

Charles Strong Trust Lecture – Part 2

Adelaide - 2013

A Far Cry: Resounding Call to all Australians

'Missionary Turned Around: Bound to be free'.

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Good evening. Tonight both Betty and I take the overall topic: A Far Cry: The Resounding Call to all Australians. Inspired by the theme of the Conference *The Paradox of Liberation and Religion*, my paper is entitled 'Missionary Turned Around: Bound to be free'.

In the daily dying and rising, many of us live this paradox if you like, of 'religion' and 'liberation'. The word 'religion' originates from the Latin '*religio*' meaning 'to bind'; in the Christian context, we are tied to Him, Jesus; and therein lies the freedom: we are bound to be free.

Theological writings, papal encyclicals, and ecclesial statements on 'Mission' and 'Evangelisation' include words and ideas like 'teach', 'empower', 'proclaim', 'develop', each one important, yet all nonetheless pointing still towards an emphasis on 'what we will give you'.¹ In today's world, mission talk and practice needs to reflect what we might learn, how we might grow, and in what ways we *all* may be challenged, changed, enriched. Key words and approaches must be 'respectful attention', 'listening', 'waiting', 'restraint', 'humility', 'repentance', 'courtesy'.

In this paper I want to reflect on ways in which I had and have my understanding of mission transformed by people to whom I thought I was 'missioning' -

Mission to the Aborigines! 'To' and 'For' the Aborigines! But early on, and all along, the call and experience was more about being missioned to *by the Aborigines*. Significant Aboriginal women and men have been companions on the journey.² Let me share some stories.

¹ The ground-breaking work of renowned theologian, Steve Bevans, must be acknowledged. His insights into mission as 'prophetic dialogue', have brought profound shifts into discourse on mission. See for example his article 'A Theology of Mission for the Church of the Twenty-First Century: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue' in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications 2011.

² Although this paper focuses on relationships with Aboriginal women, there are equally important stories to be told around the friendships made with people like Aboriginal Deacons Boniface Perdjert, Theodore Tipiloura and others, with Rev Wali Fejo, Bishop Saibo Mabo, as well as with Aboriginal leaders like Graeme Mundine and Wenten Rubuntja.

Demkadath Kilingkiling Thardim (Sr Beatrice Thardim olsh) of the Yetpela clan in Northern Australia and myself, coming from Hamilton in country Victoria, met as young adults in the 60's. We both made our Novitiate in the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Bowral, New South Wales. Friendship remained strong over the years, but it was especially in the final years of Beatrice's life that she taught me most.

Beatrice had spent some years teaching in Catholic schools before being employed by the Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education as an Advisor in Early Childhood Learning. Later she was employed by the NT Health Department, working in Northern and Central Australia with educational and health programs. As well as this, her qualifications as a language interpreter equipped her for work in Darwin's Law Courts. During all these years – up until 2003 when she died, I too was living and working in the Northern Territory. In congregational and community settings, as well as in the work place, we met often, companions and sisters all along the way³.

For the last 10 years of her life Beatrice suffered, as do too many Aboriginal Australians, with kidney disease. She had to let go of many of her dreams and plans; but she never let go of the hopes she had for her people. Her long and patient suffering became her new way of being – as our own motto says - 'His Heart on earth'. Beatrice taught me that being a missionary was as much about 'being' as 'doing', as much about receiving, as of giving, and especially about the Paschal Mystery of living and dying, with grace, living *into* the dying: bound to be free.

Jesus himself was a Man on a Mission! *His* Resurrection came in the Paschal Mystery of His living and dying; living into death turned into Resurrection!

Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, He had announced his own 'mission statement' which was to bring good news to the poor and release to captives (Lk 4:18). He had a dream for mission: 'I have come to cast fire upon the earth' (Lk 12:49). This was 'turned around', in a sense, as He was, and from the start. Initially resisting the call at Cana in Galilee, at His Mother's quiet invitation, He was moved to face His public mission. And along the way, in the encounter with the Canaanite woman⁴, for example, His understanding of those to whom He was called, was fundamentally challenged.

Let me give you another story of someone who significantly influences my ways of understanding and living mission.

A well-known Aboriginal activist, educator, and church leader in Melbourne is Vicki (Walker) Clark. I came to know Vicki quite well during her Theological studies at Nungalinga College in Darwin where I worked. Both Betty and I speak tonight with Vicki's endorsement and encouragement. For many years Vicki has been leader and co-ordinator of Victoria's Catholic Aboriginal Community. She has also made significant contributions over the years to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Catholic Council (NATSICC); her persevering work with Bishops and priests and her teaching ministry with the 'mainstream' church never wavers.

