

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy

a sermon preached on the

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 2:1-21; Ps 104:26-36; 1 Cor 12:1-13; Jn 20:19-23

Last week, Jeff Sparrow, a left wing journalist writing for the Australian edition of the *Guardian Online*, published an article lamenting the loss of society's ability to speak about our lives and its major events in any more creative way than of the mundane and the day-to-day – the minutiae of work, chores and obligations, the small, inane and trifling.¹

His article is overtly about his father's death and his inability to find words to express all the things he wanted to say about his father. But, I think, he was also pointing to a much wider canvas, of life's movements – birth, marriage, community, joy, sorrow, the apprehension of the divine and an inability to conceive of these things apart from the mundane and day-to-day.

Sparrow criticises both secular culture for a 'weak atheism' and also the church, saying, 'Even among the pious the afterlife has faded and blurred with the major faiths restructured along secular lines and experienced by most people as a cultural affiliation rather than engagement with something fundamentally Other'.

Let me read that quote again: 'Even among the pious the afterlife has faded and blurred with the major faiths restructured along secular lines and experienced by most people as a cultural affiliation rather than engagement with something fundamentally Other'.

He goes on to say that historically, by which he means prior to the Enlightenment: 'Nothing separated religion from daily routine; the porous boundaries between the ordinary and the miraculous enabled faith to shape how men and women laboured, how they loved and how they celebrated – and then guide them through their encounter with death'.

Instead, he says, work has been appropriated as the new religion and most people, at the most important stages of their lives, are unable to find the 'ceremonial oratory' to speak of them in any more profound way than through half-remembered poems, platitudes or snatches of dialog from movies or TV. In the course of Sparrow's flailing recriminations, the 21st century church is accused of being a faint shadow of itself, stripped of the emotional power it once possessed.

This is a shattering insight from a writer whose Wikipedia entry speaks of socialist activism and makes no reference to a deep knowledge of the church.

Looking for an alternative to this dry secularism, Sparrow recognises that it is impossible to return to the superstitions of the period prior to the Enlightenment, the supposed halcyon days of the church, but raises the question - how do we live a modern life in a time of science and technology, how do we find a faith that is not a capitulation to secular cultural expectations, how do we resist the blandishments of an economic culture that relegates God from the wholeness of our lives into the private realm.

¹ <http://bit.ly/2rEW0KX>

Clearly, at a point of crisis – his father’s death – Sparrow found that the not only the cultural vocabulary of secularism but also its philosophy and beliefs failed to meet the challenge of expressing his grief and loss, his pain and emptiness, his loneliness and hopelessness. Sparrow’s predicament is so very sad.

Sadder yet is to recognise that the church does have the liturgy, the words, the music and the pastoral care that Sparrow is so plaintively searching for. Where were we? Or perhaps more to the point what were we, what are we, that someone in the acute need Sparrow reveals, felt he could not approach us. He clearly has some insight to what the church has been able to do, why did he not reach out, why were we not reaching out to him?

Jeff Sparrow’s observations of the limits of secular culture are not an isolated example. In European social and theological debate, the term ‘post-secularist turn’ is being used to describe a social and cultural phenomenon that recognises, as Sparrow found, that a culture framed in the economy and consumption fails to account satisfactorily for all that life throws up to us. Secularism is now being challenged in Europe. I had thought secularism was more entrenched in this country until I read this article.

Today we celebrate the birth of the church, the donation of the Spirit, the Advocate and Guide promised by Christ. Our challenge is to decide what to do with this gift. Because, in response to Sparrow’s lament on secular culture’s capacity to speak into the abstract of life and death, love and compassion, grief and despair, we do have these spiritual gifts, as I said: the Word, the liturgy, the music, the means of speaking, of praying, of singing. There is a unique opportunity before us.

What we must recover is the habit of sharing these gifts with others. We must regain the confidence of Peter standing before the crowd in Jerusalem, resisting the naysayers and critics to claim his faith, as he did in the words of the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

This is ‘ceremonial oratory’ of a time and place, for sure, but a legacy in our possession.

How often these days does the church stand before the crowd and speak confidently and authentically of its faith, as Peter did? How often do we make a claim to our friends and families for life outside of the dry, secular, mundane day-to-day? We are not confident to do this because we have been convinced by the secularists that we are irrelevant. Sparrow’s lamentation convicts me that we are not.

In this church born again today, as a people who have witnessed the Resurrection and the Ascension of the Lord, as the people who have been given these spiritual gifts, our call, our joy, our privilege, and our opportunity is, by sacrificial commitment to the needs of others, to face outwards to the community that yearns, as Jeff Sparrow does, for a faithfulness that gives meaning to life, that makes sense of its every turn, celebrating them, in the oratory of heaven that is our gift.