



**THE GERARD TUCKER ORATION
DELIVERED BY: THE MOST REVEREND DR PHILIP FREIER**

**Sunday 19 August 2018
Anglican Parish of Christ Church South Yarra**

“85 Years of the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne”

The mid 1960's is the starting point for my reflections tonight. It may not feature in the memories of many here this evening, either because they were not yet born or perhaps as nothing special happened to them personally at that time. Some here tonight may though have been part of the generation that was encountering the impact that science and technology was making in their lives, creating what Australian Ecumenist John Garrett called, '... a generation quite different from any since mankind began'.¹ Twenty years after the conclusion of the Second World War, Australia was once again on the brink of military conflict - this time in Vietnam. In 1965 the first troops left Australia for Vietnam and for the first time the ballot of birthdays was conducted to determine those who would be conscripted to serve in the Australian military. Industrial action was prominent too with the Mt Isa Mines shut down due to strike action by miners and the declaration of a state of emergency by Queensland's Nicklin Government in response. Victorian Secondary school teachers went on strike, the first industrial action of that kind by teachers in Australia since 1920. Australia converted to Decimal Currency and for the first time in our history a woman, Roma Mitchell, sat as a judge in an Australian court. Any way that you look back at this period it appeared to those who lived through this time as a time of transition from an older order to a new emerging order. In that respect it may have some resonance with our own time.

It was also a time of similar transition and questioning in the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Father Gerard Tucker expressed his hopes in 1965 with urgency and passion, hoping that '...before I died, Australia would face up to the world situation

¹ John Garrett in *The Challenge, is the Church Obsolete?* Melbourne 1966, p 228.

as it is, and that all would examine the Gospel as preached by Jesus Christ as if it were something new'.² This urgency resulted in his promotion of this idea under the name of the 'Lara Movement'. Even though he would go on to live a further nine years he was undoubtedly aware that having attained the age of 80 years in 1965 he was at the end of the 'four score' years declared by the psalmist in Psalm 90.10 as the span of life for one endowed 'with strength'. Father Tucker hoped to face the big questions of the world like the recurrence of war and the rise of communism with his emphatic Christian faith. He could not make it any plainer that he believed in Jesus Christ as the 'very truth, the Son of God'. Tucker, perhaps referencing his clerical forebears, but certainly the ancient church of St Laurence was also emphatic that he believed as well in 'all that is taught by the Church of his fathers.' The force of the 'Lara Movement' was Tucker's conviction that Christ was capable of transcending all the human differences of belief and unbelief around the rallying cry of his Sermon on the Mount and that there in the principles of that teaching 'the Plan' as he called it was plain to see. 'Even the most sceptical', he said 'cannot deny the value of the teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount - it is universally acknowledged as the most perfect code for human behaviour - but regarding it as an ideal beyond man's attainment, and being unable to accept all the teachings of the Church, they reject the whole, out of hand.'³

Tucker is restless and raging, even in his old age, as he returns to the elegant simplicity of the Christian faith that has shaped his compassion and social activism over those many years past. The more he studies the Bible the clearer 'the Plan' appears to him. He is also clear that 'the Plan' answers the big questions the age has thrown up, all it needs is for people to embrace it.

At the same time as Father Tucker was promoting the 'Lara Movement' his nephew, David Scott was writing a prescient article, 'The Church and Social Welfare' for the 1965 book, 'The Challenge: is the Church obsolete?', edited by Ivan Southall. David Scott began at the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 1953, becoming the Brotherhood's

² Gerard Tucker, *That Man Jesus Christ has "Got Something There!"* pamphlet no date but 1965.

³ Tucker, *That Man...*

‘organising secretary’, editing the publication ‘Slum News’ and writing ‘What’s Wrong with Victoria’s Housing’ in 1954. By the time ‘The Challenge’ was published David Scott was Associate Director of the Brotherhood and would go on to succeed Geoffrey Sambell as Director in 1969.

Scott’s opening words echo ‘the Plan’ but point to the schema that he goes on in the article to elaborate, ‘The Love of God, recorded in the Bible, active in the Church, seeks to embrace all men, although it shows a special bias towards the handicapped, the helpless and the needy. The ministry of social service is a vital and inescapable mission.’⁴ By the mid-sixties, elements of the ‘welfare state’ policies that had been introduced to Australia by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction were having their effect. Scott notes that, ‘the Commonwealth and State Governments have since the war assumed far greater responsibility in meeting the social welfare needs of our community.’ This growth of government involvement in service provision raises big questions for Scott about the role of the church and its agencies. He considers that it is the Church’s distinctive duty to ‘fill the gaps’ and to ‘pioneer new services’.⁵ This raises for him the continuation of church and agency involvement in areas where government is capable of meeting social need. ‘The limited manpower of the Church and its financial resources should be used to the best advantage; that objective is not attained if the church’s services duplicate or overlap Government services.’⁶

In many ways it is easy to hear the restless passion of Father Tucker in the background of Scott’s words. For both Tucker and Scott, the work of the Brotherhood of St Laurence is essentially and inextricably the work of the Church. Tucker saw the implications of ‘the Plan’ reaching into the way parishes functioned and prioritised their resources, ‘No more stained glass windows for the present; no more new carpets and other non-essentials - God would understand. Instead, an interesting and exciting project would be undertaken, just the kind of thing that Christ and His Apostles did.’ And he saw that ‘the Plan’ would lead inevitably to the revitalisation of parish life and membership. ‘I believe that a new life would come to this parish;

⁴ David Scott, *The Challenge, is the Church Obsolete?* Melbourne 1966, p 132

⁵ Scott, p 137

⁶ Scott, p 138

that a new understanding of the Church and all it stands for would be born. But of still greater importance, many of those outside the Church would learn for the first time that the Church is a living thing, and that it could accomplish miracles today were it to truly, and practically follow the Plan brought by Him who taught that revolutionary Sermon of the Mount.'

