



THE INAUGURAL GERARD TUCKER ORATION DELIVERED BY: THE RIGHT REVEREND DR PETER HOLLINGWORTH AC OBE

Sunday 18th November 2012 at Christ Church South Yarra

I am honoured to deliver the Inaugural G.K. Tucker Oration. Having it at Christ Church serves to restore the historic relationship between The Brotherhood, Christ Church and the Tucker Family.

A recent series of articles in The Melbourne Anglican called 'Heroes of the Faith' raised the modern question about the difference between a hero and a saint. These days, increasingly, many people are uncomfortable with the careless and loose way in which the word 'hero' is used. The outcome is that people are so described when in reality they are something rather less. The language has been so distorted that the word has become synonymous with popular celebrity status. Even when, 'the Saints' are described as 'heroes of the faith' in many peoples' minds, they have been safely installed and cemented into stained glass windows and sometimes in ways that can overlook their vital and real humanity.

At the beginning of November each year All Saints Day is observed. This is a reminder to us that there are many saints who were not lionized in their day. St Laurence was, as of course was St Francis of Assisi. Some like St Laurence were brutally martyred, some were not recognized for centuries after their death, some were very quiet prayerful and faithful souls, who were barely noticed at the time and it took centuries to recognize their great spiritual qualities. Others were rather uncomfortable people to be around because of their extreme modes of living or the impossibly high standards they set for themselves and others. Qualities like extreme personal discipline, purity of heart and austerity of lifestyle can often appear to be an unspoken judgement upon those of us who are lesser mortals. Their qualities serve to highlight how far the rest of us fall behind them, unable to match their high expectations and falling well short of their great personal witness and example.

Gerard Kennedy Tucker was such a person. He might have had his limitations, which he would freely acknowledge with a certain defiant humour. He had his eccentricities, which he was not above using to great effect in order to get what he needed to achieve his plans. Though he would always operate from the highest principles, sometimes he seemed, sub consciously to draw rather too much on one

of Our Lord's hard sayings 'Whoever is not with us is against us'. Having implicitly made his point to you, he would add 'and this is the way we do things here', without stopping to clarify what he meant by the royal 'we'. It may have been the Chapter of the Brotherhood of St Laurence which, after 1947 consisted solely of himself as The Superior! In truth, he never relinquished his great dream that his order of Brothers would one day be re-established to serve and transform the church. The old Victorian Hymn declares 'God works in a mysterious way His wonders to behold'. So although Tucker's primary vision of a religious order, at mission in the world was not sustained, two great community organizations emerged instead - The Brotherhood of St Laurence and Community Aid Abroad now called Oxfam. He was quietly very proud of them both.

Shy, slight of frame, afflicted with a nervous condition, affected by a stammer in speech, a sparse eater and not especially endowed with a great intellect, he triumphed over weakness, by faith and fierce determination, through fixity of purpose and a firm commitment to the things that really mattered in life. He would have agreed with the last verse in Hebrews chapter 10 which was read out tonight, 'But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved' no doubt adding 'and showing it by practical action'.

As a young priest appointed by Bishop Geoffrey Sambell as Chaplain to the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 1964, I was touched and challenged by our regular conversations, usually over reheated tea in his small room at St Laurence Park Lara. At the time I have so say it was not easy for me to follow his directions to the letter and without question. Perhaps I was too caught up in the complexities of modern social theory and unable to see how his simple, direct, moral imperatives could instantly be translated into practical action.

For him, time was running out. He was in his eighties, I was in my twenties and our worlds were far apart. It was only later that I realized Father Tucker's early years had been ones of struggle and self doubt, when others in authority, such as bishops, who had doubted his capacity and suitability. So he enlisted as a private in the Royal Australian Ambulance Corps and was later commissioned in the field as a chaplain to serve on the western front during the First World War, having previously been rejected for ordination.

He later founded his Brotherhood during the Great Depression in 1930, lived on a pittance, [one brother's stipend had to support five of them]; he struggled through the Second World War with few men remaining in his Brotherhood, and after that had to wrestle with the great public problem of the post war housing shortage. He stood up to politicians, once broke the law to make a moral point, campaigned tirelessly in the 'war against slums' in his tiny caravan, fought for the down and out, and,

as he himself grew older, founded, led and lived in two settlements for active older people, persuading them that 'the best is yet to be' which was the title of one of his tracts.

He was able to speak with prophetic authority because that was how he lived his own life. Words and deeds were as one. Even his stammer was brought into play to increase the urgency of his message and to reinforce his moral authority. He would regularly declare 'We-e must d-d-do something' or at Easter in proclaiming Christ's resurrection he would conclude his homily with a question "And what did the world m-make of it all? E-e-e-e-easter- eggs!

You could not refute what he said because he left little room for discussion or debate. His vision of a good society, based on the Sermon on the Mount was crystal clear, as was his flint like determination to make it happen. We all respected and honoured him immensely, admiring his charismatic leadership, though without fully embracing some of his visionary schemes and solutions. But that is beside the point, because there always has to be someone blessed with the vision, moral strength, spiritual integrity and firmness of purpose to stand up and say things as they are, and then declare to the world how they ought to be. Those are the grounds as to why he should be considered as a Holy Person of saint by the church he loved, challenged, despaired of, but always faithfully served.

The world of the 1960's and 70's was very different and even more ambiguous and complicated than the world in which he served his early priestly ministry. Yet he was absolutely right in his primary vision of how things ought to be in God's Kingdom, because he believed that there was such a thing as 'the Christian social order' based on the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ. It may be that these fundamental Christian values were much harder to achieve and were too easily overlooked in the later part of the twentieth century with its new found individual freedoms, rampant consumerism, easy credit, selective affluence, diversity of choice and lifestyle, with its all pervasive mass media and its generally libertarian values.

