

Funeral of Bishop Bruce Wilson

St James', King Street, Sydney, 29 March 2021

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Psalm 39; 1 Corinthians 13; John 6: 25-40

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Some words of St Paul from our 1 Corinthians reading: "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known"; and then from Jesus in St John's Gospel: "this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day".

For Bruce Wilson, the Christian vision had to be commended in a sane, humane and sufficiently deep way if the unsure were to be persuaded, the affronted reassured, the damaged healed, and the stubbornly sceptical given a run for their money.

Part of that commitment involved his shepherding of the Church and any number of its individual members, so that Christian life and witness could become more mature, more

self-aware, and hence more compelling. It was a great blessing for me when Bruce took me under his wing, offering wise and occasionally firm guidance, with advocacy and love, for over 20 years. I know that others cared for in like manner are here today.

Bruce's commitment to exploring and commending the Christian vision arose from his lifelong wrestling with God, and this came out profoundly in his writing. His choice of Psalm 39 for today takes us to the depth of humanity's fragile, morally compromised, time-bound, even time-cursed existence, which Bruce saw as the only place from which an authentic spirituality could emerge, along with an image of God that isn't naïve, and a caricature.

This Psalm reminds us of Job from the Old Testament, on a painful journey beyond the toxic piety of his comforters, to find God at last in the whirlwind. Bruce took this journey himself in the rollercoaster years of his heart disease, suspended between life and death, yet able to find peace and thankfulness, along with the generosity of forgiveness

toward a doctor who at a crucial moment had dangerously misdiagnosed him. All this is memorably set out in Bruce's fourth and last book, *Bless You Heart Attack for Being in my Life*.¹

But today I want to go back to his greatest book, *Reasons of the Heart*, which came out around the time I first knew Bruce in 1998, and which I re-read last week. Serendipitously the heart appears in this earlier title as well, but that's appropriate because the heart's journey in faith, beyond superficial approaches to God and to life's big questions, was Bruce's abiding preoccupation. In particular, this book helps us understand his choice of our readings from St Paul and St John today, and the resurrection life to which they point.

In *Reasons of the Heart*,² Bruce recalls that once, in answer to someone's light-hearted question to him about the meaning of life, he surprised himself by blurting out "The meaning of life is to journey from naivety to innocence" (p.152). He

¹ *Bless You Heart Attack for Being in My Life: Wrestling with Death, Health, Self and Spirit* (Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2019). Available online from Koorong Books.

² *Reasons of the Heart: A Vision for the New Millennium* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998). Out of print and hard to find.

explored this insight in a profound chapter on that great 1990s film trilogy from director Krzysztof Kieslowski, the first instalment of which is called *Three Colours Blue*.

Here Julia, played by a young Juliette Binoche, has withdrawn from life having accidentally killed her husband and child in a car crash. The esteemed composer had died without completing his much anticipated ‘Song for the Unification of Europe’, the words of which were to be the ones from St Paul that Bruce chose for us today. A naïve and conflicted Julia eventually learns to open her heart in love, to grow in self-awareness, to find compassion for the pain of others, and hence to help complete her late husband’s piece. The simplicity and innocence she discovers personally is what the song hopes will take hold of post-Cold War Europe and the world—a love that Bruce explicitly associates with the one he calls “Jesus the innocent”:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing

but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Let me take up Bruce's mantle now and go a step further with this passage, looking to its second half. Paul explains there how we have to outgrow a childish and inadequate approach to the things of God. All those qualities that Paul contrasts with being loving—that is, being envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude—are certainly childish, despite their being widely seen as markers of a realistic, adult approach to living in a dog eat dog world. But for Paul similar childish habits extend to our religious epistemology—to our believing in God, or not—and here I want to make a Bruce Wilson point.

Modern sceptics typically think that God is an impossibility because a rational and empirical way of thinking tells them so. But we do well to remember that the father of sceptical empiricism, David Hume, also said that our reason is typically slave to our passions. And if we doubt this, we need only look at America's culture

wars, and at the significant uptake of baseless conspiracy theories in that increasingly deranged country.

So, while we might reject God, we humans remain dangerously in thrall to idols—that is, we’re prey to the herd mind; we’re fixated on the desire of others, either in slavish obedience or else in self-defining opposition. Hence our supposed rationality and empirical hard-headedness may not prove to be our best guide in matters of faith. Bruce would have us deepen our empiricism so that it becomes a phenomenology of experience broadly conceived, and he’d have us extend our rationality so that it takes into account intuition and the sort of participatory knowing that relies on loving attentiveness.

