



Gerard Tucker Oration Sunday, 16th August 2015

Anglican Parish of Christ Church South Yarra
Birthplace of the Founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence - Fr Gerard Tucker

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*Praise to our God who blesses us before we ask,
persistently leads us into new life,
and joyfully pursues us, morning and evening, day by day.
May God be with you.*

I am honoured and delighted to offer reflection as we gather this evening for this celebration of the founder of the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence—and of the current vitality of the Brotherhood.

We meet tonight on a feast of Mary: August 15—transferred to today, the nearest Sunday—is, according to *A Prayer Book for Australia* (APBA), the day of “Mary, Mother of our Lord.” I note that the BSL was founded, in 1930, on another marian feast: December 8, when what the APBA calls “the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary” is marked. So today, I think, we should try to say something about Mary, and something about the Brotherhood in relation to Mary.

We might, of course, begin by noting that in Roman Catholic dogma, December 8 and August 15 carry more specific meanings: December 8 marks Mary’s supposed “Immaculate Conception,” and August 15 her “Assumption,” body and soul, into heaven. These are by no means only Roman Catholic thoughts,¹ and they each may be either beautiful or baffling to Anglicans of different kinds.

Trying to make our own sense of such ideas, we might suppose that, given Gerard Tucker’s leanings to Anglicanism’s “Catholic heritage”² (p. 13, but cf. p. 5) he would have made something of Mary in his own personal spirituality. It’s quite possible: I don’t know what frames of reference he might have been given, as a child, worshipping in this very building, for starters, where *Magnificat* would be said and sung, and in which there may be marian images and shrines for all I know. And maybe he personally approved of marian dogma defined in the like of the papal declaration on the Assumption just three or four years before Gerard wrote his autobiography, *Thanks Be*. In any case, it is clear

¹ See the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultative Council, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (2005), freely available on the Vatican website. Also, Daniel Kendall and Tim Perry, *The Blessed Virgin Mary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) for an interesting recent ecumenical perspective jointly-written by a Roman Catholic Jesuit and evangelical Anglican.

² References in the text are to Gerard Kennedy Tucker, *Thanks Be* (Melbourne: Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 1954).

from that autobiography that Gerard was on occasion happy to give, as he put it, “three cheers to the pope” (p. 50), even in places where that might not seem so obvious—when in Northern Ireland, for instance. However, though I don’t know whether Gerard wrote or spoke about Mary in other contexts, it is quite striking that his autobiography makes not a single mention of the mother of Jesus, in either a more minimal or maximal mode, as it were; in a more or less Roman-, or Protestant-toned, marian spirituality within his strand of Anglican tradition.

Gerard Tucker does have some things to say about his own mother, though: “It would seem that in most cases the boys in a family have a deeper affection for their mother than for their father. Such was the case as far as I was concerned,” he says (p. 5). He describes his mother as “delicate,” and “in the background”—perhaps in those respects somewhat shaped by what Christian tradition (in my view not at its best) has done with Mary and other women, downplaying their own initiative and silencing and sidelining them, so that their main role is proposed to be to contribute to the advancement of the man or men in their lives (p. 9). This is how Gerard depicts his mother’s role in her husband’s life. However, Gerard also at times describes his mother as “presiding at parish functions.” He is of course not speaking of presiding in public, less again eucharistic presidency (I don’t know what his version of the “Catholic heritage” of Anglicanism would have made of that), but rather her role in the hospitality of their vicarage-home, albeit with the “adequate domestic help” that marked their privileged circumstances. That home, Gerard said, had given him the “favourable start” he came to wish for other children less fortunate than himself, and was even, he averred, the main reason he “had been able to do anything worthwhile in his life” (p. 2).

Though Gerard may have claimed a deeper affection for his mother, it was his father to whom he refers back again and again in his autobiography. He describes his father as “dominating,” and it certainly seems to be the case that his father’s memory and example populated if not overwhelmed Gerard’s own imagination. He showed the same grit in ministry that his father had shown in the streets around here. For example, in Gerard’s curacy in Roeburne, somewhere in Western Australia, the parish was vast and Gerard would preside at several services each Sunday, miles apart, cycling between them. He would set off early in the morning and arrive back home in Roeburne, exhausted, in the small hours of Monday morning. This mirrors his descriptions from childhood of seeing his father tirelessly cycling these streets, though his clerically-vested father also had dogs in tow. Quite a sight, apparently.

