

Annual Report 2001

"Deepening the centre, stretching the edge"

Parish Priest's Report

Loving Our Way

Earlier this week I sat waiting in Royal Perth Hospital. It was a busy thoroughfare in that confusing rabbit warren of a building. People in a hurry were making their way in both directions - self-contained, anonymous, focused on their destination or their illness or their sick friend rather than paying attention to where they were. Into this peak-hour traffic came a tea trolley with two urns. It was attended by three elderly women, wearing matching house dresses over their street clothes. The one I judged the oldest was their runner: she was eighty if she was a day, and she went to this person and that, always smiling, asking if they would like tea or coffee. One stocky woman stayed with the urns, while the third handed out biscuits and gave directions when anyone asked. I had this annual report on my mind, a report to be delivered on Trinity Sunday. Instantly, two images came to mind. The first is from one of Charles Raven's books where he talks about a fish and chip shop proprietor, dishing out cod and chips wrapped in newspaper in a steamy shop with fogged-up windows somewhere in the north of England. Here, said Raven, he glimpsed the heavenly Father feeding his children. Here was Christ feeding the five thousand all over again. Naturally, as a disciple of Bishop John V. Taylor, Charles Raven's insight was just the stepping-stone to many of the increasingly blind John Taylor's visions of glory. Here with the tea trolley was God, the eternal Trinity, not lording it over the creation, but serving it. For there could be no doubt about how simply and profoundly these three unassuming volunteers changed the atmosphere of that hospital. They brought a touch of real humanity, sensitivity to human need, good cheer, a listening ear. Suddenly, in the poet's words, the world was charged with the grandeur of God. "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." I felt as if I should take my shoes from off my feet, for I stood on holy ground.

If only we were awake instead of half asleep, we would realise that we stand on holy ground continually. Few have known this better, or been more patient and passionate about awakening others to this reality than John Taylor. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the final weeks of his life, dying of bone cancer, he found himself drawn more and more to the famous icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, written some time between 1408 and 1425. His sustained contemplation of the icon, and his meditation on the passage from the Book of Genesis upon which it is based, led to the writing of two last poems. On Trinity Sunday, we could do worse than begin our Annual General Meeting with that passage from Genesis, returning to a well where the water is good.

"The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the entrance

of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing

near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and

bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not

pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, kneed it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.'

Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh', for she was afraid. The Lord said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

Then the three men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what the Lord has promised him."

It is typical of the Orthodox to represent the Trinity by such a richly symbolic scriptural story, and typical of John Taylor to be fascinated by its poetic imagery. To the sensitive reader and

observer, both story and icon are multi-layered, operating on many different levels simultaneously.

In Hebrew tradition, God's encounters with us are frequently accomplished by an angel stand-in, a messenger or intermediary, for it is considered impossible that any human being should see God and live. Notice how the three men, the three angels, speak for themselves only once in the story. After this, the text is explicit that it is 'the Lord' who talks with Abraham. The Orthodox have rightly discerned that this story is about human nature and the divine nature. It is hardly surprising that they should have tumbled to this for the resonances with familiar gospel signs are multiple. In particular, Jesus's parable of the father and his two sons. In his haste to be hospitable, Abraham does something most unseemly, he runs, just as the father of the prodigal runs to clasp his son and express his forgiveness. The connection between the two stories is further emphasised by the reference to the calf - 'tender and good' in Genesis, 'fatted' in Luke. We cannot help noticing that on both occasions, veal is on the menu! Hospitality is a religious duty because it is an essential expression of humanness. We eat and drink together until strangers become friends. We share a meal to celebrate a reconciliation. No great moment in life passes without a party. Food is sacramental, the sure sign that we are friends. A companion is literally someone with whom we share bread.

