

Sermon at Farewell Service as Archbishop of Sydney, 14th June 2013

We Preach Christ Crucified

1 Corinthians 1:23

What? How? Who? Why? Here are the great questions every human should ask about our world.

What is this world we call home? Investigate it, classify it, describe it, test it, learn it, delight in it.

How did it come to be? Can we trace the causes which have brought it into being and the laws which govern its existence?

Who sponsored the world? Who is responsible for its majesty and its pain?

Why does the world exist? What is its purpose and goal?

Throughout human history, Animism has dominated, focusing on the *who* and the *why*. The world is invaded by spirit, indeed many spirits; I am secure only as I influence the spirits; any adverse event in my life is the consequence of offending someone who can control the spirits by magic. If I fall over a log, the interesting questions are not *what* did you fall over? *How* did it come to be there? But, *why* did this happen? *Who* is your enemy? Your enemy has bent the spirits to his will by magic, or perhaps your fall depends merely on their erratic but malign wills.

By contrast, we are a culture of the *what* and the *how*. Science and technology are the glories of our age, and the benefit to the human race have been immense. Paradoxically, however, this has come about in part because in early modern times we rejected the Animistic answers to the *who* and *why* questions. We began with greater clarity to believe that, instead of multiple spiritual wills in the universe, controllable by magic, the *who* has One sovereign purposive will. This will, controlled only by himself, undergirded all we may discover by asking *what* and *how*.

But now we have gone a step further.

We have begun to act as though the *who* and *why* questions *cannot* be answered and do not matter. We have uncoupled *what* and *how* from *who* and *why* and have set ourselves in a universe without purpose or Person. We have killed God. With heroic determination, many have accepted the consequences of being orphaned by his death. In the powerful words of Bertrand Russell:

‘Man is the product of causes which had no prevision...his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; (nothing) can preserve an individual life beyond the grave...the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins...Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.’

The deep chasm between the *what* and the *who*, the *how* and the *why*, this counsel of unyielding despair, is far more troubling than we care to admit. We now have no great story inside which we live; unless it is the myth of progressive social change. We are like some forlorn hope, men doomed to die for no good cause, the cannon fodder of the universe. Some take grim satisfaction that they are free from superstition. For many others, the old fairy

stories of so-called angels and spirits and the stars and of Luck have come back in to fill the spiritual void; or there is a new interest in the experiences provided by higher religiosity such as westernised Buddhism or even the new nationalism with its romantic glorification of Gallipoli.

Still others, have set out like the explorers of old, Magellans of the mind, to see whether God may be found in argument and by design, whether we can by reasoning re-unite the *who* and the *what*, the *how* and the *why*. But they have returned with tales uncertain, and much confusion.

In my considered view we have now therefore entered an unimaginably dangerous time for the western culture of which our nation is a part. We have divorced what should have been united. Unyielding despair is a minority option. The inextinguishable human drive to worship has found old and cruel gods such as Mammon and Eros. There is much pain and aloneness and hopelessness already. It will get worse as is already seen in the damage we have wrought in family life. We will become prey to those whose assurance and discipline arises from a collectivist spirit. And a surprising number of people will dabble in the magic from which we emancipated ourselves long ago.

I talked to a doctor about our community. She said: 'I find anxiety to be a great spiritual and personal difficulty today. I see it in children in the fragility of their parents relationship...I wonder about the amount of disturbing information available to adolescents and young adults which that is difficult for them to reconcile with a meaningful life...For women in their twenties and thirties I see it in the breakdown of long established cohabiting relationships...With older folk I come across a lot of anxiety with the casualisation of work...One other thing I find as a GP, is our expectation of perfection...as medicine advances we expect perfection and if not, someone must be responsible and recompense us.' Another doctor reported that widespread sexual licence was accompanied by a wistful longing for the older values people saw in the marriages of their parents. Death is probably the end. Values and spiritual life have to come from within us; we make our own. Tolerance is highly prized. In all this there is a highly individualistic spirit, community is not cherished. And there is no overriding story to give meaning.

