



THE GERARD TUCKER ORATION DELIVERED BY: THE RIGHT REVEREND PHILIP HUGGINS

Sunday 17 August 2014 at Christ Church South Yarra

Genesis 28:10-22

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. **11** He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. **12** And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13** And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; **14** and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. **15** Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." **16** Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" **17** And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." **18** So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. **19** He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. **20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, **21** so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, **22** and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Mark 4

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? **31** It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; **32** yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Thank you for the welcome and this opportunity.

Fr Tucker was born here at Christ Church, South Yarra in the Vicarage.

Christ Church was my first placement as a theological student in the 1970s. The spirit of Fr Tucker must have been about: the Vicar sent me up into the tower to help the pigeons get out and clean up after them! I thought I'd been doing pious Bible studies! But no ... pigeons, I discovered, are very messy.

It was a suitably humble start! Theological studies meets bucket and mop!

That Vicar also taught me how to leave a meeting early without causing offence. A useful skill! Perhaps passed on by busy Fr Tucker.

In this Address may I offer three reflections:

1. Noting the parallels of Fr Tucker's war service and these times;
2. These Scriptures - their inspiration for Fr Tucker and for us;
3. Three reflections as regards BSL and the future.

But first ...

Like many Melbourne Anglicans my respect and affection for BSL has always been part of my Anglican DNA.

It kind of comes with the Prayer Book, beautiful choirs, long processions, idiosyncratic clothing, the various benign eccentricities of Anglicanism as well as the endeavour to be in society but also a little on the edge! Mystically; Prophetically.

Another Tucker - the painter Albert once said:

"The place of the priest and the artist is on the margin, which is the place of insight."

He could have been thinking about our GJ Tucker who intentionally placed himself on the margins, with the marginalised, so he could see, speak and act with the insight of a free person, in the spirit and way of Jesus.

Of the many stories I have heard about Fr Tucker, the one that stays with me, coinciding with the 100th anniversary recollections, is from his service as a Military Chaplain in World War 1.

Of how he had to bury so many, gather the remaining property of a dead soldier, then write a letter to accompany the personal papers. His letter would be to grieving parents, a spouse, perhaps children too.

He cared for, prayed into God's eternal care those who died so young, wrote home to so many families. Around 1000 such griefs.

Obviously, like many here, I have been involved in vivid settings of grief.

Thus, one can better appreciate what would have been the emotional and spiritual consequences of this intensity of Fr Tucker's ministry.

A quote:

When the Front flared up, as in July 1916 during the battle of Fromelles, he worked ceaselessly with the patients. In the first twenty four hours of this battle the casualty clearing station took in eight hundred cases. Tucker worked in the wards until 4.00am, helping the patients undress and get into bed and, after a short nap, was back on the job again, assisting the medical orderlies with dressings. The men were covered in blood and mud and were wet to the skin as the Germans had flooded the trenches. Gerard could only help with the nursing when he was not needed by the severely wounded and the dying. He sat in his robes at their bedsides until “the soul fled”. Usually he told them that their end was near and most smiled back bravely. Some even said that they had no fears because they knew God would care for them. All were worried, however, about those they would leave behind and they gave him last messages for their loved ones which Gerard would carefully record. Their deaths would be followed by burial services, pathetic little celebrations with a two-man burial party carrying the body wrapped in the Australian flag on a stretcher to the graveside and lowering it into the grave as the bugler sounded the Last Post.

*At busy periods, three or four burials would be performed simultaneously and then the party would troop back to the mortuary hut for the next lot of bodies. Sometimes the walking wounded would join the burial parties to give the deceased company as he was settled into his grave. p37 John Handfield *Friends and Brothers*, 1980 Hyland House Melbourne.*

Traumatising, tragic scenes. It doesn't take much imagination to make the link to contemporary battle-fields. The ways of grief that are the result. Our human family is full of tears. Serious differences remain unreconciled. We see the consequences. We pray for the healing of memories and the solid steps towards genuine reconciliation.

As many of you will have noticed, there are two vivid paintings of St Laurence's martyrdom in the NGV's Exhibition of Renaissance Masters.

One of our sons went to the Exhibition in recent weeks.

His reflection was that quite a few of the Saints had very rough times!

Our St Laurence was one of them: - His generosity to the poor, his recognition in them of God's riches caused fatal irritation to those after territory and wealth.

