A narrow vision can prevent people from imagining the better world that Jesus called the Kingdom

The Tablet

Thursday this week, 11 October, is the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. The calling of this Council was the initiative of a remarkable man, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, Pope John XXIII. He was elected pope at the age of 78 in 1958, as the successor to the long pontificate of Pius XII, and he was expected to be a transitional pope, bridging the gap until a new pope was elected, and maintaining the status quo. But no sooner had he become pope than he announced his intention to call a Council: all the bishops in the world were summoned to Rome to deliberate on the place of the Catholic Church in the modern world. John was a man of great vision. He passionately believed that the Church had a role as ‘mother and teacher’ and that, as the bearer of the truth of Christ entrusted to it, it had a sacred duty to make this truth more widely known and relevant in the world. The Church, he said, must play a role in the affairs of the world, guiding humankind and shedding light in the darkness, teaching and nurturing. And so began the great work of the Council which lasted from 1962 – 1965. John did not live to see the conclusion of the Council, but his vision and passion shaped it. He wanted the Church to move out of its triumphalist, ghetto mentality, and rather than remaining inward looking, seeing itself as ‘the perfect society’, he wanted it to be a Church that would respond to the times in which it found itself and be relevant in the world of the day. This movement towards updating the Church became known as ‘aggiornamento’. The Church must reach out to all people and enable all to share in that ‘banquet of grace and fraternity’, the gift of Jesus. To do this effectively, he advocated an emphasis on the teachings of Jesus and the early Church as a way of cutting through the layers and layers of tradition that had built up over the centuries and which often seemed to obscure that vision and blur those teachings: this became known as ‘ressourcement’.
Well, much has happened since those days, the heady optimism of the sixties, of which the Second Vatican Council was a product, and I wonder what Pope John would make of what is happening today? Then, as now, there were those who resisted this new way of being Church and the school of thought, known as Vatican II, initiated by the Council. The deliberations of the Council, and the fifty years since, have been marked by this tension and, in the last few decades, an increasing regression into pre-Conciliar thinking. This is a ‘hot topic’, of course, especially of late, and it produces deeply held and often emotional responses.

One of the saddest things for me is to see a world today pretty much divided along the lines of increasing secularism and rigid religious fundamentalism. On the one hand there is a militant atheism which, at the moment, noisily and hostilely rejects any suggestion of a spiritual dimension to the universe or to life. On the other hand, we are witnessing a rapid growth in fundamentalist religious thinking: that retreat into black and white certainties, usually drawn from a literalist reading of sacred texts. And, as we know, in our own Church we are also seeing something of a retreat into the forms of the past. But alongside all this, there remains that distinctively human search for meaning.

Peter Stanford, in a recent edition of The Tablet, writes of this contemporary disdain and hostility towards religious perspectives and the practice of religion: One of the effects of the aggressive assault on religion in recent years by militant secularists and atheists of all types has been to make those of us who have a fragile enough hold on faith anyway withdraw from the gladiatorial arena. It has never been an easy course to stand up and be counted as ‘religious’ in our secular, sceptical and scientific times, but it has undoubtedly got harder. So why bother? Why not leave the field to the militants of every type? The answer is: because they stereotype faith as something extreme and confrontational, and this seems to be a view that the world is currently more than willing to accept. The challenge is to find an effective way of responding.

Indeed! There is such a great need today for the voices of religious people, theologians and spiritual writers who are truly wise and educated, who do not balk at reason and who embrace and dialogue with the advancements of our contemporary world that open up our horizons and reveal hitherto unimagined insights. The last week-end of September, the Sydney Festival of Dangerous Ideas was held at the Opera House. I attended a number of the talks and there really observed this polarisation in action. One of the sessions I attended was on the topic of evil, and a high ranking Christian clergyman, in his presentation, spoke about ‘the realm of demons’, waiting to lure the unwary and careless, doing their best to capture us and bring us into their service. Where psychology cannot explain evil actions, he claimed, this is to be attributed to the activity of the devil. He used the language and the worldview of the past, a worldview which does not sit well with twenty-first century western thought. During his talk the squirming and ridicule of some members of the audience was obvious, as were some of the scornful comments about Christianity that were passed as people left the theatre. During this same session too, one member of the audience spoke of her encounter with ‘evil’, and as soon as she mentioned she was a Christian and had a relationship with Jesus, she was immediately shouted down by the woman in front of me, ‘that’s enough, stop’! Two things struck me in this session: the militant atheism that is so scornfully uncomfortable with all things spiritual and religious and, at the same time, disappointment at the presentation of a religious perspective so clearly out of touch with contemporary thinking and which seems to be retreating.
into a worldview of the past. And what was of real concern was that talk was the only one on offer by a religious spokesperson. Is that the best Christianity can offer today? No wonder there is this dichotomy. And unfortunately it’s what the atheistic sector of the public has come to expect of traditional religion. It is what fuels the contempt of the very loud atheists of our day, people such as Richard Dawkins, who simply savage that kind of talk.

