declared, 'My life's work [is] gone.'² We know of course, that was not actually the case, but Tucker was forced to reconcile his vision for a religious order of priests with the pressing, ongoing need for the work of the brotherhood. The Fitzroy slums were still standing, the elderly were still vulnerable to homelessness, and, as he wrote in *Thanks Be*, his autobiography, Australia 'still needed to be ashamed of the fact that even in this enlightened age, and in this country of so much bounty, many are unable to enjoy that standard of living which is the right of all.'³

Fortunately for us, Tucker had, what we might now call the ability to "pivot" and within the year, Geoffrey Sambell came onboard to lead the establishment of the BSL as a welfare arm of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, with the BSL work now extending across a Social Services Bureau in Fitzroy, the Carrum Downs Settlement, and a small, mostly unpaid team of social workers, researchers, campaigners, organisers and an army of volunteers. So, whilst the work of the religious order had come to completion, the Brotherhood's work toward social justice had not.⁴

With the shifting sands of church, state and welfare in the evolution of Australian society, we must ask ourselves if the BSL is at another point of transition. Clearly the work of justice is not done. We continue to live with one in every 6 children in poverty. We continue to live with poor housing policies that contravene the human right to a safe and secure home. And we continue to live unreconciled with the violence of our relationships with First Nations peoples of Australia.

Tucker was born into an era which often considered poverty a moral issue, but he was also born into a family which considered this a moral failing of community and society, rather than a character deficiency in the individual.⁵ In a newsletter to supporters in March 1967 Tucker wrote, 'The question of poverty is most certainly a moral issue. The moral issue is the poverty of many in the midst of plenty.'⁶

However, given BSL's roots and its ongoing Anglican affiliations, we must come to terms with the fact that the church's leadership on moral issues, both individual and social, has been seriously diminished over the past half century. We must now come to terms with the

secularisation of Australian society and the manner in which this impacts the way BSL speaks about poverty as a moral issue.

Secularisation in Australia

There are three dimensions to secularisation in Australia which radically change the context in which the BSL operates.⁷

First, the welfare state vision has evolved over the past century, repositioning government, community and private organisations in their roles delivering welfare solutions to the most vulnerable Australians. I commend to you our SPARC report by Danielle Thornton, Dina Bowman and Shelley Mallett, *Safety Net to Poverty Trap* in this regard.⁸ Suffice to say that, whereas Tucker and Sambell were able to advocate for welfare policy by reminding the government of its Christian duties, that is no longer the case. Moreover, events leading to and uncovered by the *Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse* have irrevocably damaged public trust in religious institutions.

The second dimension, as reflected in our location for this oration, Gerard Tucker grew up in an Anglicanism where social reformers and heads of public and private institutions worshiped and dined together. To establish the first social work of the BSL, Tucker went to the wealthy churches of South Yarra, Malvern and East Melbourne for seed funding.⁹ Although Tucker was comfortable drawing upon his Anglican connections, for him, it was about getting things done rather than enjoying privilege for its own reward. The Australian constitution may have enshrined separation of church and state but in Tucker's day the ruling class of early Australia knew no such distinction. In the years since, the process of secularism has worked its way sufficiently through these informal networks to dismantle much of the privileged access to policy makers that our Anglican forebears at the BSL enjoyed.

The status of institutional religion today is further complicated by the rise of the religious right as evidenced by difficult federal debates on Religious Freedom legislation, and the 2017 referendum on the definition of Marriage. It is a mistake to under-estimate the ongoing influence of conservative Christianity in public life, in which the moral voice is oft narrowed to discriminatory beliefs about sex, gender and personal freedom.¹⁰ To the extent that the BSL retains a religious voice, it must urgently consider how it partners with strong social justice movements for equality and dignity, which are predominantly non-religious in the contemporary Australian cultural and political landscape.

The third dimension of secularisation in Australia was widely discussed upon release of the 2021 census figures on religion which confirmed that the make-up of Australian religious affiliation has radically changed.¹¹ For the first time less than half of the population ticked one of the Christian boxes and almost as many ticked the No Religion Box. Other religions, notably Hinduism and Islam continue to grow in numbers with a combined total of 10% of the Australian population. This is a picture of multicultural diversity in the cultural landscape as much as it is about loss of faith and it should shift our understanding of the term "secular Australia." It becomes helpful to understand secularism not just as the institutional separation of church and state but as the democratisation of spiritual and religious affiliation. Australia is a multi-cultural nation with many expressions of spirituality, religion and no faith at all.

