

the confidence of God

a sermon preached on the
sixth sunday of easter

21 May 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr richard wilson

the lections: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66; 1 Peter 3:8-22; John 14:15-21

On Wednesday evening Senator Penny Wong gave the Frank Walker Memorial Lecture to the NSW Society of Labor Lawyers. Reading the commentary in the press – I have not yet located a transcript – her lecture was centred on a need for separation of church and state arising from her opposition to the Australian Christian Lobby and its campaign against same sex marriage. Senator Wong is, as you will know, herself in a same sex partnership.

I have a great deal of time for Senator Wong as a politician of principle and respectfulness and I support her claim for the equality of same sex marriage. She habitually brings insight, intelligence and dignity to political debate. So, I am sure she has not missed the point that, through s.116 of the Australian Constitution, church and state in this country are separated, as they are in the US, but are not in the UK.

What Senator Wong addresses are two different problems the church experiences in this country. The first is the old, old problem of the privatisation of religion. It is an artefact of the Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason, which began in the 18th Century. Privatisation separates religious values from public values and shifts religion from the realm of the public square and open debate into the realm of an individual's private beliefs where they are expected to remain securely. It is because of this that we don't mention sex, politics and religion in polite society – although when I look at the press these days, it seems to be all about sex, politics and religion.

The church colluded in this state of affairs by trading the public place of its values and principles for political power of the institution. Which takes me to the second problem which is that in allowing privatisation, the majority of Christians no longer willing to argue for or explain or defend their faith publicly. So the field is left open to an often ignorant commentariat – which you can see in the commentary on the article about Senator Wong's speech in the *Guardian*, to an ignorant media, and the noisy conservative Christian minority like ACL. The current Royal Commission, of course, makes matters more complex.

The upshot is that we have a public view of the church as conservative and reactionary, out of date, cruel, anti gay, anti same sex marriage, anti-women, and of no contemporary relevance to society. This is not the church I belong to, it is not, I believe, the church we are. The paradox is that in the 2011 census 61.1% of Australians claimed an affiliation to Christianity. The minority clowns have become the ringmasters of the circus.

What Senator Wong is really saying, I believe, restates that religious values have no place in public policy-making – this is ordinary community political law and regulation making. I take issue with her on this, it is I believe, unreasonable on several levels.

First it subordinates religious values to other political forms of value such as secular notions of justice, humanist ideas of the value of the individual, personal preference for pursuit of life goals, and

ethical values in a range of areas of our common life – business ethics, bioethics – and the list could go on.

All these other values are allowed by secularists to contribute to public policy, but not religious inspiration. There is no rational basis for this exclusion, except that, for secularists, religious value is not rational.

Second, it assumes that the religiously inspired person can isolate religious motivation and value when making or contributing to public policy decisions. You and I know this is not possible, or our faith is a cypher, that John called lukewarm faith in his Revelation.

We are called in the gospels we heard today to a different way of being church than the secularists want and expect. Paul demonstrated in the Areopagus – the Athenian religious site – that his religion, our religion, is to be proclaimed, against the alternatives.

And Paul prevailed, it seems, against the odds. He may not have, the Greeks were pretty enamoured of the pantheon of their gods, a whole culture, literature and philosophy revolved around them, still revolves around them. Paul's confidence was based on a faith that we may have lost faith in. He was confident – in the extreme I would say – that he was living and working in the confidence of God.

But that confidence is difficult for us, is it not?

John's Gospel today looks ahead from Jesus' time to the future of salvation. He tells the disciples that he will soon no longer be with them – or us, but will return again and that in the meantime an Advocate – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, will take his place so that we are not left alone, orphaned. Jesus lays out for the disciples the Ascension, Pentecost and the Parousia – Jesus' return in glory. These three festivals are before us – Ascension and Pentecost over the coming weeks, the Parousia – God alone knows when.

As a community of rational humans – as the Enlightenment would have us – we find it difficult to live in the life of the Holy Spirit, in the time between Pentecost and Jesus' return, don't we? And so surrounded by the secularist clamour, the insult, the ignorance and the misrepresentation, it is hard to find our voice.

Yet, as a people of both the Resurrection and the Ascension, with the support of the Holy Spirit, we have the responsibility to make our way with confidence in the wider community. Gaining that confidence starts here among ourselves. We are called, first to be a community of love and justice and to love one another, for we need that support before we can do anything else in the world. If we are not whole among ourselves, all else will fail.

But we can be confident that we do this in the company of whole heavenly host. Paul would have known the Psalm we heard today:

Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.
...
Come and hear, all you who fear God,

and I will tell what he has done for me.
I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.

...

Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

Paul's example, Paul's confidence, calls us to a much more public defence of our faith, not only in careful, respectful evangelism like Paul's, but to reclaim our public relevance, to dispel ignorance and enmity and to participate in community in the fullness of our lives as a community of love and justice that is witness to the Resurrection.