By contrast, the Christian message connects all four questions together in a partnership which gives honour to their integrity and yields delight in this world, hope for the next, and meaning in both. But to achieve this it does not begin with our Magellan-like search for God through unaided reason or experience. Such a search is doomed because our pride and our prejudice against God means we will not look in the right place or in the right way.

No. The Christian message is that God has come searching for us. *He* has made set the terms concerning *when* and *where* he will meet us. This is disturbing news.

To our consternation, his appointed meeting place is within history. Worse, he encounters us as one of ourselves, a man with a name and a history and a place and culture and a language. Worse, we encounter God at a sordid, brutal, ghastly point in his history, a point from which we will turn our eyes. We see his glory in the gore of a Roman cross.

'We preach Christ crucified...' An ancient graffito portrays a man bowing in worship before a crucifixion. The victim has the head of an ass. That sarcasm the verdict of the ancient world on the first Christian preaching. Paul says that it was a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks. What scorn he received as he invited cultured men and women, schooled in the famous wisdom of the Greeks, to encounter the one Sovereign Lord and Creator of the Universe through the crucified Jesus Christ. How could such wise people bow before Christ in repentance and submission, to make him Lord of their lives?

The Jews matched the wisdom of the Greeks with a sense of justice unparalleled among the peoples. They knew that there is a day of judgement. They knew that the greatest human need was of forgiveness and transformation of life. They knew that there is one true God, the maker of heaven and earth, and that he had done mighty works to save his people. They expected a new messianic creation in which righteousness would dwell and death defeated. They were seeking the signs and miracles and wonders of the new age. What they received in Christ was a man self-evidently cursed, because he had died on a tree. Jesus was the expected unexpected.

Think of a conversation between an imaginary Moses and an imaginary Socrates. Moses the master of morality, the mediator of the Law, the one before whom the Red Sea parted. The one who had actually said that if anyone dies on a tree in execution that person is cursed. The one who apparently invites us to a wowserish climb all the way up Mt Sinai to God by the strength of our own goodness. No, says such an imaginary Moses, No says such a Moses to Socrates, this crucified God is not the one. No, says our imaginary Socrates, for the god of the universe cannot be captured and put to death like this and does not become man. We may already, by wisdom, know that he is, but that he does not care for us.

But the real God opposes the human tendency to religious superiority or to intellectual assurance. God abhors wowserism. The actual teaching of Moses shows us that we are all cursed, none good, no not one, all gone astray. We meet him on his terms or not at all for he is God, not us. His approach fits both his character of just compassion and our situation as those who are lost and astray. It is not that he lacks wisdom nor that he cannot do mighty works. Indeed the words and the works of Jesus are some of the wisest ever spoken and the greatest ever done. In the end he was of course resurrected from the dead and now reigns over all things.

The essence of his approach through the cross affronts us because it presumes that we are in desperate need of help and because it is so unbearably humble and so astonishingly loving. This is the God-like way of drawing near to the unworthy, a way which is worthy only of the true God.

Why come as man? Why, to be like us so he can speak with us and represent us and share our lives and share our fate. Why die his death? So that he can bear the suffering that we deserve and open the way to our justification in judgement and our life through death. Here is the forgiveness which is our greatest need; 'he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities...all we, like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one - to his own way; and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.'

In our petty moralistic individualism we prefer to swim in the shallow pool of tolerance; God invites us to be overwhelmed with the joy of swimming in the deep ocean of his love. It is love, not tolerance which we see here and we can begin to see that unyielding despair can yield to unbounded hope and joy because at a given place and time, under Pontius Pilate, the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. The pitiful weakness of the crucified God is in fact his greatest exhibition of strength: 'For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men'. The face of the crucified Christ is the place where you will see God: there and nowhere else.