The eccentricities of his privileged beginnings here seemed to stay with Gerard, and his autobiography is, from our contemporary perspective, amply marked by the like of patronising comments about women, problematic thinking about cultures other than his own, and sometimes troubling perspectives about the lives of the poor, despite his most sincere desire to serve them. In the Roeburne curacy, for example, on Sundays as other days, he would badger men as they walked from one pub to another, moralising to them about the error of their ways, just as he had harangued drinking soldiers in war-time, and

elsewhere no doubt. His parishioners oftentimes seem to be being seen as different from himself, “othered” somewhat by the blinkers of his privilege and perhaps also by aspects of his spirituality. It is hard to avoid the impression from what he wrote that he didn’t always think that he might have many things to learn *from* parishioners, but rather more to say *to* them, and to do *for* them. Of course he was a man of his time, and although embracing a most impressively disciplined life of ministry, perhaps never fully shed his own sense of entitlement. That being said, he could also turn on others who shared his privilege but resisted the challenge of his disciplines of service—something his father had done here in South Yarra, too. For example, the elder Tucker chased snobs from the pews of this church and apparently quite happily marginalized those who objected to his work to improve the living conditions of the poor of the parish roundabout (p. 5).

In this mix of privilege and service, both Gerard and his father were quite alike. Certainly, a passionate fire in the belly could erupt from Gerard. It did, again and again, about what today we might call social justice. For example, Gerard wrote:

Our Lord was crucified because he hurt those in authority. He was fearless in his denunciation of oppression and other social evils. We realize today that the basic causes of war and other present troubles are the kind of thing our Lord so ruthlessly denounced (p. 13).

He took from this understanding of Christ the lesson that “too often those who could speak with authority are silent or speak in such a way as to upset no one” (p. 13). *This* upset Gerard—he was not impressed, and for his own part, he was determined not to fall into such malaise. The heart of his convictions come out in his autobiography in dialogue with Communists, “learning from the Communistic technique” (p. 90) as he put it, whilst resistant to Communism no doubt as his own thought manifest the confluence of his Christianity and his privilege.

“When I am asked by Communists why the Christian Church is not more vocal in its denunciation of those things which were attacked by its Founder, I find it difficult to give an answer,” he confessed (p. 90). He was content, though, that Christian “help” and “care” of others, even if not leading to radical redistribution, was much more than maintenance of the *status quo*. For Gerard, the point seems to have been to

set our own house in order. [We] must see that every child born into this fair land of ours is given the opportunity of becoming a useful God-fearing citizen, we must see that those coming to end of life’s journey are enabled to continue their way in peace and security, and we must see that those that come to us from overseas, while providing for the needs of themselves and their families, are enabled to make a full contribution towards the welfare of the country of their adoption (p. 131).

Communist he was not, but his agenda for Australia as a “Christian nation” (p. 132) was not small, in his own day nor, we should note, as it echoes through time in our own times.

One of the most radical stories he narrates in *Thanks Be* is what he calls the “Verandah Case” (p. 109ff). From our later view of it, we might even regard it as a germ of what we have seen in our own times as the Occupy movement.³ Gerard and his colleagues in the then small band of the Brotherhood stepped in to take occupancy of a verandah in East Brunswick. A certain Mrs. Thomson was the resident of the house, and she was an elder, octogenarian, widow, sick herself, and vulnerable in various ways, not least to threats of eviction from her landlord. The Brothers moved onto the verandah, so as to do all they could to shelter Mrs. Thomson. They stayed there for six weeks, always ready for a stand-off. They had to face visits from police and then the possibility of soldiers being sent to wrestle them off the property. As it happened, the majority of the soldiers called upon to remove the verandah-sitters supported the Brothers (p. 114), so there was no provocation and no violent scene. The Brothers stayed and so did Mrs. Thomson. And the Brothers’ occupancy of the verandah stirred up press attention for the Brothers and the causes, and Tucker became something of a *cause celebre*. He was clearly identified in the public imagination with the championing of the poor, as expressed in a cartoon (which I particularly like) appearing in a Melbourne paper: as Gerard said of it, “a tramp with swag was shown on a verandah. From one of the windows appeared the head of the owner of the house. Under the picture were the words, ‘Who the hell do you think you are—the Brotherhood of St. Laurence?’”! (p. 113).

