

Renewing the ANU Chaplaincy

St Philips Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixth of Easter, Year A — 14 May 2023

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Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:8-22, John 14:15-24

Last Tuesday evening, the Chaplaincy at the ANU moved closer to becoming a multifaith ministry, reflecting more closely the demographics of the campus cohort. Created in the 1960s as a Christian outreach to the staff and students, the Chaplaincy has evolved and the team now includes chaplains of different faith traditions and none. On Tuesday, the chaplains hosted multifaith forum to see what this evolution might look like and, among other things, what might be a common ethic across these diverse traditions. Many of the students, particularly those who have been born and bred here in this country, have had little exposure to faith, let alone religion in all its diversity. We are committed to ensuring that when a student or member of staff approaches the 'Multifaith Centre', their experience will be one of nurture, enrichment, concern, whomever they might encounter.

Paul's speech at the Areopagus is not a bad place to start. I doubt very much that many of the students would readily claim to be Epicureans or Stoics, but these philosophies are alive and well today, just as they were at the Areopagus. The Epicurean students would be out to have a good time, eat, drink and be merry, we'll worry about that assignment tomorrow, after we've dealt with the hangover! It's a materialistic outlook, much like the man in the gospels with many barns full of stuff, then something goes wrong! The stoics would be keen to be self-sufficient: I won't allow all the pressure to impact me, I've got this sorted, then something goes wrong! So, first, to enter the Chaplaincy is to discover that there is something or someone else in whom we live and move and have our being. Something or someone else in which we can delight in, find encouragement in, perhaps eventually even have faith in, something or someone beyond ourselves, beyond even the material.

During the forum the Golden Rule 'do unto others...' was inevitably mentioned as an ethic common to the great religious traditions of the world. We can find this ethic paraphrased in Peter's letter this morning:

All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

The Golden Rule is about living in relationship, the rough and tumble of community. Peter quotes Psalm 34, which is about community. Each of the speakers on Tuesday from the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and non-Abrahamic faiths could say 'amen' to this; the Chaplaincy is—to use modern parlance 'a safe space'—for all comers.

There is plenty here for us to reflect upon as we embark on this project. But what of a particularly Christian ministry? What do we offer that is distinctive, and have we the confidence to proclaim it? Multifaith does not mean watering down our faith. Yes, we celebrate what we share in common, but we also celebrate that which we do not share. The second part of Peter's letter this morning takes us to that place, he reminds us of the need to be prepared to give a reason for our hope and calls upon us to do so gently and with reverence. This is what multifaith dialogue and ministry look like. Yes, we proclaim the cross and the resurrection, we do so with care, but above all we do so with humility.

John's gospel is perhaps *the* gospel of the incarnation. It is for a good reason that on Christmas morning we hear: "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" — the prologue to John's masterpiece. Incarnation is at the heart of distinctive Christian spirituality, it shapes our worship, our prayer, our mission.

One of the problems faced by chaplains, and indeed by anyone engaged in pastoral ministry is the desire to fix everything, to have the answers. Many a time I have wanted to disappear into my phone box and emerge as a clerical Superman! Generally, people approach chaplains because they know deep within themselves that there are no answers. Doctors, solicitors, and accountants have answers, Chaplains have presence.

We need to be reminded that this passage in John is set in the long account of the Last Supper, we heard a little of it last week too, both our Philip and Thomas wondering what on earth is happening, where is Jesus going, what will become of us. It is remarkable that Jesus doesn't address the disciples' deep pastoral needs by analysing them, counselling them, or giving answers, but simply by promising that his Spirit would be with them always. This is pastoral care 101; the work of the Christian chaplain is to assure a troubled soul of the presence and comfort of the Spirit. A Spirit that will be present to them through their relationships with one another, relationships they should nurture, relationships with those who will wash their feet and whose feet they in turn will wash when they are able. This is incarnational nature of Christian ministry.

To return then to St Paul standing before the intellectual elite at the Areopagus: the role of the religious person in an intellectual, secular, multifaith, multicultural environment, such as a university campus, is to discover that which is common to the human condition. Paul takes it for granted that worship is one of the things that human beings do; perhaps this is why our more secular, independently-minded, intellectual folk might be cautious. To worship is to allow something or someone else to define us, it is to allow yourself to be acted upon by something or someone else. We are back to our multifaith ministry, which at its heart upholds the non-negotiable dignity of every human person and which is expressed in the giving of true worth to those who seek that ministry, a ministry in which we strive to be defined by 'the other.' I hope and pray that the renewed Chaplaincy at the ANU campus will indeed be a blessing for the university and that we might wholeheartedly support it. Amen.