It is a subtle distinction but worth making here that for both Tucker and Scott the Church *has* agency through the Brotherhood of St Laurence rather than the Brotherhood existing merely as an agent of the Church. They certainly did not envisage the world that we live in where community service organisations are increasingly an agent of Government through contracting or indirectly through client purchasing arrangements or that the Brotherhood of St Laurence would be, alongside peer organisations, significantly enmeshed in such outsourced arrangements. David Scott, reflecting on the growth of government involvement in children's services asks '... should the Church continue to maintain and expand its own child-care service?' This is not just a contextual question since he follows it by asking, '... are there other fields as well from which the Church should now consider withdrawing?' Filling the gaps and pioneering new services is for him the mandate of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. He envisages a continual realignment of the Brotherhood's involvement as government services grow to fill social need. In his mind there is no nostalgia involved or preciousness about the ownership of services - what matters is that what he calls 'social need' is being met. He questions, '... should the church welcome with gratitude this acknowledgment of community responsibility as the hoped-for outcome of its pioneering work and as an indication of a developing concern in the community?'

In other words the role of the Church indeed the role of the Brotherhood of St Laurence is to be at the pioneering edge of human need, meeting those needs itself when no-one else is doing it and then stepping out of the way to move on to new initiative when government or others meet the need. The Brotherhood is called to be the 'pace-setter and standard-setter' of the new skills and approaches that new conditions of disadvantage throw up in society, according to Scott. There is much of

what I have been calling the ‘restless passion’ of Father Gerard Tucker underlying David Scott’s schema.

Perhaps the biggest area of contrast between Tucker and Scott, at least as represented in the writing under discussion, is David Scott’s articulation of the importance of research. He says, ‘If the church has a responsibility to care for people, or to see that other organizations care for them, it has an equal responsibility to try to find out why so many people need care.’⁷ He recognises that social research is still at an infancy in Australia in the mid-sixties but is sure that it has unlimited possibilities to improve the lives of Australians. I can imagine him having great satisfaction in developing the research and social policy commitment of the Brotherhood of St Laurence during his time as director between 1969 and 1980. This enduring commitment is one of the cornerstones of the contemporary vision of the Brotherhood. Like Tucker before him Scott has no place for anything that does not improve the lives of the people that he said at the outset were especially important to God, ‘... research without public education and social action is useless. The Church’s responsibility for social action follows on from research and pioneering work.’⁸

Whether in the more deliberate tone of David Scott’s writing or in Father Tucker’s manifesto of the Lara Movement there is a further unifying principle. David Scott puts it plainly, ‘Primarily, the church must accept that in all areas of social need, whether those areas served by the Church or by any other authority, one particular province belongs to it alone; that is an explicit recognition of spiritual requirements.’⁹ It is different language but not far from Tucker’s Lara Movement manifesto, ‘... the Sermon on the Mount as the best plan known to man for his welfare here on earth.’ Neither Tucker nor Scott are at all phased by any lack of response or even hostility to their Christian beliefs. Scott asserting that, ‘A stubborn or rude or weary refusal from the person concerned does not necessarily imply an impregnable hostility or a well-entrenched indifference; it may indicate not so much of the failure

⁷ Scott, p 140

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Scott, p 137

of the person but the failure of the church - concurrently or in the past.’¹⁰ Tucker’s hope was equally plain, that ‘... all would examine the Gospel preached by Jesus Christ as if it were something new.’

In our contemporary era it is common for community service organisations to reference the Christian Church as they speak about their origins. It is plain to me that this would not do for Tucker or Scott. For them and I hope for us the work of the Church and the work of the Brotherhood is one.

Tucker and Scott are good conversation partners for us today from their perspective of the mid 1960’s. They are relentlessly outcome focused and the only outcome they care about is making a difference in the lives of the people they variously describe as being in ‘social need’, the handicapped, the helpless and the needy’ according to Scott. They urge us over the half century since their words were written, to courageously face what we must give up - stained glass windows and new carpets according to Tucker or work that Scott describes as being better done by government or others. Research that makes a difference to practice and public policy is pressed upon us. What may prove more difficult in the modern era is the spirituality that drives them - the integration of Christian belief and the works of compassion that flow from it. Love and service, received as two sides of the one coin.

There is something too about the importance of the present that we can learn as well. ‘Never in the history of the world has the Church met with such a challenge - or such an opportunity as at the present time.’ This is a theme that flows easily from the pen of Gerard Tucker as he writes his ‘Lara Movement’ manifesto in his Eightieth year.

There is a powerful and persistent appeal to the inherent dignity and nobility of each human being. Even the rejection of religion is looked at as more of a critique of the Church than the one who does the rejecting. According to Father Tucker, ‘The Church can give them Faith and Hope but only if she faces the fact that these lost ones do not and will not accept religious dogmas as now presented to them’.

¹⁰ *ibid*

I haven't seen any evidence that the 'Lara Movement' had any lasting significance and Gerard Tucker's manifesto of the movement is undoubtedly driven by his relentless passion for the 'the Plan' to be a self-evident to others as it was to him. David Scott, on the other hand lays out policies and priorities that are recognisable in the modern Brotherhood - half a century on.

Heart and head, passion and program from the writings of two of our great heroes of the Brotherhood of St Laurence - may they be a source of animation and stirring for us, in this - our day.

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