

# **Funeral of Dr Rosamund Dalziell (1951-2021)**

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia  
3 November 2021

Psalm 121, John 14: 1-6

## **The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Coddell**

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

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

If I had to think of one word to sum up the character of my friend and colleague Ros Dalziell it would be 'compassionate,' but I want to be careful here because it's a term that too readily descends into cliché. With Ros, compassion was a quality you could feel. She was what's been called a therapeutic personality. Being around Ros made you feel better. Compassion involves sensitivity to human frailty, graciousness, and lightness of touch, with a restraint and thoughtfulness that's not compatible with anything needy or intrusive. It's a humble virtue, though true compassion also has an aristocratic quality about it—it's elevating.

But there was nothing sentimental about Ros and her compassion. True compassion sees life clear and sees it entire. This was evident in the way her sharp eye ranged over difficult human topics in the papers Ros prepared for conferences of the Australian Girard Seminar and of our global body, the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. Compassion doesn't hide from complexity and it's not afraid of the dark.

A major focus of Ros's compassion was care and advocacy for asylum seekers. As a student of René Girard, she'd have seen them as scapegoats, helping maintain bipartisan togetherness for all the Australians who're disoriented by social change and afraid of losing advantage. But the Girardian insights came later for Ros. The refugees came first. I wonder if her later doctoral work on shame might have its roots in her earlier experiences with these unwelcome outsiders who'd craved a place of acceptance but hadn't found it.

Ros studied the autobiographies of Australian writers for her ANU doctorate, discovering that the key to unlocking so many of their life stories was shame. Hence the title of Ros's dissertation when it was published: *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*—a book that I read thirteen years ago, but you can still find and buy it online. And what exactly is

shame? Here's a definition. Guilt is when you've *done* wrong, but shame is when you *are* wrong—that is, when you believe that you're a wrong-un, and hence when you can't accept yourself.

One category of shameful experience that Ros examined was that of the immigrant in Australia, and especially Jewish immigrants, hence my speculation about whether Ros found clues for this in her earlier work with refugees. But she also identified shame due to illegitimacy, to growing up in adopted families, to indigenous experience with the stolen generations, and of course there's always sexual shame in one form or another. The priority with shame is concealment and refusing to acknowledge it. The symptoms of shame centre on a desire to hide and be invisible, against which some of the shamed overcompensate by becoming insufferable braggarts or narcissists. To hide their shame, they behave shamelessly. There's also depression, addiction, cynicism and, often tragically, there's rage directed at oneself and/or at others.

Ros saw this shame at work under the surface in Australian culture and politics, naming fierce resistance from a few decades back to the so-called black armband view of history. Perhaps today we could add the stubbornly held delusion that our national asylum seeker policy is actually humanitarian, or that we're serious about becoming carbon

neutral—also our recent reminder that any international criticism of Australia has to be denied at all costs.

Now, friends, the only cure for shame comes from compassion, which alone can touch this deepest well of human need, this darkest prison of human self-delusion, of acting out, and of self-destructiveness. And this compassion, if it's to have the power of healing, must be able to wear the defensive pushback that erupts in hostility whenever the truth comes too close and threatens to expose our shame, albeit in order to heal it.

And so, friends, I come back to those words of Jesus from today's Gospel reading: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." This is a subtle statement, associating freedom from fear and anxiety with belief in God, but also with belief in Jesus, and this last part is especially important. Ros's studies of René Girard taught her that belief in God can be part of an evolved, purely human mechanism of social control, of prohibitions and rituals and myths, manufacturing togetherness based on scapegoating people who we can all agree need to be cast out. Hence the key role for shame in traditional religious societies, shame and honour societies as they're called, and the legacy of this ugly religious cultural function is still with

us. Belief in God has regularly been reduced to preserving sovereign social norms, with people who don't fit in often having to hide their shame and live a lie if they don't want to go under. As a result, recent generations have pushed back against this sort of belief in God.

Resistance to being shamed over sexual matters helped empty churches from the 1960s though, in many places, God's still presented as the enemy of all kinds of human embodiedness, of human fragility, of human yearning for acceptance.

Which brings us to the final words of Jesus in this statement: beyond believing in God, he also invites us to believe in him. And here's the good news; here's the liberating way, truth and life that Jesus represents. The orthodox Christian view of God is not a figure of sovereign detachment, remote from the human condition. Instead, Jesus as God with us knew the joys and challenges of embodied human life, and he knew the shame and rejection of being branded an unacceptable outsider, consigned at last to the ancient world's most intentionally shameful of deaths.

The point I'm making is that if belief in God is to be good news, rather than bad news and best done away with, then Christians' conviction that Jesus is the human face of God provides a powerful testimony. If

we've got ourselves to a place where we have to reject God to relieve us of being overburdened by shame, then Jesus himself is a corrective. God isn't like that; rather, God is like Jesus; God is compassionate love, and Jesus is that God with us.

Friends, shame gets hidden because it's the thing we hate and fear most. Yet, on Good Friday, Jesus took God into the deepest experience of human shame and failure, descending into hell with all the hopeless—and here's a metaphor that those who live with shame well understand. But then, on Easter Sunday the world changed for human beings, when the truth of our worth, of our acceptance, of our freedom from the burden of shame, was revealed in Jesus's resurrection—in God the Father's great vindication of the shamed and despised, starting with Jesus himself in the depths of hell among a beloved humanity.

So, friends, never again: never again the fear of an angry God who shames us, because, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey so beautifully put it, "God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all." So, friends, never again the need to be defeated and made liars because we've accepted a lie about ourselves—from a parent, maybe, from a boss, from an abuser, or from our government, perhaps too from our own damaged hearts. But never again. Because instead we're invited to

believe in Jesus Christ, and immediately we're in the presence of a compassion, of a trustworthiness, that redefines what God means and that has a long history of liberating burdened human lives. And how do we know that this is true? Because of compassionate Christians like Ros, who lived accordingly.

The Lord be with you ...