Richard Holloway, in his book, Looking in the Distance, aptly identifies this problem of religious fundamentalism: *When we try to engage in conversation with religious immobilists we soon discover that no real converse is possible. They defiantly hold on to the tradition that is being threatened by new developments because they refuse to acknowledge the validity of any point of view other than the one into which they have been initiated.* Perhaps we could say the same of militant atheism: Richard Dawkins, for example, is no different from the religious fundamentalists he attacks, in his unwillingness to listen to any other voice but that of the perspective he embraces on these matters. But I think the real problem is the absence, in the public arena, of other kinds of religious voices.

And this is where the vision of Pope John XXIII is so inspiring. In sharp contrast to a retreat from the world, he called for a renewal of the ways in which the timeless truths of Jesus’ teachings could be brought to that world and offer it a new vision, healing, hope, justice, peace, goodness; what Jesus himself called the Kingdom of God. We really need that voice today. And we are not enabling that to happen if we confuse form with substance. The Kingdom of God is not the preserve of an elite few, and we cannot bring it into our current world if we return to a ghetto way of thinking. The prophetic power of religious people is lost when they speak a language that is alienating rather than inviting and enabling the way of Jesus to be incarnated in and transform the present realities. *A narrow vision can prevent people from imagining the better world that Jesus called the Kingdom.*

There is much to say and debate about all this and as we remember, this week, all that Vatican II and Pope John XXIII offered the Church and the world, let’s keep before us, as John so dearly wanted, what Jesus offered the people of his day, and what he offers us too: a vision, a way of life that enlarges our perspectives and opens up greater horizons for us. As we know, Jesus used stories, analogies, metaphors, to invite his listeners into a totally new way of looking at things. He broke through cultural practices, the norms of the day, what we might call the fundamentalist perspectives that freeze people in certain patterns of thought and behavior and limit their discovery of life and God. His words always pointed people beyond what they knew. So often today, we find people ‘freezing’ Jesus’s words in the context of the past, they make them a set of rules, rather than an invitation to a glorious vision of life, of humanity, of the world - and that is to diminish them.

For your reflection this week, I offer a great passage from the Gospel of Matthew (6:25-33), where Jesus cautions against excessive worry and preoccupation about our needs and lives. You may like to read the passage and the few words which follow and then simply allow yourselves to sit silently in the wisdom they offer you:

*Jesus said: Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field,*
how they grow: they neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying: What will we eat? Or, what will we drink? Or, what will we wear? For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So Jesus invites us today into the consciousness of something greater than ourselves. His words move from food and drink to clothing, from the necessities of life that concern us all, to those great questions about life that we all have. He is saying: there is something bigger, something transcending you and your perspectives, something which you are invited to recognise; try it, enlarge your horizons, don’t get stuck in the fixations of your own particular thought patterns. **Live in the consciousness of the Divine Presence.** Live in the awareness that you are part of a great flow of life – of goodness, love, beauty, truth, justice, forgiveness, hope - which includes you, but which also transcends you. Let yourself get caught up in it and let that consciousness pervade your thinking and shape your answers. How might this shape the way you see yourself, others, your relationships, your work? As that great man, John XXIII, advocated, let’s not be afraid to be shaken up and allow this Spirit to have its way with us.

*Kerry McCullough*

*Head of Religious Education / Liturgy Co-ordinator*