I have been hugely blessed in my life by the gift of two brothers. They have done me the honour of being here tonight and I want to say how much I love and esteem them both. They are outstanding teachers. I owe my off-drive to my older brother and my ability in the scrum to my younger brother. My older brother has given his professional life as a geologist to the marvellous *what, how* questions. I will never forget standing with him on a rock ledge as he described our surrounds in geological terms, so that I could see that my puny grasp of time had deceived

me, that we exist within a giant slow-moving but inexorable washing-machine ever churning and ever creating further, far reaching changes. This brilliant tutorial gave me an attack of intellectual vertigo. Likewise my younger brother, professionally speaking, has given his life to the *why* and *who* questions, and likewise I have learned from him that our trust in the living God demands our all, and that even our failures and our pain are redeemed by the good will of the God whose Son suffered death on the cross for us.

Since the two of them cover the field of our questions, you may wonder what they left for me. I have often described myself as a valley between two mountains. But even a valley has its moment. For you see there two other questions that also press in on us as creatures of time and place: they are the questions of the historian, *when?* and *where?* Thus I say as one reads history that there is some reason why modern science was born at a time when the Bible was rediscovered. The Biblical message that there was one great sovereign will in the universe and that this one was also our loving heavenly Father, helped cleanse the world of magic and pave the way for the fruitful *what* and *how* questions. And the reason why people believed there is a sovereign God who is also surprisingly our Father was that they believed that Jesus Christ has died for them on the cross, assuring them of salvation and the love of God and making them confident to study the world in its own terms, able to explore the *what* and the *how in a new way*. So a middle brother, a valley between two mountains, may have his uses after all in pointing to the partnership of the questions.

Now a historian should not try to be a prophet, but the study of God's word gives prophetic insights into our passage through time and space. And again I say that I am deeply concerned about our families, our community, our national life and the impact that the fissure between the *what* and the *why*, the *how* and the *who* questions, driven apart when indeed they belong together. And so I come to the chief reason for choosing this passage for this occasion. For my main audience is the thousands of men and women who make up the churches in our Diocese, the great organisations and institutions and particularly the clergy and Christian workers and our central task in this age is to serve God by making him known.

As you can see, this part of God's word tells us two things of central importance and I charge you never to abandon them:

The first is this. Trust in Christ crucified alone. The Christian life is shaped by the Cross. The only God we know is the God whose supreme work is the Cross of Christ. For despite what the world may say, in the wisdom of God, the world does not know God through wisdom. And you will not impress the world either. The world is always looking for human and divine celebrities, for gods suitable to its own desires. For our part we are always tempted to impress the world and to gain the world's good opinion. But frankly, fellow brothers and sisters, we don't look that good. And neither should we, for 'God chose what is foolish in the world in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong'. If anyone boast, let him boast in the Lord. To know who God is, we must know who we are - lost sinners, totally dependent on the mercy of God. This God, the God revealed in the cross, is the God of such astonishing, amazing grace and mercy that he puts all our efforts at self-justification to shame. We are saved by faith alone and not by works lest any one should boast. In my place condemned He stood. The divine substitution is the basis for our fellowship, the motive for our worship and the power which transforms lives. Brothers and sisters of the diocese, we can never graduate beyond the cross of Christ.

Second, as you live, so preach. Preach Christ crucified. The preaching of the cross is the old, old story of salvation of sinners through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the lamb of God. It is the only pathway we humans can follow to a knowledge of the real God. The Bible teaches us many things: there is still more light from Moses and the other prophets; but at the very centre of the Biblical message, indeed at the very centre of the history of the world, is the cross of Christ. Woe betide us if we preach a different message from this one. Woe betide us if in years to come the cross loses its power in our lives and we grow cold about the supreme work of God. Woe betide us if we so glorify religious experience or intellectual attainment and abandon the wisdom of God. Woe betide us if the message of the cross is simply one of the list of things we talk but not the passionate heart of our message. If the cross of Christ is anything to you, it must be everything.

And if we depart as Anglicans from this old, old story, we may continue for a while as a religious institution in Australia, but we will do nothing for our nation except condemn it to further confusion and despair. The cross of Christ is the key to answering all our questions - the what and the how as well as the why and the who and the when and the where.

So, when all is said and done, when all history is finished and the Lord returns in glory to judge the living and the dead, may it be that our record was this - that we lived and we preached Christ crucified...the wisdom of God and the power of God.

Behold, behold, the Lamb.