Vicki has been initiator or founding member of groups such as Reconciliation Victoria, Opening the Doors Foundation (making education accessible for Aboriginal students), and Fire Carriers – an

³ Along with dear friend and colleague, community leader Theodora Parmbuk, Beatrice was of great support in the late 90's when I worked on my PhD thesis 'Catholic Sacrament engaging with Wadeye ritual'.

⁴ Mt 15:21-28

initiative for Victorian schools and other institutions, such as Yarra Theological Union where I work today. Vicki has recently produced a set of lessons accompanied by her own beautiful Aboriginal paintings, around the theme of the Sacraments. And it was her leadership that inspired the amazing bollards which accompanied the Lenten Liturgies prepared this year and seen displayed proudly by secondary school students in Melbourne's Federation Square on Feb 13th (5th anniversary of the National Apology).

Vicki – absolutely- is a woman on mission, *Missio Dei*. Her faith sustains and impels her. Vicki heard Pope John Paul II say to indigenous Australians in Alice Springs, 1986: 'The church in Australia will not be fully the church Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.' Vicki sees this as a life-time mission. She does not give up on solidarity, nor on reconciliation, the two-way story⁵.

Solidarity is more than an ideal, or an attitude for Vicki. She lives constantly what the distinguished Afro American theologian Shawn Copeland has written about: 'Solidarity is a task, a praxis through which responsible relationships between and among persons (between and among groups) may be created and expressed, mended and renewed.'⁶

The renowned missiologist, Robert Schreiter, who says that the ministry of reconciliation 'is more a spirituality than a strategy' suggests that 'reconciliation as a paradigm for mission goes beyond a liberation from oppression to a liberation for building a new creation.'⁷ Vicki's example teaches me about working hard and persevering; and despite repeated set-backs, to continue the struggle, to follow the Dreaming faithfully and simply, to keep on.

And now – a woman from Australia's Central Desert: Lyakiye, Agnes Palmer. Like all of us, she lived with her own shadows, her own addictions, her own dark places. She faced her demons, named them, dealt with them. From this place of truth and compassion, she became one of the Northern Territory's most respected teachers. She lived and worked in Darwin, in Katherine as well as in Central Australia. Lyakiye was also a qualified Counsellor with Central Australian Health, becoming director and facilitator of programs in Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation. Before her death she worked for some years as Co-ordinator of the Healing Centre in the Santa Teresa community. She said once 'God is in every person. The Ngkarte is there, the Spirit is there.'⁸ It was during my time in Alice Springs when Lyakiye was teaching in the school, as well as times at Nungalinga in Darwin, that I

⁵ Stefan Girola in his paper 'The Catholic Church in Australia and the 'Great Australian Silence' (in Hall and Hendriks) has written 'that the Catholic Bishops' views on the colonisation of the Australian nation were consistent with those that Stanner regarded as expressions of a 'Great Australian Silence' (220). Some might argue the silence remains.

⁶ Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race and being*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 95.

⁷ Schreiter explores reconciliation as a model both of and for mission in his paper 'The Emergence of Reconciliation as a Paradigm for Mission,' in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, ed. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 9-30..

⁸ *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History*, contains stories narrated or written by Aboriginal Australians. Agnes Palmer's story appears on pages 127-132.

learnt to be a better teacher by working alongside her, witnessing the transforming power of story-telling, of silence, and of sacred ritual.⁹

I will always remember her words during an interview I was conducting with regard to current missionaries: She said 'We invite them to sit down with us, to make a retreat with us, to listen to us and to learn from us'.¹⁰

Lyakiye understood Aboriginal Christian spirituality as searching for life in the face of death. She was one of a group who met regularly in Alice Springs in the year preceding Pope John Paul's visit. A prayer composed and prayed frequently during that time included the words: 'Make the knowledge of you grow strong in all people, so that You can be at home in us and we can make a home for everyone in our land.' Delio, in his wonderful book *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* has written, 'To make a place for God within is to enter into the heart, to let go in that inner space where God lives and evolve in greater unity in love...'¹¹ Lyayike, through her pain as well as her faithful loving, knew 'that inner space where God lives'.

Today for people on mission, it is important to 'have a handle' on things from the outset and to be knowledgeable about historical, religious, political, cultural and linguistic context. Lyakiye did not strive to be the perfect package. She was more intent on entering into liberating mission in the humble home places, including that place of one's own vulnerabilities¹². Ultimately, Lyakiye understood Aboriginal Christian spirituality as searching for life in the face of death. Her fidelity to mission sprang from a tender relationship with God, with the Creator Spirit as she would say; and bringing a profound sense of service and of respectful meeting with others, her way was about spreading the Gospel from the inside out. Lyakiye challenged me to live more honestly with my limitations, and above all, to keep on loving.

