



**THE GERARD TUCKER ORATION  
DELIVERED BY: THE REVEREND HELEN DWYER**

**Sunday 20 August 2017  
Anglican Parish of Christ Church South Yarra**

**“The Power of Compassion”**

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, staff, and friends of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening at the annual Gerard Tucker Oration in honour of the founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and all that it stands for, here in the place of his birth. Tucker understood the power of compassion, and recognised how formidable compassion was in overcoming the power of shame, and in that same spirit, I acknowledge the original custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nations. I offer my respect to their elders, past, present and future, and lament with them the loss of culture, language, land and children. I dream with them of a future of equality, dignity and mutual respect.

In preparing for this evening, I was struck by a beautiful reflection in the Brotherhood DVD ‘A Shared History’ where Aunty Georgina Lovett-Williams, remembers that Gerard Tucker was in and out of all the local Fitzroy houses, even the houses the ‘poor people’ wouldn’t go into. For Fr Tucker, there was no such thing as ‘too’ poor. She says of him, he kept coming back, because he really wanted to know about the local Aboriginal people, and that he didn’t behave like the other priests of the time, sticking to the ‘priestly’ things, he went into the homes<sup>1</sup>, and the hearts and lives of the people of Fitzroy. Tucker had the ability to see beyond the social framework of the times, and like St Laurence, the namesake for his life’s work, saw people as the true treasure of the church, and Aboriginal people were and are, an integral part of that rich treasure.

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<sup>1</sup> A Shared History: The Aboriginal Community in Fitzroy and The Brotherhood of St Laurence DVD

In our gospel reading for this evening, we hear of the first of Jesus' miracles, and the compassion Jesus has for the family, saving them from immense shame.

Most of the people gathered at the wedding celebration in Cana never knew a miracle had taken place. It seems that only Mary, the servants, and the disciples were aware of what happened. My impression is that the servants knew 'what' happened, but they were not exactly sure 'how' it happened, so they simply kept quiet, scratching their heads with wonder.

John tells us that because of this miracle, the disciples believed in Him (verse 11).

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is seen by many people as a welfare agency that has charity shops scattered around the place. But those in the know understand the miracles that often take place because of the work they do, built not on the notion of a hand out, but on the philosophy of a hand up. While material aid is important, the work of the Brotherhood has always been more about innovation and development to move people, families and communities forward to improved circumstances, not maintain the current circumstances and status quo. The power of that compassion also has the ability to leave us scratching our heads, seeing what has happened, but not necessarily understanding how it happened. Perhaps that's because the simplicity of compassion and honouring human dignity are so often underestimated in their ability to transform lives. Actions are essential, but without compassion they can so easily become obligations or duty. The power of compassion is that the actions that come out of it are Godly and Spirit driven, enabling a shift from a life of shame, to life abundant. When compassion is shown

## **The Gospel of John 2:1-12**

### **The Wedding at Cana**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

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(NRSV)

to those who have repeatedly been told that they are useless and worthless, and shame has become part of their DNA, their lives are changed and futures written according to possibilities presented, when compassion is the scaffold surrounding and supporting actions. Compassion fuelled action, empowers people enabling them to move onwards and upward towards self-respect, dignity and value.

My family is no stranger to shame. We have babies conceived before marriage, unmarried mothers, slave traders, football players, alcoholics, and children raised in state care. But the most shameful person in my family tree is Laura Coles, who was born on Hindmarsh Island.

Nobody tried to hide the slave traders, alcoholics, inadequate, dysfunctional parents or football players, but this baby born on Hindmarsh Island was blight on our family tree. What do you do with a person so shameful, so disgraceful because of who she is, not what she's done? You hide her, that's what you do. You pretend she's something she's not, or more accurately, you pretend she isn't something she is. Because she is Aboriginal, and really, it's best to not be Aboriginal, so you pretend she isn't. Alcoholics, slave traders, and hopeless parents have nothing on her. Grandma McDonald, as she was known by my dad was born just after the establishment of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines which was responsible for the administration of the Aborigines Protection Act, which in part sought:

- To separate Aboriginal children from their families and communities in order to 'educate' them within a European system
- To control where Aboriginal people could live, work, what kinds of jobs they could do, who they could associate with and who they could marry.
- And moved those who survived the frontier wars and massacres around the nation, that are too numerous to mention to missions and reserves.

These policies meant that Grandma McDonald has been the shame of the family, hidden and denied because to be Aboriginal has meant you missed out. You missed out on opportunities, respect, equality and justice. You missed out on being acknowledged as human and treated as such, with policies for your 'wellbeing' made under the Flora and Fauna Act, until 1973.

Compassion can be a rare commodity in our world of secularism and individualism, but Jesus leads us by example by noticing needs and responding with compassionate action.