When we move from the text of scripture to the text of the icon, these messages and layers of meaning become even more explicit. The three mysterious visitors are seated around a table, drawn within a perfect circle. They are given wings to show that they are more than ordinary mortals. Their heads incline toward one another, but their deep communion requires no conversation. The harmony between them expresses itself in great stillness, that wordless silence where heart speaks to heart in the eternal *shalom* of God which we are all invited to enter. Notice how their right hands indicate a single cup on the white cloth of the altar-like table. In this chalice lies the head of a sacrificial animal, for Christ's selflessness and self-giving express who God is always. The secret of life is the wasteful Love which creates and redeems and vivifies. The Holy Trinity, the only true God - Father, Son and Spirit, Creator, Word and Paraclete, Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer, Love-Maker - is Christlike, and in the Trinity there is no unChristlikeness at all.

In other words, this story and this icon attempt to describe what God is like on the inside. God as God is by nature generous, hospitable, welcoming, careless of dignity. God as God is an overflowing communion of extravagant love and indiscriminate life. The shape of Being, the shape of all reality, is this eternal exchange of patient and passionate love, experienced as giving and receiving. Encounter with this God invites to relationship, drawing us into the circle of God's inner life.

At the same time, this story and this icon are about God on the outside, that is, they are about us. We are God on the outside. We are the actual body of God in the world, God's physical embodiment in time and space. This is always a case of *already*, and *not yet*. We are *human becomings* rather than *human beings* for we are mysteriously unfinished creatures. It is not so much that we fall short of some original perfection, as that we fall short of who we can and could be. Religious or not, we are all aware of this truth about ourselves. We are still *becoming* ourselves, becoming the unique person only we can be, the person we are in the mind of God, the person God needs us to be. In baptism our sins are forgiven and we are accepted just as we are in all our imperfection, made daughters and sons of God in advance of fully attaining this dignity. We set out on a journey, an adventure, a pilgrimage in faith and hope towards the Love at the heart of all things. Eucharist is food to sustain and nourish those engaged in this life-long journey, this lifelong christening, this growing friendship with One whose service is perfect freedom. Eating the Body of Christ in Eucharist we are becoming the Body of Christ. "Receive therefore and eat

the Body of Christ", Saint Augustine tells us, "you who are already made members of Christ within the Body of Christ. Take and drink the Blood of Christ. Lest you should fall apart, drink that which binds you together. Lest you should seem cheap to yourselves, drink that which bought you. As this when you eat and drink it is changed into you, so you are changed into the Body of Christ... You are receiving that which you have begun to be."

This transformation, this transfiguration, indeed, this *deification*, or *divinization* or *theosis* is the destiny of the whole creation. It is this and no less than this that we are about as Christ's church. "By the mixture of this water and wine, may we share in Christ's divinity, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." So we pray as wine and water are mixed in the eucharistic cup from which all will drink. This alone is our calling, to become truly human after the pattern of the one human being, Jesus Christ. Herein lies the pattern and the plan for our common life together.

Deepening the Centre

Over the past six months we have been exploring this reality under the motto "deepening the centre, stretching the edge". By this we mean an ever-deeper penetration of the Easter mystery, total immersion in the processes by which we are re-created as God's Easter people. These processes involve turning again and again to Christ, following more carefully and closely his way, participating daily in his life, letting his truth infiltrate our closed minds, permitting the warmth of his love to thaw frozen hearts. Christ is always passing through our lives, entering our trials, our hells, our pain, our grief, taking us by the hand to lift us out of our tombs, lifting us into new places, places of new birth, new joy, new life. In a word, "deepening the centre" is about our own commitment.

We Anglicans are notoriously casual about belonging to the Christian community. We sit light to the obligations of love, absenting ourselves at the drop of a hat from our religious duties. Some of us have even learnt a whole new language of selfishness and evasion from contemporary psychology. *I must take proper care of myself. I must set aside quality time for my family. I must not push myself too hard. I must learn how to establish boundaries. I must learn to say No.* Now, don't misunderstand me. There is much here that is good, much we need to hear. But we must ask ourselves how these important insights are held in tension with Christ's wide-open call to self-giving and generosity of spirit? How do we balance our own needs against the needs of this Christian community? How often do I do what I want at the expense of the group? When is my presence optional, when is it absolutely crucial? When do I retire to lick my wounds, when do I forget myself long enough to get lost in wonder, love and praise?