Yet you were compelled to listen, marvel at his simple faith and admire his determination and his persistence with his numerous ideas and plans to make the world a better place, both at home and abroad. Quite simply, he longed to seek out the lost sheep, to bring them into the fold, and to make manifest the love of God, by revealing it in practical acts of mercy, kindness and justice and to maintain and support it with ethically based social institutions; though he was less clear about the details which he was happy to leave to others with greater knowledge of such matters.

Without actually naming the mediating philosophy of his Christian vision, his ideas came out of the great Christian Socialist tradition of the 19th century, through his father Canon Horace Finn Tucker, Vicar of this Parish and his grandfather Archdeacon Joseph Kidger Tucker who lived his final years

with them in the vicarage. They were not Marxists, but saw socialism as fellowship. Fr Tucker was avowedly anti-communist, but he was unswerving in his commitment to structural change for peace, justice and compassion from the beginning of his life to the end.

Father Tucker died on May 24 1978 aged 89. It was an honour to preach at the Requiem for him here at Christchurch South Yarra. The church was full, even though he had outlived most of his contemporaries.

Addressing the Synod later that year, Archbishop Sir Frank Woods said 'Our most outstanding loss has been that of the Reverend Gerard Kennedy Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, inspirer of manifold works of charity and himself a visible and active reflection of the love of his Lord and Master. Much has been written and spoken about him. Even in retirement [a word he did not use] he was still revered as founder and the inspiration for many Brotherhood of St Laurence activities, and for Community Aid Abroad, originally called Food for Peace, which he instigated at the age of 69. I have no hesitation in saying that Gerard Kennedy Tucker was a saint. God raises up such men, now and then, here and there, whose life and example are an inspiration to their fellow Christians and a witness to the world of the strength of the grace of God.'

Six years later John Handfield wrote his Biography 'Friends and Brothers' to mark the Brotherhood's Jubilee in 1980. I chose to work closely on the project with John Handfield, and of course learnt many new things about Father Tucker after his death, things his shyness and personal modesty would have inhibited him from speaking about openly. The then Chairman of the Board, Bishop James Grant launched the book at the Coolibah Club in Fitzroy. He too concluded that Tucker met the two fold definition of a Saint as ' One who brought forth in his or her life the fruit of the spirit and one who significantly advanced the Kingdom of God in the lives of men and women.'

This raises the question of why he has not been formally recognized in our Australian Church Calender as a 'holy person'? Was it because he made some influential church people uncomfortable? Was it because of his determination to keep the Brotherhood and Community Aid Abroad independent of the Diocese? Was it his innate distrust of bishops whom he believed had thwarted him most of his life? When Geoffrey Sambell was elected to the Archbishopric of Perth GKT declared 'we've just lost Geoff'. Perhaps the church is not quite ready to embrace him fully as one who was a rather different and somewhat rebellious style of saint?

More than eighty years later, how is he to be regarded today? The Brotherhood itself recognizes the inspirational leadership of its Founder and constantly draws upon his vision of a world free of poverty. This in itself is a good test of the durability of his witness and of his continuing example over

the years. In 2010 the Brotherhood Membership unanimously supported a resolution to have him recognized by the Church in this Province as a 'Holy Person' in the local Anglican Calendar.

So how should our church, of whom he was a faithful priest, regard him for posterity? His nephew the late David Scott wrote a fine monograph simply called 'He got things done.' Tucker's brand of Christianity always meant practical action, doing the will of the Father on earth as in Heaven. Of course we should be cautious about adding new names to the calendar of Saints too easily. They should be brought forward and be tested after a reasonable passage of time with the additional purpose of inspiring and encouraging future generations in their Christian endeavours.

I have always associated Fr. Tucker's innermost faith with St. Paul's words about himself. I don't recall him actually quoting that text for that was not his style. He knew about human weakness and he could acknowledge his own with humour. In his early life he had struggled to overcome personal difficulties and so there was little room to let them back into his conscious thinking in later years.

Yet I am confident would have drawn comfort from these famous words of St. Paul.

"The Lord said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly in weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12.9.

Among his few earthly possessions found by his nephew David Scott were a typically unrepresented pension cheque, a few books, old stoles and a small piece of paper containing his last words. 'I have run the race, I have kept the faith, I have finished the course...' Even so, dying was not an easy process for him, but in the end he accepted it with grace.

The Brotherhood and Oxfam are different organizations to the ones he founded. Yet I believe his spirit and values should remain entrenched in them because his broad Christian beliefs and values certainly stand as a living witness to us and all people in every day and age.

So we give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for the life of Gerard Kennedy Tucker who was in the deepest sense a twentieth century Prophet, Priest and Pastor. One who could bridge the gap between church and society, who saw that the whole world was God's world, through God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Looking back on his life and ministry, he stands as a somewhat unlikely hero of the faith. Yet he was a true priest in the catholic tradition, one who in many other ways was ahead of his times, who knew

intuitively what needed to be done and who probably didn't speculate too much on what might lie ahead in the next stage of life's journey.

For him the fever of life is over, the busy world hushed and his work done. He would hope that the torch is being passed on to new generations who will catch his vision of the Kingdom of God. God the source and giver of life has indeed granted Gerard Kennedy Tucker a safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last. Nothing happens purely by coincidence. The modern Collect set for today could have been written by Fr. Tucker himself and so I will conclude with it.

O God,
welcoming refuge for the outcast,
and upholder of justice for the oppressed:
maintain the hope of the poor,
so that the time may soon come
when no one need want for food and shelter,
and all will learn to share freely
following the example of your Son, who gave his very self;
who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

+ Peter Hollingworth