

The Church as Koinonia

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Identity and relevance

The *church* has often been pictured as a *ship at sea*. A ship is not built to lie in a safe harbour, protected by stone barriers that break the waves. A ship is built to ride the waves and brave the storms. If a ship is *built well*, and if it keeps on *moving*, it will withstand the storms and the onslaught of the waves. A ship that has *no substance*, breaks, and a ship that *stands still*, will be beaten to pieces by the waters.

A sociologist describes modern society as a “risk society”. He says: “Everyone must accept that he leads a life which can fail.” Old answers are no longer adequate. *We must take risks*. We must lean into the future of God and shed some shackles that bind us to the past. But it must be *God’s* future into which we lean, and not the projection of our own dreams and interests. Change must therefore arise out of a deep knowledge as to *who we are* and *who we want to be*.

Christian churches around the world - all those little ships sailing in the stormy seas of life - are engaged in a process of self-evaluation, asking themselves: *who are we*, *where are we heading*, *how well are we built*; and at times wondering *whether we shall make it*.

Indeed, by tuning into this world wide *search for identity and relevance*, we are *true to the very foundational documents of our faith*, the *Holy Scriptures*. Why were Genesis and Exodus, Jeremiah and Isaiah written? Why did Paul write to Corinth and to Galatia? Why did Luke and Matthew write their gospels, when there was already a gospel, the gospel of Mark, around? Most biblical books were written in situations and for situations where the people of God needed to hear again *who they are*, *to whom they belong*, *what their reason for being is*, and *how they can claim the space that God has assigned to them*.

And is it not *God himself*, God the *Holy Spirit*, who has placed the desire in our hearts to know *who we are* and *what we are supposed to be*? Indeed, given the state of the world around us, there must be an urgency within God to place this desire in our hearts. “The earth is mine,” says the LORD, “and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell in it” (Psalm 24:1). The God, whose very nature is a burning oven of love (Martin Luther), who has shown his love by making covenant after covenant with his creation, seeks to share his life with his creation. God is observing the misery of his people, he is hearing their cry, he knows their sufferings, and he wants to deliver them (compare Exod 3:7f.).

But God’s grace does not by-pass *human response and human responsibility*. It is God’s very nature to seek *partners* - “fellow workers” the apostle Paul calls them (1 Cor 3:9!) - in the struggle against unemployment and torture and drug addiction. God seeks partners in unmasking and opposing those who want to define human dignity in terms of pieces of silver, in terms of possessions, power and achievement. The God of Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul comes to us in the question: Who will help to create spaces in which people can be accepted and feel at home? Who will show solidarity with those who are marginalised? Who will become a friend to the lonely, and who will lend their voice and their power to those who have been fated? Who will declare the acceptable time of the Lord? Who will plant flowers of hope and promise in the desert?

It is the *church*! This beautiful and fragile creation of God. The church is *Christ’s human presence in the world*. “... where two or three are gathered in my name,” Christ promises, “I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). That is why in the Pauline tradition the church has been called the “*body of Christ*”. Just as we with our “bodies” relate to the world around us - with our “bodies” we eat and drink the fruits of the earth; with our “bodies” we work and create culture; with our “bodies” we love and praise and touch - so the risen and exalted Christ relates to the world through his “body”, the

church. We belong to *Christ* - that is our *identity*. At the same time we are *Christ's body*, *Christ's way of relating to the world*. That is our *relevance*.

The need and the promise of a *new symbol*

An Anglican theologian has reminded us that a *proper understanding of the church* must be grounded in *good theology*. He correctly observed that "bad ecclesiastical practice is at least in part the outcome of bad theology." If and when a proper *theological* foundation for the church is missing, then it is natural and it is to be expected that other schemes and plans and ideologies will move into the vacuum. It is *the function of theological reflection* in our midst, to ask, *where* our understanding for *being the church* comes from. Does it come from the *being of God*? Or does it come from the market place, from the body politic, from the corporation, from the military organisation, or simply from uncritically received tradition? Are we who we want to be? Is our faith and our practice in harmony with its source?