And this is what St Paul talks about in today’s reading: putting away a childish approach to matters of faith and learning to trust love—discovering what only loving and being loved can reveal; coming to trust a perspective that isn’t accessible to our observing and reasoning minds

apart from trusting self-investment. That way something becomes possible between us and God, as mutual self-investment begins to rub off, as the poor reflection that's all you got in ancient mirrors gives way to a clearer, higher bandwidth knowledge of God—a face to face knowledge as St Paul calls it: “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known”.

Bruce knew that this personal knowing has to grow on you, and that it has to displace inadequate forms of knowing over time. Very often this transition requires the help of a wise guide, so that we can be trained and nurtured—this personal knowing has to be personally cultivated. For Bruce this was the Church's purpose and that of its clergy, or at least it can be, and should be. Hence Bruce's commitment to spiritually mentoring fellow travellers on their spiritual journeys of struggle and conversion of life.

Anyway, the journey to a right knowing of God is what we discover more than once in St John's Gospel, and not least

in our passage today from Jesus' so-called bread of life discourse. We see Jesus leading his questioners along this path in a compressed and thematic way, from the initial piquing of their interest having been fed by Jesus in the wilderness. He leads them beyond their initial conceptions and questions, and here in microcosm is the story both of effective theological education and of good spiritual direction. Jesus' focus points his questioners beyond what they can get for themselves to what he will give them: the bread of life, which of course is himself.

They go on to ask about what works they have to do to earn God's favour, which is a perennial religious question that proved central to the Protestant Reformation. Again, Jesus shifts focus, away from their search for justification and onto his justifying gift. God is searching for a way through to them; it's not primarily a matter of them having to find a way to God.

Then another typical religious preoccupation presents itself, which Jesus again deflects. They want a sign, these

proto empiricists, to prove who Jesus is. They ask for bread, like Moses gave Israel in the wilderness, not yet realising that this is exactly what Jesus *does* offer in his multiplication of the loaves, which is about far more than catering! Jesus takes it to a whole new level, as he sets out in his bread of life discourse. This new level is where Jesus seeks to lead his questioners: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”.

And it’s in this context that Jesus goes on to talk about the resurrection, which is the central plank of the Church’s vision—though regularly sold short. The resurrection is either dismissed by sceptics, or alternatively it’s insisted upon as an article of faith and a test of biblical allegiance, though I daresay it’s often just left to float uninterpreted on that endless river of pious verbiage that flows over us from down the front in church.

But here in this passage the resurrection ceases to be a purely objective fact, a matter of arms-length speculation, or a detached conjecture. No longer a curiosity, a conundrum, or an affront, the resurrection becomes something that's primarily relational, to do with knowing, trusting and hence abiding in Jesus.

So, rather than speculating about the possibility of a post-mortem state, and trying to fit that with a closed view of physical reality, Jesus presents resurrection faith in this passage as something integral to the whole Christian life, which is about coming to abide securely in his love: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day".

To believe in the resurrection, then, isn't primarily about sacrificing our modern intelligence with a leap of faith, as Bruce made very clear in *Reasons of the Heart*. Instead, it's about trusting Jesus, about trusting the journey that leads us to him. It's about being persuaded that in Jesus

our hearts can come home to rest; our critical intelligence can find its fulfilment in a richer, more personal mode of knowing; and our stubbornness can yield at last before a love that's more stubborn than we could ever be.

So, if we've been led to Jesus along the path of broken idols, and if we're somehow aware of being drawn into Jesus' life with God, then we can trust that Jesus will never let us go—that where he is, we will also be, held safe, finding a level of reassurance in the meantime that proves sufficient for us.

Bruce knew this journey of the heart's knowing. He found it mediated reliably in the Church's story, in its sacraments, in its saints. And this despite all the cluelessness and mendacity that he was well aware of in the Church, though without ever despairing over it.

So, as we take our leave of Bruce, with full and thankful hearts, we can be confident that his lifelong wrestling with God continues to bear fruit in many lives, and we can

share with Bruce his secure place in the love of Jesus, as
we stand with the Church on Easter Day.

The Lord be with you ...