

"GOOD NEWS IN THE PRESENT TENSE"

by Geoffrey R Usher

On 27 February 1992 the Annual General Meeting of the Women's League within the Sheffield and District Association was held in the Hollis Room at Upper Chapel. Chapel member Ada Cartwright was installed as the President of the District Women's League at that meeting. At the end of the meeting, as part of the Closing Devotions which she conducted, Ada read a piece by an unknown writer. It was called "The Good News in the Present Time". I liked it and I asked her for a copy of it, and I begin by sharing it now, in full.

THE GOOD NEWS IN THE PRESENT TIME

I feel a bit uncomfortable when people who have been Christians for years insist on telling their conversion experiences. It's not the stories that make me uncomfortable, but the thought that they ought to have something much more recent to communicate about their Christian life. A poet commented:

Your holy hearsay is not evidence:
Give me the good news in the present tense.

The living truth is what I long to
see. I cannot lean upon what used
to be.

Show me how
The Christ you talk
about is living now.

The good news in the present tense. Something seen, not in the stories of half a generation ago, but in those of today. Tell people what happened this morning, or the day before, because that's the living faith of our relationship with God now. The Christian life is for living, not just remembering. It's an experience of immediacy - not in the sense of undisciplined and thoughtless action, but in living with God today, rather than with the memory of what used to be.

Lord of today,
I'm here, waiting.
Today, like any other day,
yet like no other day that ever was.
Unique, as I am unique.
Different.
The routine, the well trodden path, is
there. Yet each day is punctuated by small

Lord, today is your gift to me.
Help me to turn it into my gift to you.

Each today pushes back the past
into history,
and in the long perspective
I can see your hand at work.
For good. For my good.
And from that view
I can turn to face the prospect of today.

Tomorrow is obscure.
But from that lookout point of past
mercies, I can leave it, again, in your
hands. Knowing that you are the same,
yesterday, today, and forever.

But today is my concern.
Good news in the present
tense. Not just for me, Lord

-

although in honesty, that's where my interest begins -
but for those with whom I live and work and talk.
Make me an instrument for good.
A small focus of your healing in a worried world.
I thank you for yesterday,
I leave tomorrow in your hands.

Today is yours and mine.

Like the unknown writer, I "feel a bit uncomfortable"
sometimes - especially when I am confronted by people whose
earnest wish is to convert me:- to persuade me that their
particular religious sect - their view of Biblical Truth -
their interpretation of the will of God - is the only true
and right one.

The curious thing is that they spend their time and energy
in arguing only by reference to the Bible. Their reference
point is two thousand years old.

I am more interested - and more likely to be convinced - if
someone wants to tell me about a local organisation that is
trying to do something - to alleviate suffering, or improve
the lot of people in the local community.

Your holy hearsay is not evidence.
Give me the good news in the present tense.

The living truth is what I long to
see. I cannot lean upon what used
to be.

Show me how

When I was at the Sydney Unitarian Church I joined and became actively involved in organisations which I felt were actually doing things. No-one ever persuaded me to join a group - religious or otherwise - on the strength of stories from two thousand years ago. But I joined Amnesty International because it works for the release of people held in prison right now because of their beliefs:-prisoners of conscience who have committed no crime except to express (or be suspected of holding) beliefs which are not acceptable to the people in power. And Amnesty International works for the abolition of torture - the torture of people today, not the suffering inflicted on Jesus and the martyred saints of Christendom and all the millions of nameless, innocent, ordinary people of past centuries who were caught up in the tyranny of their times. And I spent most of those fifteen years working in various ways with the United Nations Association of Australia, because it is concerned with supporting the work of the United Nations now, and the UN's efforts for disarmament, non-violent resolution of conflict, international co-operation and understanding, health, education and security for all people today, and tomorrow. I continued to work with the UN Association in Sheffield, and back here in Sydney now.

The good news in the present tense. Something seen, not in the stories of half a generation ago, but in those of today. Tell people what happened this morning, or the day before, because that's the living faith of our relationship with God now. The Christian life is for living, not just remembering. It's an experience of immediacy - not in the sense of undisciplined and thoughtless action, but in living with God today, rather than with the memory of what used to be.

I like the books of the American Unitarian minister and writer, Robert Fulghum. Let me share with you a story from his first and perhaps most famous book, All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten. It's about Elias Schwartz.

Elias Schwartz repairs shoes. He's short and round and bald and single and middle-aged and Jewish. "An old-fashioned cobbler," says he, nothing more, nothing less.

I happen to be convinced that he is really the 145th incarnation of the Haiho Lama.

See, the Haiho Lama died in 1937, and the monks of the Sa-skya monastery have been searching (since then) for his

reincarnation without success. The New York Times carried the story. The article noted that the Lama would be recognized by the fact that he went around saying and doing wise things in small, mysterious ways and that he would be doing the will of God without understanding why.

my shoes, disappeared into the back of the shop, and I waited and wondered. He returned with my shoes in a stapled brown bag. For carrying, I thought. When I opened the bag at home that evening, I found two gifts and a note. In each shoe, a chocolate-chip cookie wrapped in waxed paper. And these words in the note: "Anything not worth doing is worth not doing well. Think about it. Elias Schwartz."
The Haiho Lama strikes again.

Robert Frost was once interviewed by a newspaper reporter who asked if he believed the nation (USA) had much of a future. The poet replied: "Our founders didn't believe in the future. They believed the future in!"

There is passive believing and active believing. Passive believing gives lip service to this statement and that conviction. It venerates the conversion experience of the past. It is based on holy hearsay. Active believing is vigorous, alive, concerned with today, confirming one's affirmations with deeds.

We have to prepare for the future. We have to lay the groundwork so that our tomorrows will eventually rise from the foundations of our present. There will be surprises, setbacks, disappointments; but we must do more than preserve the past. We must look to the present for the work in hand, and ensure that today's action will be the best foundation for tomorrow.

The good news in the present tense.

The routine, the well trodden path, is there. Yet each day is punctuated by small surprises.

Lord, today is your gift to me.
Help me to turn it into my gift to you.

Today is my concern.
Good news in the present
tense. Not just for me, Lord

-
although in honesty, that's where my interest begins -
but for those with whom I live and work and talk.
Make me an instrument for good.
A small focus of your healing in a worried world.

Amen.