

### *Ritual, moral and intellectual*

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor  
Sixth Sunday of Easter — 21 May 2017  
Reverend Martin Johnson

#### *1 Peter 3.8-22*

A couple of weeks ago Susan and I attended Burgmann College at the ANU for the annual Chaplaincy Association dinner and lecture. It was decided by the Association's board to have an eminent person give a short address and then ask students to respond. The topic was 'The future—for people of faith'. The lecture was given by Professor John White, Emeritus Professor of Chemistry. Professor White cited three primary areas of concern for the world: population growth, climate change and artificial intelligence. He suggested that, in all three areas, Christians had an important role to play and were indeed obligated to play. It was, he claimed, a question of us leading the way in the search for a moral compass.

We as Anglicans are often maligned as being a church that doesn't really believe much at all. It's rather in our DNA, this idea of the *via media*, the middle way. We don't want to be seen as extreme; we are seen as liberal folk who, like St Paul in his missionary endeavour, want to be 'all things to all people'. But we do need to stand for something. After all we weren't given the 'Ten Suggestions'. I think the best way to look at this is to say that we don't necessarily have the answers, and we are often wary of dogmatism, but we do have a method with which to wrestle with the problems. As John White is both a scientist and an Anglican, it could be argued that he is well placed to speak into this area'

Those well versed in Anglicanism tell us that our ecclesiology, that is, our way of being church, rests on a three-legged stool: scripture, tradition and reason. I don't think that is a bad thing; I like the analogy. For one thing, the stool cannot stand on less than three legs. Importantly it isn't a list, a series of boxes to be ticked. Equal weight is placed on each of the legs. There is no scripture without tradition and there is no tradition and scripture without reason.

But I wonder then, if we are going to sit on this stool, what our 'way', our method, will look like. We can all live a private faith to some extent but eventually it's going to require of us, demand of us, that we get off our stool and do something. Given what St Peter said to those early Christians in Asia Minor, and what he says to us this morning, I have been considering three elements in which we can exercise our 'Anglican way'. They are: ritual, moral, and intellectual. Like all the major religions of the world, Christianity is a set of devotional practices, a moral code, and also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history. Peter outlines these three elements in this morning's epistle. First, he cites baptism at that *ritual* that brings us into communion with God. Then he writes, 'have unity of spirit, sympathy, *love* for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.' Finally, he calls on his readers to give a to be prepared to give a *reason* for the hope that is theirs. So our very Anglican triumvirate of scripture, tradition and reason is lived out ritually, morally and intellectually.

One of the ongoing problems we have with our evangelisation is that so many folk believe from the outset that they have to sign up to set of dogmas, a list of rules, a way of life, and they are wary. The paradox of this is that for some time now the wing of the church that has been growing is that part that *does* ask its new members to believe certain things and live a particular way of life. So clearly there is balance to be found here. Yes, it is true, there are demands—repent and believe the gospel, says Jesus in the opening of Mark's gospel. But we cannot, must not, demand this of folk as they arrive at Church; this 'way' does not come as we tick off boxes. It comes as we are immersed in the ritual, the moral, and the intellectual lives of our faith.

Ritual helps us to avoid placing limits on what we mean. Words can so often limit us, they can so often place barriers around us. Those who sacralise words can so often be drawn into a fundamentalism which does no justice to the texts they claim to be the undiluted word of God. Ritual engages our imaginations.

The handing down of the nation's budget in recent weeks served as yet another reminder that so often we don't actually live in a community but in an economy. Market forces are at play and we have little if any control over them. The church must be counter cultural in this respect. We come to the altar with empty hands to be filled by the one who emptied himself that he might give completely of himself. Our faith, our morality, ultimately is all about gift.

Our intellect comes last; it cannot come first. We cannot give intellectual assent to ritual and gift and then go out and live it; it is the other way around. Our ritual here at St Philip's, week in week out, projects us into the world, the world that God loves; its giftedness is a wonder. Our faith and hope and love are also a wonder, gifts that we share. When we rest and pause, it is time for us to remember that we are indeed all one (as John Donne famously said, 'no man is an island') and to allow our intellects to consider the profundity of this. The unity of everything, so the scientific folk tell us, is a marvel; it is something we strive to comprehend. From seemingly nothing has evolved such beauty and order. It is a unity that is marred in so many ways and so it is crucial to live the hope that is within us, to demonstrate that hope is a valid way of life, not a vague wishy-washy idea, but a hope that is revealed in our method. It is not anti-intellectual, it is our way, and ultimately we believe, God will be all in all.

As Jesus said, 'On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.'  
Amen.