Take the *Murray River*. Besides being compared to a *ship* at sea and a "*body*", the church has also been likened to a *river*. At its *source* the water of the Murray is fresh and clear, full of life, adventure and promise. But what is the fate of the river? What does the source think about the course of the river? How much of the original water is left by the time the Murray gets to Albury and Mildura and Adelaide? Why are there no more Murray Cod in the Murray? Other rivers and creeks have joined; industrial waste, pesticides, and fertilisers have muddied the water. Is there any relation of the river to its source? Is there any of the original water left? And the source can do nothing to change the course of the river!

Is the "*river*", besides the "*ship*" and the "*body*", not another *picture of the church*? How much gospel and Jesus and Spirit is left in the church? Yes, the river bed is there, indelibly carved into the soil of human history. We have institutions and dogmas and clergy and liturgy and church law and rules for this and that - all important to preserve the integrity of the gospel. But is there water, good, clear water - *living* water! - left in the bed of the river? And where does the water come from? Is it water from the source, or is there at least *some* water from the source left?

Yes, there is water left from the source! Every time we read the *Scriptures*; every time when in true *faith* and *repentance* we turn away from ourselves into the future of God; every time we seek *the other* for her or his own sake; every time we receive the *Eucharist* not as a religious rite but as the *Lord's* supper and thus make present the living and dangerous memory of Jesus; every time we *baptise* a person into the story of Jesus, we retrieve the original water.

But it *needs to be retrieved*! It does not just happen. We can't make renewal - that is true. Faith comes from hearing, not from doing (Rom 10:17; John 5:24). But we can *close ourselves off* to the One who wants to make all things new! We can *listen to other voices*, and we can occupy our minds and hearts with other things.

In order to keep touch with the *source (identity!)*, we need *good theology*, and in order to be open to the ever surprising newness of the *gospel* and of the *Spirit (relevance!)* we need to seek and find *new symbols* to remind us who we are.

Koinonia

Such a *new symbol* is emerging. A symbol which may have the power to help us to take stock, and then pave the way for modifications, transformations and renewal. And it is a *good symbol* because it is grounded in the *New Testament*, it was important to the early *church fathers*, and it is gaining an increasing popularity in *all the churches*. It is the symbol *koinonia* - "communion", "community", "fellowship". Many women and men feel, that this old and yet very new symbol may open our ears to hear some new tunes, open our eyes to see new vistas, and point us to the One who alone can speak the joy of the gospel and the call to discipleship into our lives. If it becomes a powerful

symbol, then it will strengthen our resolve to change things, and it will empower us to have the necessary patience and perseverance for the journey ahead.

But we must be a little *suspicious* at this point. Are we really willing to change? Or do we only expect the “others” to change? Will the story of *Jesus* lead us ever again to repentance and renewal, or have we already domesticated the story of *Jesus* into the story of *the church*? Allow me to illustrate: when the new symbol of *koinonia* was agreed to within the context of the ecumenical movement, and when it became popular among the churches, one of the large Christian churches, after having enthusiastically welcomed the new symbol at first, suddenly realised that it may call for some *changes* in the church’s life and structure. But, rather than welcoming such changes as transitional birth pangs for the coming of new life, the theological watchdog and clearing house of the church declared that the new symbol can not and therefore must not question “some fundamental elements that are to be considered already settled,” and then the “officials” listed among those elements all the affirmations that are controversial in the ecumenical process.

If we adopt that attitude, if we think that God can’t teach us anything new, then all our thinking, our yearning and our praying are plastic shells. Understanding the church as *koinonia* is not a plastic shell. It is a symbol full of life and promise. May I invite you to open your minds and hearts to it for a moment?

Koinonia is grounded in the being of God

What is the source from which we must drink? What is the foundation on which we must build? What is the air that we must breathe? What is the food that we must eat? What is the very structure that keeps us afloat on the sea? To answer these questions, the church has spoken with one voice, and at this point the church through the ages has rejected - at least in its theory! - all other voices.

The *ground* from which we come and the *foundation* on which we must build is the very *being of God as the dynamic and personal inter-relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

“God is faithful; by him you were called into the *fellowship (koinonia)* of his *Son*, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1:9).

And we all know the benediction with which the apostle blessed the church in Corinth:

“The grace of the Lord *Jesus Christ*, the love of *God*, and the *communion (koinonia)* of the *Holy Spirit* be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13).