In those days, it was Roman soldiers. Nowadays, ISIS and others. Ideologies to justify brutality and greed. The power of evil rampant.

Wars, and rumours of wars, stay with us, tragically.

Always, our choice is that enunciated in the Book of Deuteronomy, etched into Church buildings, across from the United Nations in New York:

"I set before you life and death. Choose life." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

It is the wise choice, considering the essence of the Christian narrative:

It's a wonderful story, really. Worth remembering in cruel times.

The essence of our faith is that the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen, enters our human life, born of Mary, lives, dies an unjust death,

then rises, radiantly: The love of God is stronger than hate and cruelty. Our source of hope, forever.

The Creator of this 12.5 billion year old universe, the end of which is still to be found, this immense, astonishing universe with soaring comets and desert cactus, sea-weed and pelicans landing and species that sing as kookaburras, at a certain point in time, having conveyed a little of the plan to a few wild transcendent folk called prophets, actually enters this Creation of which this divine being is Creator. At a point in time, though 'all time is God's time' as the saints say and our Alpha and Omega convey on the Pascal Candle, the very Creator of everything enters in very risky fashion, as a baby to a country couple soon to be refugees.

This divine child then grows up amidst family and friends, enjoys an ordinary life, feasts and family weddings, plenty of fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

Then, over three years, the Creator of all that is, Incarnate in Jesus, risk-taking all the way, shows us how to live so that we might delight in the gift of life.

Gift it is, as meditation teaches us. We breathe out. Is this our last breath? We breathe in. Still here!

So, in the gift of life, this is the perspective we bring to these times, as did Fr Tucker: Incarnational, resurrection faith.

That Fr Tucker came back from such an incredible World War 1 ministry and then founded what has become BSL, is a mark of his character and resilience, under God.

What was the key to his passion and stamina?

The key was his faith, his friends, these Scriptures and what they say to us.

There is an important lesson here for us at BSL in this time of terrible wars and cruelty. We need to go to the same sources of passion and resilience.

Starting with these Scriptures tonight.

Jacob's ladder ...

Jacob was on the road. There'd been a bit of family conflict behind him, which meant it was better to move on.

Pity really. His parents had a great love story, Rebecca and Isaac.

Rebecca going to gather water.

A bloke there saying to himself and the Most High:

"The first woman who offers me a drink and offers to feed my camels, she'll be the one for my mate Isaac" ...

Of course, it is her, Rebecca. I'm paraphrasing a little ...

He says, *"come with me and meet my mate"*.

She climbs on a camel. They go a fair distance.

She sees her true love to be, coming out of his tent, wraps her scarf around her face ..

They fall in love, have children. One is Jacob, the other Esau.

Jacob is on his way to a love story, too.

There'll be children, one famous for a coloured coat and a fair job as a CEO, running a big business ... Joseph ...

One of Tony Nicholson's predecessors!

So amidst love stories, conflicts, new business, travels and adventures, Jacob meets the Divine, in an unattended moment.

It's often the way ... A dream ... An awareness of the Divine presence.

So, in a long line that reaches to here and now in this Christ Church, Jacob wanted to mark the spot, build a sacred place, "God's House; "Bethel"

God is always present. In consecrated places such as this beautiful Church, made holy by grace and prayer, we may know God's presence a little better.

Fr Tucker, like millions, pondered these Scriptures, sought to live in Divine presence, present to the Divine in all, especially the poor. It started here, as a child in this Church ...

We are encouraged to do this too, as best we can, like Jacob, in all our flawed, complex, lovable humanity ... called to be the Holy People of God.

The second scripture is Jesus' parable of the mustard seed.

The mustard seed of Jesus with a few disciples in Galilee has become the wonderful tree which is the Universal Church: diverse, across every culture and generation ... nurturing saints of every land.

Failing many times. Renewed in the Spirit.

Jesus speaks of **faith** as the vital ingredient by which the mustard seed can become a blossoming, very large tree.

"From little things, big things grow", as Paul Kelly sings about Mabo and reconciliation with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

As we sing tonight about the little mustard seed of Fr Tucker's faith and what it has become in our BSL.

"From little things, big things grow" in the Spirit and Way of Jesus.

Poet-Philosopher Simone Weil, recognising the power of evil, spoke of the "mustard seed of grace in us". How important it is to foster that mustard seed of grace, for the Common Good.

Such is the story of BSL.