The relinquishing of privilege

All this is to say that what has changed since Tucker's time is that an Anglican agency no longer stands in a position of privilege, and we cannot assume that governments or the public at large will listen to our prophetic voice simply because we are speaking. We must find our place in the

democratic arena of competing institutions and ideas, and we must translate the distinctive moral religious vision of our founder into a secular social justice for today – inclusive of but not exclusive to the Christian vision.

For many involved in the contemporary BSL this call to update the religious identity to be more inclusive or more reflective of today's secular context is uncontroversial. Father Tucker himself would also welcome anyone who would fight the fight against poverty. Brother Frank Coaldrake drew in several of his agnostic and socialist friends in the Pacifist movement to work at the Social Services Bureau in the early 1940s.¹²

However, for many faithful, lifelong Anglican supporters of the Brotherhood, this may not be so easy: there is much grief in the Anglican church about its decline and loss of influence for good in our society. Our Founder knew that grief and he kept pushing on with the fight against poverty.¹³

What does Tucker's vision look like when there is no privileging of Christianity in Australia? Is there a genuine articulation of his vision for the Brotherhood of St. Laurence that is both theologically true to his legacy and radically egalitarian in its approach to faith and justice, one that speaks to the multicultural nature of Australian society and of our own organisation in the 21st century?

Let me explore three theological principles core to Tucker's vision for the world and how they are already demonstrated in the contemporary work of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence.

Three theological principles¹⁴

Tucker defended the social work of the BSL saying 'the Christian way is the practical way.'¹⁵ It is the work of the BSL that best articulates Tucker's theological vision for social justice, and it is in our ongoing work that we see his vision positively translating into a secular age.

1. The golden rule

Tucker believed in a social vision revealed in the person of Jesus who showed us the right way to live. At its most basic, his ethics came down to the "Golden Rule" "do unto others what you have them do unto you: 'Justice for all regardless of creed, colour or class.'¹⁶ Our wonderful library team recently unearthed a video created for the BSL's first Reconciliation Action Plan in 2009 which I hadn't seen before!¹⁷ It contains a story from Aunty Georgina who knew Tucker as the priest from Brotherhood of St. Laurence who would visit any home in Fitzroy, no matter how many lice or mice lived there: 'he was in and out of all our homes' she said. He treated every person equally, with dignity and respect and his public campaigns to condemn these living conditions as unfit for human habitation became legendary by the middle of last century. Tucker trusted in this principle of the Golden Rule as self-evident in the Christian teachings, such as in the Sermon on the Mount,¹⁸ but also self-evident in a human sense, as simply the right thing to do. When campaigning for Food for Peace¹⁹ in 1957 he wrote, 'It is only goodwill that will save the world.'²⁰

This principle affirms the priority to human community – one human community to whom we are all obligated in fellowship. This question of shared humanity was critical in the twentieth century, after two global wars and a global depression. The United Nations and the Universal Human Rights were born from this commitment. And it is in full accord with the universal humanism implicit in Christian theologies – that all are worthy because they are beloved creatures made in the image of God. However, philosophies of the human rights movement have grown to understand that diversity is a critical dialogical partner with universalism, one that could perhaps be summed up with the word 'recognition.'²¹ To be seen in our uniqueness is

to be accepted and valued as human. Social theorist Alex Honnerth, for example, insists that equality is not just about equality of access, it is also recognition that all people are able to conceive of their own notion of the common good.²²

We see this already reflected in many of the BSL's programs and policy advocacy. For example, for over two decades we have worked with incredible individuals who need support to obtain secure work in Australia as asylum seekers or refugees. Through the *Given the Chance* program employers grow their capacity to include the unique skills of these people in a way that strengthens their business. Our coaches work with those seeking employment to build the skills necessary to participate in the workforce with the understanding that the expansion of an inclusive workforce benefits both the employee and the employer. The uniqueness of these people is a strength just as diversity is strength, not just a barrier to overcome.