Every time we participate in the *Eucharist* we celebrate the great Christian mystery that through faith we have communion with the life of Christ:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *sharing (koinonia)* in the *blood of Christ*? The bread that we break, is it not a *sharing (koinonia)* in the *body of Christ*? (1 Cor 10:16)

That is the vision by which we must orient ourselves as we try to be and shape the church in a drifting society. Not the *corporation* with the board of management, managers, departmental heads, down to the clerks and customers. Not the *monarchy* with the King or Queen on top, then the ministers and the people below. Not the *Republic* with the hierarchy of President and Prime Minister and cabinet and the two chambers and the electorate. Not the *military* with the clear hierarchy of ranks from top to bottom. No, as the church, that group of people whom God calls into being through faith and baptism, *we echo the very being of God as the koinonia of Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

Before the church is an institution, it is the *voluntary gathering of people* who have heard the gospel, experienced God as the liberating and integrating reality of their lives, and then joyously

bind their conscience to Christ. That is what the early Christians meant when they heard Christ saying:

“... where *two or three* are *gathered* in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

Paul in quite secular language describes the church as people “*coming together*” (1 Cor 11:18-20). The difference to a football club or a birdwatchers club is that the church is not just a gathering of people who have some common religious interests. But it is *God himself in the power of the Spirit who calls the church into being*. It is true, of course, that the Gospel comes to each person and none of us is compelled to become Christians. But when we *hear* the Gospel and *believe*, the same Spirit who speaks the Gospel into our lives, does not individualise us, but *the Spirit creates a community*. When we talk about structures and buildings and rules and offices, let us never forget that the power and the reality of the church consists in the *people* who in their commitment to each other and in their willingness to become messengers of reconciliation reflect the very being of God.

God *is* the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God calls the church into being - in the New Testament the church is dominantly called the “Church of God”). And the church echoes the being of God by shaping a community which reflects the colourful diversity in unity which is there in the being of God. What happens in a church which echoes the being of God?

Inward Journey

In trying to understand the *being of God*, theologians have spoken of the “immanent trinity” and the “economic trinity”. They wanted to find ways to explain that “*God is love*” (explicit in 1 John 4, implicit throughout the Bible). The God whom we experience as accepting us unconditionally, who desires our well being, and who wants to liberate us from the chains that bind us, is indeed God and not some kind of psychological illusion. What God is “*for us*”, God is in *Godself*.

God’s life therefore entails an *inward journey* - the dynamic and personal inter-wovenness and inter-relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and an *outward journey*, where the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit claim what belongs to them. The inward journey and the outward journey complement each other. The same is true for the *church*.

Our *koinonia with God* is reflected in our *koinonia with one another* in the community of faith. Here are a couple of words from the Epistle of John:

...we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship (koinonia) with us; and truly our fellowship (koinonia) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ... This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship (koinonia) with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship (koinonia) with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:3-7)

The church as *koinonia* becomes real as the friends of Jesus become involved in and with each other’s lives, as they gather around the table of the Lord, eat bread, drink wine, become aware of the *presence of the Spirit*, remember what *Christ has done* for them on the cross and thereby anticipate the *eschaton* in which God will be all in all.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *sharing* (koinonia) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *sharing* (koinonia) in the body of Christ? Because there is *one* bread, we who are many are *one* body, for we *all partake* of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:16f.)

What happens at the *Eucharist*? We are being told *who we are*: “... *you are* the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Not “*you shall become*”, or “*you must be*”, or even “*you will be*”. Not a moral exhortation or a future promise, but a simple and beautiful designation of our

life: "... *you are* the body of Christ and individually members of it". Let us remember that when we become discouraged or even disillusioned. We are not divine and we are not infallible and we are not even the continuing incarnation. But we *are* the presence of Christ in the world. And the God who has established the event of reconciliation, is equally concerned about those who are engaged in the ministry of reconciliation, who invite people on behalf of Christ: "... be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:17-21). Let us develop the community of faith; let us appreciate each other; let us expect Christ to come to us in the Christian brother and sister.

