

KEITH'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

Michael Horsburgh

This paper began as a review of a book by Sydney priest and former Moore College lecturer, Dr Keith Mascord.¹ The review will appear in the June/July 2016 edition of *Parish Connections*. I know Keith Mascord and admire him for the way in which he has followed with integrity a progress out of fundamentalism, the ideology of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and the security that they both offered into what must now seem to him to be a wilderness. Unable to obtain a parish in Sydney, although he might well do so in any other Australian diocese, he has written a second book about his journey. The first, *A Restless Faith*, was essentially biographical. His second volume discusses in more detail the theological, philosophical and scientific issues in beliefs and doctrines arising from the proposition that the Bible is inerrant in everything that it says. It is deeply researched and exceedingly generous to those who have cast him into the outer darkness; far more generous than they have been to him. It is a model that the customary vicious debates in the Sydney diocese could well follow.

I trust that he will, equally generously, forgive the apparently facetious title that I have given both to the review and to this article. I have never been an evangelical conservative in the Sydney style. My initial Methodism was at the more liberal end of that denomination. My theological education was informed by Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I have never been a Calvinist, having been brought up in the traditional Arminianism of Methodism. I can say that I have never had a serious theological discussion in which any of the following matters were proposed: that the Bible is inerrant in everything it says; that the world is only about 6,000 years old; that Adam and Eve were real historical persons; that Noah's flood took place over the whole world. I am quite comfortable with the idea that these Biblical stories are myths in the larger meanings of that term and that our hermeneutical task is to discover their meaning for us today.

As I have said from the pulpit in St James', these are true stories that never happened. Although in the form of narratives, they are actually descriptions of the human condition. They are acutely observant of our pretensions and failings. To treat them otherwise is to distract ourselves from their deep meanings and to lessen the possibility that they might be heeded.

It may come as a shock to the readers of Keith's book to discover that these matters are seriously discussed in the Sydney diocese of today. As I read into the book it seemed to me that I was possibly a visitor from Mars discovering a strange world based in assumptions that I could not even begin to understand. It is little wonder that a very large proportion of our compatriots dismiss Christianity as completely implausible. And so they should, if that is who and what we are. We may even wonder why Keith bothers to engage with these debates. More to the point, why should we bother to read about them?

If it were necessary to establish the currency of such arguments, we need go no further than the sermon preached by Archbishop Glenn Davies in St Andrews Cathedral on Easter Day this year. The *Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 March 2016, reported on his sermon as follows:

¹ Keith Mascord, *Faith Without Fear: risky choices facing contemporary Christians*, Northcote, Morningstar Publishing, 2016, 260 pp. (Can be purchased online at <http://wp.arestlessfaith.com.au/>)

“Death is our enemy. Death is not natural to this world... death is an intruder into our world and it is not the way God made the world when everything was good,” he said. Dr Davies said death was the result of sin, and that Adam and Eve only faced the possibility of death once they sinned.²

Taking this report at face value suggests that our Archbishop was proposing that Adam and Eve were real historical figures; that the Garden of Eden was a real place; that the Biblical record of the Fall is factually correct and that Adam and Eve would otherwise have lived forever. It is not clear whether they would have had equally immortal children, raising the question of the population of the world.

I was somewhat surprised to read the report and considered that he might have been speaking in a figurative way, representing the meaning of the text, not asserting its historicity. So I listened to the whole sermon on the Cathedral website.³ It seemed to me that my original impression was correct. Archbishop Davies appeared to treat the Creation story in the same way as he treated the Resurrection, as a matter of fact.

The text has considerable problems, including suggestions that there might have been original persons other than Adam and Eve. They include the record that God marked Cain, the murderer of his brother Abel, in such a way as to prevent others from killing him. Cain then went away and took a wife. The questions are where the persons who might have killed Cain came from and who bore the woman he married. It is also the case that chapters 4 and 5 of Genesis contain different genealogies of Adam’s descendants. There is no evidence to support the historicity of these records apart from accepting the inerrancy of the biblical text.

Nevertheless, the problem here is not the text but the persistence of literalist views of a claimed inerrant source. Neither is this only an internal matter about which Christians might have different opinions. This is a matter that affects how Christians relate to the world in which they live. As Christians, we are the beneficiaries of scientific advances that have changed the ways in which we all live, not always for the better, but frequently so. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot accept the benefits of science and reject its conclusions when they do not suit us. To do this risks justified ridicule. We quickly become irrelevant. This is a shame because we have much to say to the world in ways that do not depend on rejecting science.

So, I think that there are several reasons why Keith Mascord’s book is important for us “non-believers”. The first is that the type of Christianity described by Keith has captured the public definition of our faith. In particular, the political group, Australian Christian Lobby, purports to represent us when negotiating with parliamentarians. They appear to have considerable influence. They certainly do not represent me, nor, I suspect, do they represent the majority of Christians in Australia. I find it difficult to confess to being a Christian without qualifying my statement with a “but not like them”. We need to know who they are who have usurped our faith. The more so, since the positions that they advocate will, in the long run, serve to lock us out of the public space altogether.

Second, we live in the ecclesiastical world that Keith describes. We may not see it in our diocesan visitors, but it is out there. There are signs that some parts of that world are

² <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/archbishop-uses-easter-sunday-sermon-to-condemn-brussels-attacks-20160327-gnrr46.html>

³ <http://www.sydneycathedral.com/talks/>

cracking up and we need to understand both what that world is and why it sits on the edge of a precipice.

Third, and most importantly, we need to read the second half of Keith's book. In the second half, it is as though Keith has emerged from Wonderland and has started to live in the real world. He has some important things to say to all Christians who seek to live faithfully and intelligently in the 21st century.

The ideology operating in large parts of the Sydney diocese, while it may sound extreme, serves, as Keith demonstrates, to shore up their position on more contemporary social issues, in particular, the place of women and opposition to the acceptance of the LGBTI community in, for example, access to legal marriage. Biblical inerrancy is supported, not because it can be substantiated, but because of what will be admitted if it is abandoned. Thus inerrancy is a tool for social conservatism. We emerge from Wonderland at this point also, because with this social conservatism comes actual hurt and harm to both women and gays. One of Keith's motivations in writing this book is to seek in some way to stem these adverse consequences.

Moreover, the Sydney diocese has acted opportunistically in forming an international alliance with African and Asian parts of the Anglican Communion in pursuit of its conservative agenda. I say opportunistically, because Sydney lives in a modern or post-modern culture and acts that way in most things. Those with whom it is allied are more traditional in their cultures. The two groups are fighting different battles.

What does Keith propose as the alternative? Here are the chapter headings that he uses:

- The courage to be honest
- The exhilarating risk of inquisitiveness
- The inescapable need for appropriation (to incorporate contemporary knowledge into our faith)
- The reliable guidance of love
- The resilience of hope

These are virtues that we need whether or not we are engaging in a struggle with outdated theologies. It goes without saying that Keith has researched his arguments meticulously and presented them dispassionately. That is who he is. We may not have Keith's scholarship, I know that I don't, but I envy his persistence, honesty and faith.