

Dr Atomic and the Bread of Life

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 5 August 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT, Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78: 22-28; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

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

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” (John 6: 35)

Tomorrow is August 6th, which used to be the Feast of the Transfiguration until we shifted it to become the climax of our Epiphany season. Yet August 6th also marks a different and more troubling transfiguration, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. In that transfiguration, material mass ‘m’ was transfigured into energy ‘E’ according to Einstein’s celebrated equation $E = mc^2$. And because C in this formula, the speed of light, is 2.98 followed by 8 zeros, nuclear fission in only a fraction of an atomic bomb’s enriched Uranium or Plutonium core still delivers a massive energy yield. Yet from the 1950s, the implosion-type Plutonium bomb, tested in New Mexico and then dropped on Nagasaki, yielding 20 kilotons of TNT,

became only the blasting cap for newer Hydrogen bombs. The largest of these ever tested, by the Soviets, yielded 58 megatons!

I was thinking about all of this in the New Mexico desert a few weeks back, at the semi-open air Santa Fe Opera, during a packed performance of John Adams' 2005 opera *Dr Atomic*. It's about the physicist Robert Oppenheimer and the top-secret Manhattan Project he directed, set in the final hours prior to the first atomic test, in June 1945, at the Trinity site not so far from where we sat. Hanging suspended over the opera stage was a great reflective silver sphere, symbolic of the perfectly smooth, shiny plutonium hemispheres that were explosively compressed at the bomb's centre to yield nuclear fission, but also symbolic of the bomb itself. There it hung, presiding over the whole performance: the orb was portrayed as transcendent, yet like every pagan deity it was man-made, and of course the opera cast, chorus and audience could see their own human forms and faces reflected in it.

This spherical symbol of nascent, world transforming energy represented a necessary violence, driven by fear of worse violence that the Germans and, later, the Japanese might unleash on America. Around this cosmological symbol of savage rationality a community of 6,000 people grew up in the desert, and in its perfect roundness a terrible man-made religion of peace out of violence was celebrated.

During the opera Pueblo Indian Corn dancers performed, enacting their own traditional sacred ritual for maintaining the stable order of an agricultural society, where the enemies to be kept in check were famine and pestilence. Yet the Pueblos paid a great cost for the nuclear deterrent, with the so called Downwinders in New Mexico suffering cancers and lingering debility as a result of fallout from the atomic tests. A new sacred cosmology had overcome an old one.

At one point in the opera the highly cultured physicist Oppenheimer sings words from John Donne's poem to the Trinity, "Batter my Heart, Three-Person'd God", from which came the name for his test site. Oppenheimer also pondered the creative and destructive faces of the Hindu god Vishnu as he tried to imagine the monster of life from death that he was creating. At the high point of this scene he falls before the dreadful shiny orb and sings Donne's frank confession to the Holy Trinity from that poem, "But I am betrothed unto thy enemy'" ... and the whole thing fell into place for me.

Here, once again, we see humanity putting its ultimate faith in idols, which promise life but ultimately deliver death. This is the nature of the pagan sacred, in which our human fears and faces are reflected back to us whenever we construct them. Where Exodus today celebrates the God of Israel turning the desert into an inhabited place, the atomic idol turns inhabited places into a desert. Where

our Exodus reading today shows us the glory of God in a cloud, the mushroom cloud and its radioactive fallout displays a certain sort of savage glory, yes, though not the glory of God. From the cloud in Exodus comes manna to sustain the people of God in the wilderness, and from Jesus comes God's definitive response to humanity's hunger and thirst. Yet *Dr Atomic* ends with the eerie recording of a Japanese woman's voice, pleading for water. For us today, however, the writer to the Ephesians celebrates a cosmic vision of Christ at the heart of a community marked by love and mutuality; for us today, the symbolic roundness of the Eucharistic host lifted up by the priest at the altar represents Christ's perfect challenge to the symbolic roundness of that plutonium idol to which our world has looked too long for its hope and its healing.

Friends, we make our own violent gods to still our fears in a violent, uncontrollable world. The Christian alternative of the real God erupting into the life of our world in person to bless, to transform, to heal, is a nonviolent answer to violence, and an authentic divine glory which takes the counterintuitive form of human humility. It invites us into a community and a ritual that are not rooted in fear and self-preservation, but in joyful self-giving. Here is a cosmology and a community of a different sort; here is a sacred not made with human hands; here is a living bread come down from heaven to heal our world, and to make the inhabitable into the habitable. Here in

the Eucharist, you and I declare for another week that we are not betrothed unto the enemy of our Trinitarian God, as so many in this world seem to be.

The Lord be with you ...