We can be sure that in our own times, the work of the Brotherhood remains in much favourable public opinion (and we might note that this is in sometimes considerable contrast with how church leaders’ talk is received). In its own way, the work of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence today represents a kind of occupancy:

- working in spaces that are tense and contested,
- where power flows against the weak,
- where shelter—metaphorical as well as physical—is lacking,
- *and yet where voices can be raised* to advocate for the disadvantaged
- to question and challenge the powers that be,
- to call to account those who may own but do not use what they own with common goodness, and
- to square up to authorities who need to be confronted and possibly defied.

The Brotherhood today

- concentrates much of its work amongst elders like Mrs. Thomson,

³ See Jeorg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

- as well as children like those whom Gerard Tucker wished might have the space and leisure he enjoyed in his own privileged beginnings in this very part of the world,
- as well as refugees in our own times coming to this country sometimes with traumas to match those who came here in past times in desperation, against their will and at their wits end.

Communist he wasn't, but we find startling intimations in Gerard Tucker's thinking and writing and the legacy that has evolved from him of the kind of liberation theology that Leonardo Boff depicts in his *Ecclesiogenesis*: "absence of alienating structures, [] direct relationships, [] reciprocity, [] deep communion, [] mutual assistance, [] communality of gospel ideals, [and] equality"⁴—at least in some respects.

Liberation theologians have been amongst those who have made most use of marian motifs,⁵ not least those drawn from Mary's *Magnificat*—often most oddly sung at Evensong (where of course it can sometimes sounds anything but an "un-mollified/un-placatable"⁶ demand for justice). And we might imagine Gerard Tucker giving "three cheers for the pope" when John Paul II said that,

Drawing from Mary's heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the Magnificat, the church renews evermore effectively in herself the awareness the truth about the God who saves... cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of and preference for the poor." (*Redemptoris Mater*, 37).

Or better still, imagine Gerard raising three cheers for Pope Francis when, in *The Joy of the Gospel*, his brilliant first encyclical—and the first papal encyclical ever to include the insights of liberation theologians—Francis says that

Contemplating Mary, we realize that she who praised God for 'bringing down the mighty from their thrones' and 'sending the rich away empty' (Lk 1:52-53) is also the one who brings a homely warmth to our pursuit of justice" (*Evangelli Gaudium*, 288).

Francis suggests that Mary helps us to believe in "the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness" (*Evangelli Gaudium*, 288). Whether from Evensong in this church as a child, his own mother or father, the warmth of the home his mother secured for him, the deep companionship and commitment of the Brothers in the company of St. Laurence he formed, or some personal devotion to Mary to which he did not seem to give more public expression, we might well think that Gerard Tucker learned of the revolutionary

⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 4.

⁵ Most notably, Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), and the uncompromising contributions of Marcella Althaus-Reid, especially obvious portions of *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000) and with Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

⁶ Two made up words, I think, but playing on opposites: mollify, placate.

tenderness of the gospel from *somewhere*. *And that*, in its own way, in our own time, the Brotherhood continues to assent to, carry and nurture the good news of God's unswerving love for the poor.

With Gerard Tucker in mind, and with faces from the Brotherhood in front of me, tonight, on this marian feast, I think of Nicola Slee's "Mary, still singing":

I am the singer of the song of justice
I am the dancer of the coming age
I am the artist of God's new revolution
I am the writer of history's fresh page

I am the daughter of my people's suffering
I am the mother of my nation's hope
I am the sister of an unbroken struggle
I am the kinswoman of disenfranchised folk

I am the prophet of an unimagined future
I am the pioneer of an impossible dream
I am the wisdom of an implausible folly
I am the midwife of your destiny unseen⁷

Reference: Tucker, Gerard Kennedy. M. *"Thanks be": The autobiography of Gerard Kennedy Tucker (Brotherhood of St Laurence)*. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Carrum Downs, 1954.

Brotherhood of St Laurence website: www.bsl.org.au

⁷ Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 130.