In this communion with each other, God becomes historically manifest. That is the ideal which the evangelist Luke lifts up for our reflection and orientation:

All who believed were together and had all things in common (koinoi); they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

But then there is the *impossible possibility*, which shows us that the *inward journey* becomes an illusion apart from the *outward journey*. Paul, in a momentary flash of insight - or was it the momentary whisper of disillusionment? - entertains the possibility that the church may cease to be the church:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. *When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper* (1 Corinthians 11:17-20).

What had happened? Why those strong words? All the religious elements of the Eucharist were there: the bread and the cup and the word and the song and the prayer and the people. What was missing? Missing was the *theology of the crucified Christ* and its consequences. The Christian leaders in Corinth had severed the Eucharist from the story of Jesus. They thought that they could engage in a Christian celebration and forget the world. When the latecomers came, the wharf labourers and the nannies and the slaves who had to work long hours, the food and the wine had gone, except for the sacramental elements! And is not that the important part, thought those whose belly was full: sacramental food for the soul and not for the belly! No, Paul hurls at them. You can't celebrate the Eucharist and forget the latecomers. And then he invites them to spell again the basic alphabet of their faith:

... that the Lord Jesus *on the night when he was betrayed* took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, *you proclaim the Lord's death* until he comes. (1 Cor 11: 23-26).

Koinonia with Christ in the Eucharist binds us to each other and at the same time it binds us to the world. Therefore participation in the Eucharist does not only tell us who we are and *to whom we belong* (the indicative), but it also tells us to *whom we must go* (the imperative).

Outward Journey

When Paul defines the church as the "body of Christ" he reflects earlier pictures from the gospels where Jesus says to the disciples: "You are the light *of the world*" and "You are the salt *of the earth*" (Matt 5:13-16). As God is true to himself by being the God for others, so God breathes his life into the church and thus constitutes it as the community "for" and "with" others.

Grounded in the being of God, the church echoes its foundation by being “for” and “with” others. The “inward journey” and the “outward journey” complement each other. Just as Jesus has been described as the man “for others” and the man “with others”, just as the Spirit is God’s self-giving par excellence, so the church reflects God being by incarnating the central mystery of the Christian vision of reality:

(Jesus) called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34f.)

What does that mean for us being the church?

It means, *firstly*, that we *lean towards each “other”*. That we affirm and encourage each other in and with our differences. That we energise and empower each other on the journey. That we accept the giftedness of our life and then show our gratitude to God by using our gifts for God’s mission and for the welfare of others. Remember what the apostle said: “To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*” (1 Cor 12:7). We need to discover the people power in our churches. Whatever hierarchy and structures and buildings and doctrines we may have and we may need, let us not forget that the *church is people* and the church of the future will be a *people oriented church*.

“... that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. ... you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:25-27).

To be the church means, *secondly*, that we *affirm difference and otherness*. Jesus was the man *for* and *with others* and the “others” included people from all walks of life; and the *Holy Spirit* is God’s self-giving par excellence, sharing God’s life unconditionally with all people. The *church is the historical manifestation of grace* in that *all* are invited and *all* are accepted. That makes life difficult at times, but grace, if then it is grace, never comes cheap. Let us resist the “social club” mentality where we reward people for their sameness. The beauty of the rainbow is in its coming together of a variety of colours.

There are some who may seek *self-realisation* and *self-acceptance* and *self-understanding* and *self-experience* at the expense of others. But the community of faith knows a secret; the secret that the “self” needs the “other” to become what it is. To echo the God who “is love” means that in our quest for the “self”, the “other” is not the constant threat to our identity, but the enrichment for our journey towards the “self”. What would it mean for our relationship and commitment to the unemployed, the disabled, and the foreigners in our midst, if we meet their “otherness” as a divine gift that can enrich our own insights into the mystery of life?

To be the church means, *thirdly*, that the church reflects the *partiality of God* in our world. Just like the good shepherd who is passionately concerned about every erring sheep (Luke 15:4-7 / Matt 18:12-14), so the church lives from the *dangerous memory of Jesus*:

He comes to break oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity.

He comes with comfort speedy
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy
And bid the weak be strong.

Therefore in Australia today we have no choice but to fuel the process of reconciliation with the Aboriginal people; to do whatever we can to lighten the burden of parents and children who have been forcibly separated; to unmask and criticise a mentality that defines the human being via their usefulness and achievements; to love and accept the stranger in our midst. These are not merely moral challenges. They are spiritual challenges. Just as the rich man can not relate to God by-passing Lazarus, so we cannot relate to God if we close our eyes and ears to what God is doing in our world.

