

**Sermon preached by Gerald Beaumont at St John's, Camberwell on 10<sup>th</sup> February  
2008 Lent 1 Year A**

About two years ago, here at St John's, many of us enjoyed a very special evening.

We opened the Chancel space to three young Aboriginal men who danced the story of the Temptation of Jesus, in the context of a Eucharist celebrated by Fr Wayne and Valmai Connelly, themselves Aboriginal people from the Far North.

They came from the Yarrabah community outside Cairns. I recollect that the space pulsed and echoed with the life of the story told as we have never heard or seen it told before.

In the midst of a Liturgy that was familiar to us, there emerged this quite foreign cultural revelation.

The young men and their mentors, having danced us all out of the Church, then ate with us and, in due course, offered testimonies to God's gracious intervention, in their previously wrecked lives.

We heard shy recitations of remarkable recoveries, of violence and restoration, of despair and new life.

The cultural distance between us may have been immense, but it was not only that which seemed strange. There was a language being used openly, which most of us here find hard to use. A particular kind of religious language. There was, in it, both an obvious intimacy with God, and a passion to let no opportunity pass in which God might be praised.

And these were no gifted orators. They spoke passionately but falteringly of their painful journeys. And all who heard them were impressed, and perhaps a little envious, of the honesty, courage and commitment so evident in the lives of these lovely people. They modelled for us, an enthusiasm to share the great good that God had wrought in previously broken and desperate lives. These were accounts of miracles, at which we could only wonder and make our own quiet responses of gratitude to God.

But there was, in the experience also, a challenge to enter into another spiritual space, almost another spiritual dimension.

It may be that Norman, Colin, and Sean, and Wayne and Valmai were speaking to us over a gulf much wider than just that of colour and race. These people seemed to be seeing the world in the way that Jesus could, but that many of us, perhaps most of us, find very difficult.

The lives of those young dancers had started again and, this time, with a consciousness of the power of God's Spirit that guaranteed healing or salvation.

It is well for us to be aware of these dramatic spiritual realities as a kind of talisman of hope as we approach the expected events of the week before us. A week in which the new Government of our country will, on behalf of the Government, say “Sorry” to the indigenous people of our land for the pain of a terrible separation.

As our Government prepares to issue the apology, that so many people, white and black, have longed to hear, we need to consider what this might mean for us as both a community of Christians, and also as individuals. We need also to consider what it might mean for such as our friends from Yarrabah. And this is no simple matter.

Writing in The Age newspaper a week ago, Wesley Aird ( a member of the Gold Coast Native Title Group and the Bennelong Society board and formerly a member of the National Indigenous Council ) offered a sobering reflection on what the saying “ Sorry “ might really mean. He concluded: “If I am correctly understanding the message coming from the Government, after the apology we can all ‘move on’.

With the potential to either miss, confuse or disappoint most of the population, it seems hard to understand how, for most of us, the apology can achieve much at all. And there’s nothing wrong with that just as long as we understand its intent as well as its limitations and we don’t let our expectations get out of hand.”

Mr Aird emphasised that the “safe path out of poverty is education followed by valued work; to be full participants in society on an equal basis with the rest of Australia. Not everyone can achieve that on their own, and the apology will do nothing to reduce the need for support for those trying to get off welfare.”

The arguments rage too and fro, and often with great bitterness on all sides. What is to be done that will change the way things are? Whatever the origins, whatever the carelessness and dysfunction all round, the facts of practical and demonstrable disadvantage declare themselves.

In the story of the temptations of Jesus, so tellingly danced by the young men from Yarrabah, we may begin to understand that God is showing us that there is no quick-fix, no stone-to-bread miracles to be called upon, but rather a co-operation with God in the simple grinding business of practical and selfless loving. An obligation on all Christians that will be found to be costly in a variety of ways, and not least in a form of hand-to-hand combat with the Satanic seductions of our best intentions.

Above all else there is an absolute requirement that we take the trouble to draw close to those entrusted to our care. A failure to do this in times often not so very long passed, has ensured that our representatives, as well as ourselves, have missed crucial clues to another way of seeing and acting.

The Yarrabah men showed us how it may be done, as have other passing angels of mercy. And sometimes the decisive moment is upon us almost before we are aware of it. A moment that lifts us over and beyond the boundaries of even our most subtle prejudice, and into God’s kingdom of the Spirit, in which our eyes are opened to the truth of our

profound relatedness to all others, whatever their condition or whatever their strange journeys.

One night, some time ago, I met a man who had had a fair bit to drink. We'd brushed past each other outside the Casualty Department at a large metropolitan hospital.

I Said "G'day" to him as I passed and, laden with bags and parcels, he turned slowly around and called out to me: "Father?"

I stopped and turned to see what he wanted,. I figured he'd put the bite on me for a few dollars. I wasn't entirely mistaken. But it wasn't quite in the usual way.

He told me his wife was in Casualty, and that he was concerned she would run away. She'd already unhooked herself from a drip and escaped earlier that night.

He said they had no money, and he had nowhere to stay. So I made a phone call, and organised a place for him close by.

But he was still agitated. He really wanted me to speak to his wife. Maybe if I spoke to her she would be re-assured.

We found her in a little cubicle. A gentle, dark, full-blood Aboriginal woman from the Kimberleys. Four months pregnant, and not very well at all.

We spoke a little. She seemed to accept that her husband would be really looked after, and that he would be back for her.

After a while, we left, and I drove the man to a hostel and arranged for him to stay the night. He said they'd see me in the morning at church. They didn't and I never saw them again.

On the way to the hostel, the man had spoken of his children from a former marriage. One had done well. The other, he said, was "jail bait", just like his father. He laughed, and coughed the cough of an old smoker.

Goodness only knows what terrific and terrible adventures this man could recount. But here he was, anxious that I offer some re-assurance to the de-facto wife that he very evidently cared for a great deal.

It would be very easy to discount the love these two shared. It would be easy to think of it falling well short of the love that we Christians are always going on about. It would be equally easy to romanticise their relationship. Simple people, sharing a simple affection.

Like most loving, however, I think it showed all the signs of being pretty messy. Like most of us, they didn't want it to be like that, but it is anyway.

I was moved by this little encounter, and by many others that served to re-humanise me, or so I dare to hope.

I am bold also to hope that, as we approach the moment of apology this week, we will all grasp after a deepening of our own humanity. Reaching out and beyond our limitations of loving. Emboldened by the love of Christ to seek a new humanity in which we rejoice in the common dust from which we were formed, and in the one breath of God that sustains the life of all, without distinction.