2. A fence rather than an ambulance

Tucker was well known for using the analogy of the fence to describe his approach to social reform: it is better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to send an ambulance to the bottom after the poor human has fallen off!²³ The emphasis on structural interruptions to poverty is not incidental to Tucker's theological vision for humanity. When he began his slum work his argument was that it was the environment that was the problem, not the people. As we remember when we tell the story of St Laurence, the people are the treasure of the church. It is not that Tucker was unrealistic about people, on the contrary, he affirmed a theological position which recognised sin – the theological category for human failing – in the structural inequalities and in constructed social, cultural, economic and political, barriers to human flourishing.²⁴

This understanding of human value is mirrored in the Capabilities Approach which has distinguished the BSL's work for the past decade. Amartya Sen, the Indian born economist who was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1998 for his work on welfare and inequality, defines poverty as 'not just a lack of money, it is not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being.'²⁵ Coupled with Nussbaum's Aristotelian ethics for the common good, the Capabilities Approach to social policy emerged: when people are given choices and the means to enact their choices, they will, on the whole, create a life for themselves which contributes to the common good of all.²⁶

This is illustrated by The Advantaged Thinking practice framework which fuels our Youth Programs and operationalises these principles to guide the way we work.²⁷ We will work with people to include them in solutions to their own problems, we will work with people to avoid stereotyping them, we will work with people to create positive risk rather than defend ourselves from fear of negative risk.²⁸ The result is a division which incorporates youth voices at every level. We employ youth advisors who have designed the office space and impacted the design of youth programs. Externally, the National Youth Employment body have systematically worked to get young people before policy makers in Canberra to speak for themselves. And the policy makers listen because the strength of their authenticity cuts through. Agency matters when it comes to social justice.

3. Sacramental action

A number of early Sambell orations identify the centrality of sacramental theology and practice to the theological tradition in which BSL is founded.²⁹ This approach anchored the BSL in a social vision that embodies a hope of something beyond ourselves as individual human actors. A sacrament, by definition, is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.'³⁰ Sacramental action describes the way in which grace becomes present – is incarnated – in the

material world, which is the world of the BSL mission, the world of economic, cultural, political and social flourishing. By our actions the dignity of other beings is either elevated or otherwise impacted. By improving the material circumstances of other beings, we honour their own value as humans, animals or nature.³¹ Thus, as Bishop Michael Challen, BSL's Executive Director in the 1990s wrote, 'It is in the sacramental view of the universe, both of its material and of its spiritual elements, that there is given hope of making human both politics and economics and of making effectual both faith and love.'³²

This sacramental perspective can be seen in the experience of a BSL volunteer who started here upon her retirement from paid employment. She expressed to me her passion about her new role mentoring refugees and other vulnerable Australians on their path to employment with BSL support. She described to me her joy at being free to contribute to the things that mattered most to her, to be able to do something practical to help not just an individual but help Australia be the place of wellbeing she herself had experienced in her lifetime. It was her new vocation yes, and it sounded very much like what Challen or Tucker described as sacred work.

This sacramental view of the world assumes an active process in which the state of the world wherein poverty is structurally embedded is not an absolute, unchanging state, but rather a consequence of the sum choices of all its inhabitants. This is what Tucker had in mind when he said, 'Poverty is a choice we make as a society.' By comparison, consider the faith in the arc of justice which Rev'd Dr Martin Luther King spoke of so passionately: 'The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.' Brandon Terry, a scholar of King's political philosophy was asked in a recent interview whether this logic of hope in Dr King's thought holds up without King's theological frame of reference. Terry's response was to say that as long as a person believes that human action can be something more than completely evil or self-centred, then it is possible to hope that human beings will make choices – at the very least from time to time – that are for the benefit of more than themselves. If human beings can be trusted to make 'good choices' even some of the time, then there is grounds for believing that committed actors for the common good can lead to substantive improvements in the world.

Half a century and half a world from Dr. King, Indigenous Australian and journalist Stan Grant recalled the hope of faith in God that he grew up with and that informs much of his work and passion, writing simply, if you don't like the idea of God, substitute 'love and justice' and you arrive at the same life of action.³³ This is the life of action we want to invite all Australians to. Regardless of creed, colour or class. Working together to build a society in which all may share in the wealth of our nation.