3. So, what about the future as I conclude these years as Chairperson?

Three reflections:

(1) Healthy relationships:

As you may know, I am currently juggling, also working as Interim General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

We ask continually, and from Scripture: *“What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?”* (Revelation 2:7)

One suggestion is that a charism of the Churches now for the Nation, is modelling good, healthy relationships.

In the light of the Royal Commission it is clear why this would now be a focus for our common life.

In Church circles there is considerable energy for what is called “Receptive Ecumenism”. In sum, this is a recognition that we are completed by the other. We are interdependent, differently gifted but complementary.

The theological framework is the doctrine of God as the Holy Trinity: Unity in diversity.

The search and honouring of our unique contribution thus draws us into deeper communion with one another and with the Divine.

This emphasis on healthy relationships means two things for BSL:

The first is a continuing discipline to model in our own relationship with each other that which is of good character: honesty, respect, openness to learn by listening well, a readiness to support those knocked about, impoverished, taking the initiative in reconciliation when it is needed.

There is no place for stupid rudeness, vanity and deceit if we are to be true to our high calling.

The second, as we are doing, is to keep taking the initiative in partnerships, for the sake of the common good, recognising how we need the gifts of others to complete our hopes:

Goodstart, the Youth Foyers, Parish partnerships, much else has been an endeavour to get beyond siloed, competitive, even combative “*agency versus agency versus Government*”, kind of relationships.

Of course, there needs to be careful preparation, planning ... Of course, not everything works ...

But, as with the examples given, the Spirit of life, the Holy Spirit, gives vitality, freshness and delight to these healthy partnership relationships.

“From little things, big things grow ..”

Take our GoodStart initiative:

A bit of faith, a few established friendships, good networks, a risk-taking spirit, a value on giving young children their best possible start in “early learning centres” rather than profit-focussed banality led to Goodstart: 650 centres, new partnerships now to front and back-end the other needs of these families with complementary BSL services, focused on their well-being across the life-cycle.

Thanks be!

Building, modelling healthy relationships is my first encouragement.

(2) Our quality of leadership ...

For people of faith, believing in the Empty Cross - the victory over sin, evil and death - the corollary is that we trust in the Divine providence, whatever the circumstances!

It was this deep, deep Resurrection faith that sustained Fr Gerard Tucker, including after all he had seen in the trenches of World War 1 and then the 1930s' Depression.

These bleak things were not the divine plan, nor were they to have the final word.

Not by magic but by prayer and sacrificial action, things would be different!

So he made them so!

Hence we do too, unselfconsciously therefore asking others to assist with their labour and resources.

In the Diocese, with Archbishop Philip, we often speak about being a “non-anxious” presence in leadership.

It is an anxious age. Lots of people seem rather focussed on making us all very anxious! Take it in and it's possible to be worried about pretty much everything all of the time! Even in your dreams.

Being a non-anxious presence for those in need, for those in the Sector, as Governments come and go, is maybe a special charism of and for BSL.

Trusting in the Divine providence, working hard together, we can forge a way that is better.

Whatever the issue, the problem, we can find a way forward!

That spirit is as necessary as ever! *"From little things, big things grow"*.

(3) A third reflection: about friendship.

Better than most, BSL honours and sustains its "corporate memory", grateful to those who have shaped who we are.

BSL cultivates and nurtures friendship. Friendship is a gift really, isn't it?

Friendships come along, meet and develop usually through simple circumstances. If you think back, your best friends came thus.

Each friend "is a world" of gifts shared, stories told, meals together, action taken for the common good.

Better than most, BSL recognises and gathers those who are friends, those who have contributed, those who want to stay in touch.

This is a subtle but important strength. It's a kind of Catholic spirituality - remembering the Saints, their stories, their inspiration, seeking their prayers in support.

Accordingly, with Jacob and that ladder of angels, so we have a BSL company now in the place we call heaven as well as here and now.

There is something very beautiful about that, yes? Including St Laurence, Gerard Tucker, Connie Benn, David Scott. So many will be in your hearts, even as I speak.

I'm only finishing being Chair, not yet up Jacob's ladder, but I love our gratitude for this fine company of BSL people, stretching back and including all of you gathered here tonight and those who would have liked to make it!

The 'mustard seed' has become a wonderful tree. Many have found shelter, nurture, leadership and friendship through the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

May it long be so!

Bishop Philip Huggins