I would like to think that Grace Church Joondalup is one of the few Anglican churches in the world where gathering around the Lord's table Sunday by Sunday is our absolute priority. At present, except for a faithful core group, it is entirely a hit and miss affair, disrupted by high tides and full moons. In this matter, this congregation is as erratic as any I have encountered anywhere, and I believe this is our weakest link. When we can truly say that Sunday Eucharist comes before everything else, then everything about our life together will change dramatically. When we are here regardless of other calls on our time, hail, rain or shine, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, then and only then will God be able to work miracles in us and through us. Then and only then will that question asked by the Lord of Sarah and Abraham and Mary and so many of God's other friends be answered: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Eucharist is the heart of the church's life, and everything flows into this celebration and out of it, enabling us to live eucharistically - thankful people in a cynical world, generous people in a greedy world.

If this church is to grow, there is no substitute for our commitment week by week to common worship, each and every one of us contributing our gifts to its orderly beauty and sensitive proclamation of the gospel. There do not have to be many of us, but we do need to cultivate greater consistency so that there is some reliable predictability about us. Only as we immerse ourselves thoroughly each week in the things of Christ will we be able to welcome others and integrate them into our common life of faith. Commitment to the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty is a good contagion. In Bishop Brian's words at my Commissioning as your priest, through a liturgy celebrated with careful sensitivity to the moods of the church's life, where the scriptures are opened up for understanding, "this church will gain a reputation that here people are helped to see God within the plentiful ordinariness of their lives. It will be known as a place of grace."

Stretching the Edge

This, of course, is what "stretching the edge" is all about. Even though we worship in an office building, God keeps sending us new people. Sometimes I wonder how they find us, as Sunday by Sunday they do. Hardly a week goes by when there are not new people joining us for worship. Some stay, and we bless God for them. Most disappear as mysteriously as they come. Why? The responsibility rests largely, if not entirely, with us. Is it easy for someone to find their way in here, or hard? Are we welcoming, or not? Are we including, or excluding? My feeling is that we are not doing very well in all this. The chief danger of small congregations is that everyone knows each other too well. We enjoy each other's company to the unconscious exclusion of others. We talk to friends and ignore visitors. The work of welcoming, caring and ministering belongs to all of us, not just to rostered representatives. We all need to be aware that it takes far more courage to walk into a small space like our own than it does to enter a cathedral. You can't be anonymous here. The core-group is intimate, making new-comers stand out. Not belonging is emphasised at moments like the Greeting of Peace: insiders know each other by name, while new-comers are nameless. While old friends greet one another in leisurely fashion, the outsider is left like a shag on a rock. This is an unusually appropriate way to describe the experience, because the sheep move on and away while the dead tuft of wool is left behind. I have been in that situation in churches where people think of themselves as unusually friendly, and I am here to tell you that I would never put myself in such a lonely position a second time - lost, quite literally, in the friendly Christian crowd.

Can I suggest that a typical scenario goes something like this. Out of the blue, I go to church today. It's an effort because I've not been in a long time. Things have changed. Some things seem familiar, other bits are decidedly strange - and, damn it all, if they're not having an annual meeting! Well, I stick it out, and quite enjoy myself. Afterwards, I get chatting to Judy, who hopes I'll come again. I do come next Sunday, but Judy isn't here and I have to start all over again from scratch. I don't bother a third time ...

Another possible scenario. I am in church for my baby's baptism. It wasn't my idea, and this is my second visit ever. It's like entering a foreign country: I feel like a fish out of water, an intruder, conscious that my two-year-old is noisy and disruptive. The elderly lady in front of me turns round, smiles, and takes my toddler off my hands for a while. She whispers that it's lovely that we want our baby christened. Afterwards, she comes over to congratulate us and wish us well. Suddenly it dawns on me: here is a place where people belong, where people matter. I'll be back ...