Wholesome end

A final story, this time from our chaplain's spiritual care ministry in the BSL's aged care division. Recently we were asked to visit an individual who had just received a terminal diagnosis and was having trouble sleeping because of the nightmares this news brought on. I went and encountered a person whose appearance was not only ravaged by illness but was also what you might call "pretty rough" with tattoos all over the face and neck and arms. It became my privilege to walk with him through the last days of his life. He had spent considerable time sleeping on the streets in recent years, and his family life was in disarray due to persistent alcoholism. With the stability of home our Aged Care team were able to provide, he celebrated more than 6 months sober on the day he died. In our conversations about preparing for death we joked about smoking a cigarette as a form of prayer. As he set his affairs in order, he arranged generous gifts for his friends and neighbours. We talked about ways that peace might come. And I urged him to borrow the peace I had for him as his body and mind slipped away.

This is a much-treasured person in our community. We celebrated him as an equal and honoured the uniqueness of his own life journey, which was distinctly non-religious. To us, he represents the fulsome nature of our secular sacred work – to journey with people through life’s many challenges until their wholesome end.

Further reading

Challen, Michael. *Grand Beliefs – Radical Responses*. 13th Sambell Oration (Companions of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1993)

Cottam, Hilary. *Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state* (Virago; London, 2019)

Dann, Robert. *Leadership and vision in social action: when the dream expires, can the vision survive?* 8th Sambell Oration (Companions of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1988)

Holden, Colin & Richard Trembath. *Divine Discontent: The Brotherhood of St Laurence, A History* (Australian Scholarly Publishing; Melbourne, 2008)

Honnarh, Axel. 'Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice.' In *Acta Sociologica*, 47(4), 351–364

Ibrahim, S 'Introduction to the Capability approach: from theory to practice. Rationale, review and reflections' in Ibrahim, S & Tiwari, M eds. *The Capability Approach: from Theory to Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan; London, 2014)

Nussbaum, M. 'The central capabilities' in *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Belknap; Cambridge, Mass, 2011)

Scott, David. *Ancient Laws and Modern Dilemmas*. Sambell Oration (Companions of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1985)

Tucker, G.K. *Thanks Be: The Autobiography of Gerard Kennedy Tucker (Brotherhood of St Laurence)* (Brotherhood of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1954)

Woods, Frank. *Why care? An attempt to state the theological basis for Christian social action*. The Inaugural Sambell Oration (Companions of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1981)

Further reflection

What drives your commitment to social justice? How does that show up in practice?

What is the place of faith in the pursuit of social justice in secular Australia? How might diversity be a strength?

Notes

¹ A real person with their identity obscured.

² Cited in *Divine Discontent*, p.65

³ *Thanks Be*, p.23

⁴ Read about this transition from Religious Order to Welfare Agency in *Divine Discontent*, chapter 3.

⁵ In his 1985 Sambell Oration *Ancient Laws & Modern Dilemmas*, David Scott spoke about important influence of Tucker's father – Rev'd Horace Tucker, vicar of Christ Church South Yarra - who was of a communitarian persuasion, adhering to the principles of Christian Socialism. Horace experimented with a model of communal farming to assist young unemployed men.

⁶ *The Brotherhood News* No.167. March 1967.

⁷ These three observations correspond in a general sense to the three modes of secularity identified by Charles Taylor in his seminal work *A Secular Age* (Belknap; London, 2018). That is, secularised public spaces, a decline of religious belief and practice; and the decline of cultural influence of religion.

⁸ Thornton, Danielle, Dina Bowman & Shelley Mallet. *Safety Net to Poverty Trap? The twentieth century origins of Australia's uneven social security system* (BSL Research & Policy Centre; Melbourne: 2020)

⁹ You can read about the establishment of The Houses of St Francis in *Divine Discontent*, p 45

¹⁰ For a summary on the religious right in Australian politics see, David Smith, 'A Christian Nation no longer: Why Australia's Religious Right loses policy battles even when it wins elections. In *The Conversation* (theconversation.com pub. Aug 6, 2021)

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (4 July 2022), *Religious affiliation in Australia*, ABS Website, accessed 14 May 2023.

