

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

Commemoration of Bishop William Grant Broughton

First Bishop of Australia (1788 - 1853)

Choral Evensong

25 February 2018

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Rector of St James

Readings: Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34: 11-16; 1 Peter 5: 1-4.

William Grant Broughton, the first and only Bishop of Australia, was a man of his times. He was a scholar, a Tory, a moderate high-churchman, and one who was very aware of his position in colonial society. The Late Ken Cable described his vision for the church as follows:

'The church would have a paternal concern for convicts, Aborigines and settlers in the new areas, and a special responsibility for the organization and control of education with the financial and official backing of the state, for it was above all the national church, established in law, charged with the care of all subjects of the Crown, apostolic in its doctrine and government.'

(K. J. Cable, 'Broughton, William Grant', Australian Dictionary of Biography)

Broughton's idea was to plant British society into Australian soil, with an established church, religious educational institutions (including the university), and a class system to provide social order. It was flawed, and he was not to have his way; which was ultimately a good thing.

Historically, religion has played a most significant yet ambiguous role in the development of Australian society. On the one hand, it shaped and developed many of our social, educational and political institutions; yet on the other hand, it has created social dysfunction and conflict.

Much of the problem has arisen from the way that various religious institutions have sought to establish and maintain their status as well as keep the loyalty of their adherents. The resulting tensions from these activities are understood to be more manifestations of ethnic and class rivalry rather than differing theologies or spirituality. Indeed, such exclusivist attitudes and practices in the churches were common in the past and are still present with us today.

It is therefore with a degree of irony, that in this twenty-first century secularist age, religious concerns dominate matters of national security and drive much of our domestic policy in education, welfare and the law – including the current debate over ‘freedom of religion’. Today, Australia has many expressions of faith; Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and atheist are all present in the market-place of ideas. Religion seems to be on the move in our own times; but has been its journey in Australia? Tonight, I will explore some of the foundations upon which Bishop Broughton sought to build a church.

Settlement at Sydney Cove

When the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove in 1788, the first church service did not happen until just over a week later. It would appear that Governor Arthur Phillip had little interest in establishing this new British colony with prayer, and the chaplain had difficulty in gaining a congregation.

What happened became indicative of the social tensions that have shaped much of our society ever since. The colony then consisted of two classes of people, convict and gaoler; neither of which seemed particularly interested in religion. The first week of the settlement focused on the practical matters of survival in a strange and seemingly hostile land. It was recorded as being a time of hard work and drunkenness. This was no journey of the Pilgrim Fathers to a New World seeking fleeing religious persecution!

Eventually the Chaplain, Richard Johnson, with the assistance of the Governor, gathered people for worship. It was a compulsory church parade for both social classes held under a tree in what is now Bligh Street. It marked the beginning of the chaplain’s regular duties of marriages, baptisms and funerals, visiting the sick and dying, attending executions, and admonishing both convict and gaoler alike to lead moral lives. Four years later, there was still no permanent church building and little material support for the Chaplain. Johnson returned to England a broken man. Indeed, there was to be little provision for the work of the church until the arrival of Governor Macquarie in 1810.

The next chaplain to arrive in the colony was made of sterner stuff. Arriving in 1794, the Reverend Samuel Marsden is an enigma in the histories of Australia and New Zealand. He is derided by many in Australia as the ‘Flogging Parson’; yet he is revered in New Zealand as the one who brought Christianity and enlightenment to the Maori people. There being few educated people in the colony, Marsden (perhaps foolishly) accepted the position of magistrate. It proved to be a role at odds with his religious responsibilities and led to him being seen more as a moral policeman rather than a loving pastor. In Australia, Marsden became an icon of an unhealthy relationship between church and state.

Indigenous Australia

Meanwhile, the aboriginal people had a very different approach to religion in a land that was for them inhabited by spirits in trees, rocks and lakes. They knew how to live and thrive here and they took their religion seriously. Nevertheless, many of the white invaders (as the aborigines came to understand the newcomers), seemed to show little respect for the land and even less for its original inhabitants.