"Stretching the edge" is hands-on work for all of us. It involves changing the whole culture of this place. Where we are inadvertently alienating now, we want to be welcoming. This is something

we can learn. There are sensitivities to be cultivated, skills to be acquired. If we were really welcoming even half the people who discover us on Sunday, we would be growing in numbers quietly and steadily. It is possible for the desirable and the necessary to intersect, and let us be quite clear that this particular intersection is *not* an optional extra for us!

Let us be clear too about something else. Paradoxically, it is as we relax into the celebration of our faith and learn to laugh that sharing it becomes natural and easy. Have you ever wondered why some Christians are so earnest? It's the ultimate give away: we do not really trust God, we don't really believe the Resurrection. No one, said Bertrand Russell, is zealous about mathematics! Anxiety about the future will never help us live authentically in the present. Fear about shrinking numbers, declining influence, and worry over inadequate finances communicates easily as what it is: selfish concern about our own institutional survival. My dream for Grace Church is that we learn together the art of enjoying our common life in such a care-free way that the driven and the bored and the disappointed and the crushed find here an oasis in the desert. There should be a radical honesty and unusual reality about this humble Christian community which is patently attractive. In this atmosphere, problems of numbers and finance solve themselves.

Often, we are content to be only half awake, when the call of Christ is to be fully alert. Sometimes, priests and bishops are criticized for rocking the boat, while Christ is all the while calling us to walk on the water! In any case, as John Taylor loved to say, there *is* no boat! Which, of course, brings us full circle, back to sharing the Trinitarian life, *the* great treasure we are destined to enjoy with all God's daughters and sons. I mentioned that Bishop Taylor wrote two last poems in the final weeks of his life. Both grew out of his dying reflections on the Genesis story as he contemplated the Rublev icon. The second of these poems sums up his own life and thought and work almost perfectly. I take it as a sort of charter for who we are called to be, and charged to do together here in Christ's name.

Love in its fullness loomed, love

loomed at the tent door in its truth,

not the sole unique truth

reserved for the incomparable God,

but for a love consisting of communion.

I, Abraham, looked for a single

flower; but it has blossomed into a

multiple head, made for sharing.

Love's ultimate reality, gazing at the Son

proclaims 'I AM'.

And He, as love's obedience,

responds 'I will'.

And the Spirit, love's delight,

says, 'look and see'.

Their mutuality precedes creation

being Eternal, and offers the only space

in which it can exist.

So the cup of suffering at which they gaze

is the price already paid

for the world's pardon. 'The Lamb

slain before the foundation

of the world'.

DAVID GRAEME WOOD

Churchwardens Report

This was the year that was...

To say that we at Grace Church were becoming accustomed to change would be fair comment. However 2000-2001 held more in store for us than any of us could imagine.

We started out with planning meetings to examine who we were and what our role could and should be. Then the news of Robin's serious illness and impending departure shocked us out of our complacency, and called our continued existence into question. It is a matter of personal pride for me that, through this unsettling time we rallied around Robin as best we could, and maintained our identity and our existence as a worshipping community. Our thanks go to each member of our congregation for hanging in there, for caring and taking responsibility in ensuring our existence. I feel that we have all grown in our own sense of self-reliance this year. We were able to farewell Robin, and honour her ministry here, and we are delighted that, after her course of chemotherapy, she seems now to be in good health. Our thanks go to Bishop Brian, who provided temporary pastoral care for us each Sunday, and believed in us enough to commit money and arrange for David's long-term placement. This culminated in David being commissioned as priest-in-charge just a fortnight ago, surrounded by a large group of friends and well-wishers.

Part of our growing sense of self-reliance can be seen in the number of activities that were undertaken this year, and the support they enjoyed.

First off, a big thank you to David for challenging our perceptions about how we worship, and for deepening our appreciation of the liturgy. When I look back at changes he has made in a relatively short time I am amazed. Take for instance the new layout of the church building, and the ceremonies at Christmas, Passion Week, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Catechuminate group, and the many christenings. We may not always show our appreciation, but at least we are voting with our feet and participating in increasing numbers in each new season and event. Well done, David.