A further reflection: To respect this dear friend (L) I will not give her name. She gives me a precious, if hard lesson.

L and I were the best of friends. Like sisters. A serious issue brought us together one morning. She needed my understanding so much, my continuing support. I longed to give more. But there were hard words, a sense of loss, disappointment, helplessness. This was a woman who had/had given her life for family, community, church. I was left feeling hopeless, a faded friend.

⁹ In 1995, along with Saibo Mabo, Djiniyini Gondarra and other indigenous students, Lyakiye participated in an Aboriginal Spirituality course at Nunglinya College in Darwin. Lyakiye was to return in the following years as visiting lecturer.

¹⁰ Many people from the Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) and Alice Springs communities share similar views. For many years, friend and 'yaye', Margaret Heffernan has been a major contributor in the regular 'Campfire in the Heart' gatherings in Alice Springs.

¹¹ Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, (Maryknoll, NY:Orbis Books, 2013), 90-91.

¹² Mary Doak has noted that we often 'attempt to replicate the hierarchies of this world in the reign of God, while we overlook the hope borne by the "insignificant," the powerless, the destitute, and the despised who continue to affirm life and love, to strengthen relationships and to support each other in the midst of pain and suffering.' In *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century*, ed. Lassalle-Klein, Robert, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 231.

There are often questions unanswered, dreams unfulfilled, mission 'projects' incomplete. Try as we might there are times when we are unable to go that extra mile. But sometimes, congratulating ourselves on what we think may have been achieved, we are often reluctant to acknowledge mistakes and to address the consequences.

Recently I received a phone call from L. She spoke with the old familiar ease, with warmth and kindness; she spoke friend to friend. Earlier troubles had vanished. We are all, in the end, as L shows me so well, simply companions of the journey, needing each other, caring for one another.

As I began this talk, I conclude now with the story of another member of my religious congregation, Aboriginal woman, Sr. Agatha Midaringi. After her Novitiate days in the 70's, Agatha studied at the Randwick Training Hospital and received accreditation as a Health Worker. Returning to her home community at Nauiyu Nambiyu, Agatha was to become Director of the Daly River Health Centre. During this period when I was teaching in the community school¹³, she and I lived together in our convent community. Later Agatha went as missionary to Papua New Guinea and it was during this time that she became ill, dying of cancer back in Australia in 1984. When I think of all the many Sisters with whom I have been privileged to share life, it is Agatha whose smile and laughing eyes shine brightest. In missiological studies, too infrequently is there mention of companionship, friendship and joy. Agatha taught me by example, over and over, that being on mission is not only about hard work, sacrifice, conflict, alienation – even failure, but about vitality and enthusiasm and that the source of this freedom was the One, the Holy Mystery we call God, who draws us into that great *Missio Dei*. Agatha's radiating spirit was one of abiding and joyful trust. When the heart is open, the Spirit breathes – and dances!

We are all most certainly blessed and even potentiallyⁱ 'liberated' by the poor with whom we share life and land: the forgotten and excluded of this world who are indeed people of the Kingdom, friends of God. But here in Australia, the 'resounding call' from the ones who are devalued and oppressed, remains 'a far cry'. We must find better ways to respond to the voices of this land and its first peoples, voices calling out for recognition¹⁴, for life, voices too often silenced. It is in recognizing our own poverty of spirit, knowing our dependence on God and on others and in allowing ourselves to learn and receive from the poor of our land that sometimes, with God's grace, we become persons turned around. In such a new place we may find ourselves liberated, 'bound to be free'.

Bevans, Stephen, 'A Theology of Mission for the Church of the Twenty-First Century: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue.' In *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Stephen Bevans and Katrina Tahaafe-Williams, 99-108. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

Copeland, M.Shawn, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race and being*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Delio. Iliia, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.

¹³ Soon after I left Nauiyu Nambiyu, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, (another strong Catholic Aboriginal woman and friend) became Principal of the school. Already a community leader, Miriam was also a recognized artist in Australia and was to become a renowned public speaker and activist; her famous 'Dadirri' paper is well-loved and widely quoted. Miriam's charismatic presence and vision have inspired countless Australians.

¹⁴ See MK Turner's amazing book '*Iwenhe Tyerrtye: What it means to be an Aboriginal person*'. Institute for Aboriginal Development: Alice Springs, 2003.

Mary Doak, 'Jesus of Galilee: Hope for a globalized world in despair.' In *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century*, ed. Lassalle-Klein, Robert, 221-234, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.

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