We must realise that *life is getting colder in our society*. The *euthanasia* debate is not only about freedom to determine your own destiny, it also says something about the worth and value of *human dignity*. The “*Mabo*” and “*Wik*” debate are not only concerned with justice and fairness, it also says something about our understanding of *freedom*. Do we want to support the classical “Western” understanding of freedom, which demands individual and group self realisation which often comes at the expense of others. Or can we dream of an experience of freedom where the other is no longer the potential limiter of my own freedom, but the necessary human partner in the experience of freedom. The constant reference to *Dollars* makes one wonder whether economic values and profits invade and determine all of our life. Are we, the churches and Christians together, prepared to declare our ultimate concern, are we prepared to confess to whom we have bound our conscience, are we willing to leave the comfortable harbour of our denominations and begin to shape an alternative community which visibly lives out a different vision of life and where all people are welcome to the table?

The *fourth* point is, that when we accept ourselves as *koinonia*, we shall also want to *share our resources*. The Apostle Paul was collecting money in the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem, and he called this collection “*koinonia*”!

... Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources (*koinonia*) with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:26f.)

Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your *sharing* (*koinonia*) with them and with all others ... (2 Cor 9:13; compare 2 Cor 8:4).

The *church* does not exist for itself. As the *Spirit* is in being for and with others, as *Jesus* manifested who he is in being for and with others, so the *church* is in being for and with others.

Do not neglect to do good and to share (*koinonia*) what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Hebr 13:16)

Paying the price for *koinonia*

Lest we romanticise things let us not forget that God’s love for us was a costly affair. Sharing in God and sharing with each other does not come cheap. The cross and resurrection of Christ flows over into our existence:

... for we know that as you *share* in our *sufferings*, so also you share in our *consolation*. (2 Corinthians 1:7)

Being the church as *koinonia* means participating in God’s passion for God’s world. It means hearing the cry of his people in slavery, knowing their pain and yearning for their liberation. It means feeling the sadness of his people in exile at the rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137), and sharing in the sadness and suffering of his prophets who try to speak truth and honesty into society (Jeremiah 29:4-14). Being intentionally Christian will not become easier; it will become more difficult. As if the prophet wants to speak a word of honesty into our life:

"If you have raced with men on foot,
and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?"

(Jeremiah 12:5)

Truth begins at the point of pain. When the road becomes stony and steep, we must not forget that faith in Christ has always been associated with pain, struggle, conflict and a life wrenching loneliness. The apostle Paul had to oppose Peter in Antioch because he could not compromise the gospel of grace with moral and religious rules and stipulations; and Peter who agreed with Paul in theory, had a pastoral heart and was in agony because he knew that some of the consequences of shaping a community of equals in Antioch would bring about persecution for the church in Jerusalem.

To echo the being of God in a world that is run by economic, secular and materialistic interests will entail the readiness to face conflict, change and hardship. But it is there, at the point of pain and conflict where truth and justice begins to dawn. The Crucified One who calls us to follow him, also promises to be with us to the end of the age, and as his life flows over into ours, we shall know that that life of unconditional love will grace all of our struggles, because love "bears *all* things, believes *all* things, hopes *all* things, endures *all* things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Conclusion

Can we gather our reflections into a summary statement? The church is a creation of God and receives its being from God. With raising the crucified Jesus from the dead, God created a community of disciples whose divine mission and destiny it is to witness to God's salvation and liberation in the world.

The church is grounded in and woven into the trinitarian history of God. It is created by God the Father; it is empowered by God the Holy Spirit; and it is given direction by the story of Jesus.

As the friends of Jesus lean towards each other and share their lives with each other; as they hear the Gospel and create space for the Spirit; as they gather around the Eucharist and share in the life of Christ; they reflect the koinonia of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And as such, echoing the koinonia of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit we have the resources and the determination of shaping an *alternative* vision and building an *alternative* community in which not the Dollar but Christ, not performance but faith, not our experience and our interests but the Holy Spirit will write the agenda for the church.

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