

Response to Bruce Kaye – Witness in the Emerald City

Bruce Kaye and I are, it may disappoint you to learn, in furious agreement on his paper about witness in the Emerald City. I am delighted and inspired by his emphasis on the theme of witness, and the way in which he speaks about the narrative of the Christian life as an act of witness. This is probably because we have drunk similarly from the wells of Bruce's friend Stanley Hauerwas.

Hauerwas, who has only in these latter decades become an himself an Anglican, offers a strong challenge from his Methodist roots and his interest in the Mennonites to an Anglican notion of the church which has seen itself as the chaplain of the state, the guardian of privilege, and all too often the blesser of guns.

And this is where we should be aware of just how radical Bruce Kaye's challenge to Anglican Christianity is. The Greek word for witness is of course 'martus', from which we get the words 'martyr' and 'martyrdom'. Since Christians are called to 'die to self', and to 'take up their cross', martyrdom is the possibility latent in the Christian identity, for all Christians are called to the 'witness' or 'testimony' that might result in bloody martyrdom. As the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes:

...this does not mean that every single Christian must suffer bloody martyrdom, but he must consider the entire case as the *external representation of the inner reality out of which he lives*.

Christian baptism is a symbol of the offering of the old self over to death which is what every Christian does as an identification with Jesus Christ. It is a kind of proto-martyrdom, with its act of testimony to Christ and renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Now we have to be careful here: the Christian does not validate his or her witness by seeing it persecuted, as if we should goad our neighbours into having us killed. But the history and symbol of martyrdom - which is really of course the symbol of the cross of Christ - is a reminder of what the Christian life might *cost*, if we are faithful. There is not a promise from above that we will be spared.

Of course, this is a highly controversial topic in contemporary public discourse, since the spectre of religious violence of any kind hangs heavy over liberal democracy. Even to talk of martyrdom is to evoke images of the twin towers and of suicide bombers. The rhetoric of martyrdom has been put to appalling use. If we are to speak of 'witness' in the way Bruce has suggested, how shall we then avoid becoming what our neighbours fear we must become if we are too keen about our faith?

Now, as Bruce has pointed out, the task of testifying the Christ in Sydney is made more difficult not because Christians are plunged into the conflagration that we saw recently in an All Saints' Anglican Church in Peshawar, Pakistan; but because we are enduring the slow persecution of apathy - which is not like being beaten with a rod of iron but more like, to quote the immortal words of Paul Keating, being flogged with a warm lettuce. The lettuce wears you down, but you just don't realise it.

Bruce is right in saying that attending to how we meet together will prepare us best for witness in the world. We forget sometimes simply how contemporary and counter-cultural Anglican liturgy is, or has become in time: we praise not the rulers of the world but the creator of all things in whose hand are all times; we do not engage in denials, but we confess our sins to the God who is merciful and just; we do not celebrate our own achievements in accumulating more things, but we give thanks to the God from whom all things graciously come, and we learn to give generously; we do not meet to share our various opinions, but to hear from the Word of God; we do not seek vengeance but learn to forgive as we have been forgiven; we do not gorge ourselves on fast food, but eat of him who died for us, and our nourished by his death; we learn not to despair at death, but to hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

I feel the cutting edge of Bruce's challenge most keenly as a theologian and pastor, for he indirectly charges me and those like me with the task of sustaining and equipping Christians 'for witness in the world in which they live'. As he puts it, 'a church community should be providing help in areas such as family life, work, life in business corporations, professions, government, public bureaucracies and in areas of sport, recreation, and public conversation - in other words those discrete areas where the members of a church community have to live a Christian life'. What that means for the pastoral ministry is that the calling is no longer simply schooling people in the faith, but schooling them in the life of faith. It probably always was that: but now, in an increasingly complex, post-Christian city, the job of discovering what the gospel of Jesus Christ means in every situation is not straightforward. Thus, to instruct (say) a young Christian barrister in the practice of the law as a Christian can never be simply one-sided, since the pastor does not usually have any idea what confronts a barrister day by day. A conversation is needed by which the gap between theology and experience is bridged. Without that conversation, we are left with what happens all too often: a compartmentalisation of a life, in which the faith that one espouses and what one actually does are never actually brought together.