Some colonisers accorded them the status of 'noble savage', yet in time the aboriginal people were to be treated as less than human by those who shot, poisoned and enslaved them. It is therefore unsurprising that many aborigines directed their rage toward white people - including their values and religion. But it was not all bad news; many people of faith also spoke up for the rights of aboriginal people and protected them from those who would do them harm.

The Irish Question

Most members of the First Fleet were Church of England (now Anglican), however with subsequent fleets and the coming of free-settlers many other Christian denominations arrived; including Roman Catholics from Ireland, Presbyterians from Scotland and Methodists and Congregationalists from 'working-class' England.

This proved to be an uncomfortable situation as the Irish Rebellion of 1798 had precipitated a large increase in the number of Irish convicts, most of whom were Roman Catholic and were political deportees rather than common criminals. By the early nineteenth century, a quarter of the population of NSW was Roman Catholic. Yet, they were not allowed to practice their religion.

Early Roman Catholicism in Australia therefore identified itself as a persecuted church. Being predominately Irish, the authorities saw them as subversive and dangerous and they were not permitted to have their own clergy until 1820.

A Secular State and a Sectarian Church

The Australian Constitution of 1900 states that there is to be no 'established religion' in Australia. Despite the efforts of some colonial pioneers, such as Bishop Broughton, to copy the political institutions of the 'mother country'. The early administrators knew that, given the ethnic and religious mix, any official favouritism of one group would lead to hostility and civil strife. A new model was required, and so the idea of a 'secular state' was adopted, which included a division between church and state.

Religion, however, was not left deprived; the Church Act of 1836, promoted by Broughton, provided generous government subsidies for clergy, construction of churches and land grants to a range of Christian denominations and Jews. The state,

having supported religion, then disengaged itself from the influence of any particular religious group and proceeded to create secular structures to support society.

Despite this, several churches sought to retain or develop a duplication of these services for the benefit of their members, as well as a way to inculcate their beliefs and a means to exert control over their communities. This resulted in the creation of dual secular and sectarian institutions in the areas of education and health.

Gold and Free Settlers

From around 1820, large numbers of free-settlers started to arrive, which led to the development of new colonies and the establishment of fresh business opportunities. Yet, it was the Gold Rush (from around the 1850 onward) that had a huge economic and social impact on Australia. People poured onto the goldfields from across the world searching for wealth and opportunity. Greed and quick material success motivated many, the economy prospered and the churches grew thanks to the benefit of mammon.

The immigrants were not only from the British Isles, but also came from mainland Europe, the United States, China and other parts of Asia. The melting pot of multiculturalism has its roots back in the mid-nineteenth century. Each group brought their own religion with them, many of which were in some sense 'established' or dominant in their homelands. Churches, joss houses, synagogues and mosques were built on Australian soil to meet the religious and cultural needs of the new-comers.

The Failure of Institutional Religion

This was the world into which Bishop Broughton came and exercised his ministry, first as Archdeacon and then as Bishop. The colonial period of Australian religious history was one based on class and ethnic division. One's religion was an indicator of one's social standing, political allegiances and ethnic origins. Moreover, through the churches the political concerns and tensions of the mother countries also became the political concerns and tensions of the colony.

Religion enhanced identity and membership of a social group, but it was based upon connections that were becoming more distant as the colony grew and people committed to staying in this new land. Yet, at the same time, the churches sought to reinforce their distinctions and divisions as they grew in power and influence.

The nineteenth century was therefore an age of strong yet divided religious institutions that ordered and directed society as much as they could, but it was not sustainable. This was part of the legacy of Roman Catholic Archbishop Bede Polding, Presbyterian John Dunmore Lang, and Anglican Bishop William Grant Broughton.

This cultural heritage created profound challenges for the churches in the twentieth century, which will need to be explored at another time. It also continues to create missional problems for the churches today and is a contributing factor in the decline of church participation from around 50% of the population in the 1950s to currently around 8%. Institutional religion and its focus on property, status and control has failed, and we are now merely arguing over control of the assets.

Until we, the church, overcome such divisions and conflicts, the Christian faith will struggle to have anything meaningful to say to a society that is still searching for meaning. Nevertheless, the Royal Commission into institutional abuse of children, while being principally about justice, might also be the catalyst for a new reformation that will lead the us into a new way of being.