Given our turbulent year it would be understandable if we had fallen down on the social and fundraising side of things, but this didn't happen. My thanks go in large part to Michael and Margaret Price for stepping in to fill the void left by Ken and Danni's departure, and Barry and Jill's cut back from the social organisers' role. Michael and Margaret's role has not been an easy one, but their good humour, organisational skills, and the ready help of a dedicated band of workers has meant that events such as the "austerity" fish and chip night, the fund-raisers, the parish dinner, pancake and Easter feasts, and David's commissioning party all went off without a hitch.

My thanks also go to Pam Arthur for making our colour-coded altar cloths and sanctuary hangings. To Pam and Bruce, and, more recently, to Karen, thanks for their important work in providing us with a clean and tidy building to worship in each week.

On the music front we have seen so many changes as well. With Anne leaving for the deep south, and Olga's gradual recovery from illness, we either relied on the music box or our own sweet voices - with varying degrees of success! Recently, Diane has taken pity on us, and I for one really appreciate your efforts. So to all our musicians - real, virtual, and do-it-yourselfers - thank you.

Handy-person awards go to Alistair for a very nice piece of welding to our Pascal candlestick, and the amazing feat of resurrecting the fridge when it lay dead and nearly buried for some weeks. Bruce also "urns" an honourable mention for his very nifty repair to the urn! Thank you, gentlemen.

To the members of the Parish Council (yes, we did have one even if it was so small we held our meetings in a public phone box) a thank you for wrestling with extra administrative duties in the change over period from Robin's departure to David's arrival. Thanks also for continuing the accommodation struggle over the adjacent office space, and negotiations with the bishop that eventually secured us David's services. I would urge you all to consider nominating for the Parish Council.

Last but no means least I would like to express my thanks to all those people who participate in our weekly worship either by welcoming, reading, caring for children, collecting the gifts of the people, providing and serving morning teas. Your efforts go largely unremarked, but are much appreciated.

This is the bit where I am sure to miss one or two people out. I apologise in advance. It is unintentional, and purely down to my unreliable memory. I'm not sure if this past year has been busier than usual for departures and arrivals but it seems that way to me.

Sharen, Jeff and Jennifer joined us for part of the year, but then Sharen had to return home to Singapore to find work and care for her mother. The arrival of Chris, Erica, Akeela and baby Elliott had an immediate impact on us, and we were sorry to wave them good-bye when they departed for somewhere hot last week. Karen has been a great asset to us in her quiet and caring way. I have cancelled her passport, so that she cannot leave the country no matter what other members of her family may do. David and Judy Moore worshipped with us for a few months, first as a locum priest and then as a member of the congregation, before they were called away to New Zealand to take up a parish there. Not to be out done, our other David seems to have brought a committed band of followers with him from his previous parish. I for one am delighted by these occasional visitors. Just don't expect to take them with you if you decide to leave us, David. We have been delighted to welcome Val, Don and Beryl, Richard and Sharon, Jean and other friends from the retirement village, Monica, Pam and Peter, Margaret and John, and all

those people I have not mentioned before. We have also enjoyed the company of quite a few visitors from overseas visiting family living in the area.

Let's wrap this up. As I have never written a warden's report before, and after this effort will probably never be asked to write one again, there are no doubt things that I have left out. I would like to close by thanking you all for the support and friendship that I have enjoyed. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Ian's companionship in the role of warden, and thank him for all he contributes to our well-being as a church. This report is written on behalf of us both. Ian hands in his commission at this meeting. If its not too much trouble, I would like to be considered for another tour of duty.

JOHN GRACE IAN WILSON

Churchwardens

This year we 'dreamt' about the future and about building a church on the bush block next door using the 'straw bale' method. There were several meetings of our appropriately named 'Dreaming Group' drawing on local expertise. These meetings will continue as the 'dreaming' process develops.

We would like to close by thanking you all for your contribution over the year and most of all for your friendship and support. As John is stepping down as Warden, thanks are due to him for his contribution to the well being of our church in his two years in this role.

JOHN GRACE MICHAEL PRICE

Churchwardens