In Cana, when the wedding party was at risk of failure and shame, Jesus turned water into wine. The water jars were used for purification - for the washing of hands and faces and feet that the purity codes of Israel demanded.

The purity codes began as simple rituals of cleansing, but over time they developed into something obsessive and damaging. The codes first defined behaviours as good or bad, but they became oppressive and destructive, as people who, for all kinds of different reasons, failed or fell short of the purity code's requirements were also defined as good or bad, and those judged by the code as bad were rigidly excluded.

Jesus actively sought out, and invited, and gathered in, people who had been condemned and rejected.

Jesus turned the water of exclusion and purification into the wine of welcome and compassion.

From the Brotherhood's beginnings during the Depression era, they have been inviting and gathering people in who have been rejected and excluded. God cares for the outsider, and Aboriginal people feel like outsiders in their own country. The first people of our nation so often feel that they don't belong. Imagine being part of the oldest continuous living culture and not feeling like you are welcome in your own land. Repeated systematic government policy failures have left them pushed to the fringes of society, marginalized, treated as sub human, unworthy and unvalued.

Dialogue, mutual respect and compassion have been defining characteristics of the relationship between the Brotherhood and local Aboriginal people. Moving into Fitzroy in the 1930s like so many Aboriginal people, Tucker had a grand vision for an Australia free of poverty. Tucker helped to create local 'gathering' places for the people of Fitzroy at St Mary's, because poverty isn't only economic, it's also social. Aunty Georgina says that Tucker was a good friend to the Aboriginal people in Fitzroy.<sup>2</sup> Inspiration still comes from

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<sup>2</sup> A Shared History: The Aboriginal Community in Fitzroy and The Brotherhood of St Laurence DVD

Tucker. He had great respect for Aboriginal people, and his understanding and respect of Aboriginal culture continues to enable the Brotherhood to gain insights and understandings into the needs of Aboriginal people and create innovative and culturally appropriate programmes, and to partner with other advocacy groups to build awareness and understanding.

At the wedding at Cana, Jesus provided an abundance of new wine, and the Brotherhood provides an abundance of compassion and understanding.

It may be that the real miracle at this wedding is found in the God who saves a family from shame – and only tells those who serve unnoticed. In a world of rank and order, the forgotten, unnoticed ones became the real insiders.

Fitzroy's relationship with Aboriginal people continues beyond the Brotherhood. I'm sure that Tucker, if he wasn't the one agitating for this action, would stand proudly in solidarity and support of Yarra City Council's recent decision to move its traditional citizenship and citizen-of-the-year award ceremonies from January 26 to another date out of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as ceasing to refer to January 26 as Australia Day.

Despite backlash from individuals and Government, Yarra Council has received support from other Councils. Sometimes it only takes one brave, bold move against injustice, whether invisible because of enculturation or ignorance, for others to have the courage to stand with them. Gerard Tucker so often stood out on his own, fostering courage for others to stand with him. Despite the fact that he "had been fighting doubters since childhood"<sup>3</sup> he had mettle and determination to stand up and fight against the social prejudices and injustice that exists and thrives because of ignorance or greed.

More than 80 years after the formation of the Brotherhood and Fr Tucker's ability to see the dignity of each person, and his counter cultural approach to race and poverty, Aboriginal people are still fighting to survive and be recognised. It is a reality of our past that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have not had the opportunity to fully

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<sup>3</sup> Scott, David; *He Got Things Done: A memoir of Gerard Kennedy Tucker, Anglican priest, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Community Aid Abroad*; page 9

enjoy their human rights. This is because of the process of colonisation, the dispersal, removal and dispossession of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a history of discrimination.

As suicide rates skyrocket to unprecedented numbers, up to six times higher than non-Aboriginal Australians, youth incarceration stands at a staggering 53 times higher, homelessness at 14 times higher, and unemployment at five times higher, it's not surprising that life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 10 – 17 years less than non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>4</sup>

As the Brotherhood's inaugural Reconciliation Action Plan draws to a close, conversations begin, reflecting on the efficacy and achieved outcomes from it. I wonder if the Brotherhood will add to their campaigning, agitating and advocating, the need for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation commission to educate all Australians on the history of colonisation, the frontier wars, dispossession and Government driven genocide through policies like the forced removal of children, so we start to build a picture that helps us as a Nation to understand why there is suffering in the present, and together dream and work for a truly reconciled Australia.

The wedding at Cana is a story of generosity, relationship, obedience, humility, compassion, and miracle. So too, is the Brotherhood's story, and in these stories, we get to see first-hand the grace of God. AMEN.

*The Reverend Helen Dwyer is a descendent of the Ngarrindjeri people from Hindmarsh Island South Australia. She is currently Chaplain at Overnewton Anglican Community College, Keilor*

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics found on Australians Together webpage: <http://www.australianstogether.org.au>