¹² Notably Tony Bishop, agnostic in faith and sceptical about organised religion, joined Coaldrake in the first direct action of BSL, occupying the home of a vulnerable renter until the landlord relented on a decision to evict. Also, the sisters Shirley and Vivienne Abraham, from a liberal Jewish family in Fitzroy, were pleased to volunteer at the Brotherhood in pursuit of their commitment to social transformation. *Divine Discontent*, p. 52ff

¹³ *Thanks Be*, p.12-13

¹⁴ A technical note on hermeneutics: Ethics, social policy, and activism are aspects of thinking and acting which are fundamentally relational. Theological ethics refers to an objectively transcendent value which informs the human dimension. There are secular philosophical traditions that function with a similar hermeneutical structure constructing universal truths or principles. My personal preference is to insist on a Hegelian dialect where any universal is held in dynamic relationship with the particular. I have argued elsewhere that this dialectical structure for ethical discourse mirrors the contemplative hermeneutics from early apophatic traditions of Christian theology. See, Trebilcock, M. *Towards a Theological Hermeneutics for Contexts of Change: Love in Liminality*. PhD thesis Charles Sturt University, 2015

¹⁵ *BSL Notes* No. 58, June 1946

¹⁶ *BSL Notes* No.65, Aug 1947

¹⁷ *A Shared History: the aboriginal community in Fitzroy and the Brotherhood of St Laurence* (Brotherhood of St Laurence: Fitzroy, 2009)

¹⁸ Tucker, G.K. *That man Jesus Christ has got something there!* Pamphlet published by Lara Movement. 1965

¹⁹ Tucker established the Food for Peace campaign in the 1950s. Through David Scott's leadership it grew into Community Aid Abroad and is now incorporated in Oxfam Australia.

²⁰ G.K. Tucker, *Food for Peace News* (BSL; Melbourne, 1957)

²¹ For a summary on the concept see, Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019)

²² Honnarth (2004) 'Every human subject is dependent, in an elementary way, on social forms of interaction that are regulated by mutual recognition; and the absence of such recognition relations will be followed by experience of disrespect or humiliation with damaging consequences for an individual's identity formation.'

²³ *BSL Notes* No.22 July 1937

²⁴ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. 'Justice for Women: Martha Nussbaum & Catholic Social Teaching.' In: Severine Deneulin, Mathias Nebel & Nicholas Sagovsky. *Transforming Unjust Structures: The Capabilities Approach* (AA Dordecht, The Netherlands; Springer: 2006)

²⁵ Sen, Amartya. *Development and Freedom* (NY Knopf; New York, 1999)

²⁶ Nussbaum, Martha. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge MA; Belknap, 2011)

²⁷ Howie, Joe with Emma Cull, Sally James & Shelley Mallett. *Better futures : advantaged thinking practice framework* (Brotherhood of St. Laurence / Victorian Government Series: Better futures, 2nd ed.)

²⁸ There are 7 "tests" of Advantaged Thinking: 1. How we TALK about young people; 2. How we UNDERSTAND young people; 3. How we WORK with young people; 4. How we INVEST in young people; 5. How we BELIEVE in young people; 6. How we INVOLVE young people; 7. How we CHALLENGE ourselves and others around Advantaged Thinking?

²⁹ See especially, Michael Challen, *Grand Beliefs, Radical Responses* (Companions of St Laurence; Melbourne, 1994)

³⁰ William Temple, a key thinker in the Catholic Social tradition, developed a notion of how God brings about goodness in the world through investing Godself in the sacrament and this is then extended to God's people investing themselves in the world as God's agents for transformation. The incarnation of God in Christ extends to the incarnation of God's grace and goodness through Christian action.

³¹ This view of social action is an important distinction from the eighteenth-century assumptions about the material world as a reflection of the moral worth of individual actors. It is not that people are poor because they are inferior. There is poverty in the world because the human community has failed to act graciously, consciously living as if all is sacred. For Temple, God is intimately involved in this process. The sacramental action is the means by which God imparts Godself into the material world.

³² Challen, Michael 'The implications of Temple's thought for today.' Unpublished presentation given at Trinity Theological School William Temple Symposium, 7 May 1994)

³³ Grant, Stan. 'For me, Invasion Day is a chance for reflection. Is Australia as a nation all it should be?' *ABC News Online*, pub. 26 Jan 2023