Welcome to the second edition of Red Wings for 2013!

We begin with a short profile of our Presbytery Minister, Kevin Dilks, and some past events, like songwrite, and Common Dreams 3, the forthcoming Progressive conference in September.

From the Chaplain’s Desk brings us a very human account of ageing, by Michael Leunig; and an alternative view of Lent by a chaplain, The Rev. Meghan F. Froehlich, from the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio.

For those With a Progressive Bent there is contemporary account by Christian Piatt, called The Ikea Effect, Slow Church and Laboring Our Way Into Love. It may not be everyone’s view of the state of the church, but it’s surely entertaining, worth a read.

Burning Issues includes an article from the Washington Post about a recent tour by the Afghan Youth Orchestra to the US and the young women and men who are bringing music and hope to their country.

I’ve also featured a recent Editorial from The Age newspaper in relation to asylum seekers. It was written in the light of certain comments by politicians at the time.

Chris Glaser is a US based gay progressive theologian and writer, who writes a blog about contemporary issues, including this offering: “If Jesus Read The New York Times”.

Finally the The Library Shelf has a review of a recent book entitled “The Abundant Community; Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods” by Peter Block and John McKnight. A must read for those of us who are passionate about becoming part of the community, as a family and as a church!

On the back page, an “unashamed” plug for Rex Hunt’s new book “Against the Stream” and a review by Dr. Nigel Leaves.

Editorial

We stand now in the first quarter of a new year, and in the middle of Lent.

It often seems incongruous to me that we celebrate Lent and Easter in the southern hemisphere during autumn and not spring, but of course these festivals began with primitive roots and origins in the northern hemisphere. Easter is always a new beginning as we celebrate the risen Christ and the resurrection.

For us at St James, 2013 is a fresh new start as a community, as we begin a year with some unknown territory but also opportunities and challenges. Like the first Christians, who faced years without Christ by their side, yet with a strong and steadfast faith, we will persist and grow.

With faith, as we are reminded so many times in the Bible, all is possible. Faith, and love, which:

“bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” 1 Corinthians 13:7

Love has that capacity to mend and heal, forming a seal over many wounds, creating bonds that last and remain to strengthen live and communities. If we allow ourselves to build slowly, with love and patience, something “beautiful for God”, others will want to join us as we show our light, to the world. We know that light can be reflected in all Christians by the way they act and carry out his work in the world.

“believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” John 12:36

Let us carry that love and light to the people of Canberra and build a new community of compassion and hope for those around us. With faith in God and the strength of all of us working together, we can move forward.

M. Tandukar, Editor
At our last Congregational meeting we had a visit from Kevin Dilks, who is Presbytery Minister (Pastoral Care and Administration); also Presbytery Secretary and PRC Secretary.

Kevin addressed the congregation and expressed his thanks for our “faithfulness” during the past year and during this time of change. He offered his support to the Church Council and to the congregation as a whole while we are in the process of finding our new direction and eventually finding a new minister.

He advised caution in moving too quickly, and acknowledged that we had enough lay preachers and guest preachers who were willing to take up the lead in worship and liturgy planning for the moment.

At the same time, he was willing to give advice and listening time to members who were uncertain or anxious about the process or the present state of affairs.

If anyone wishes to contact Kevin, please email if possible to arrange a time. If email is not possible for some, there is a mobile number, bearing in mind that Kevin is carrying several roles on his “broad shoulders” and may not be able to respond immediately!

We are grateful to Kevin for his “shepherding” role in our present time of renewal as a community.

Email: presbyteryminister@bigpond.com

Mobile: 0400 361 468

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On a Lighter Note

**Why Go to Church?**

One Sunday morning, a mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, "I'm not going."

"Why not?" she asked.

I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "(1), they don't like me, and (2), I don't like them."

His mother replied, "I'll give you two good reasons why you SHOULD go to church: (1) You're 59 years old, and (2) you're the pastor!"

**The Picnic**

A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter.

"This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding."
SONGWRITE was held at Kippax UC from 15-17 February 2013. It was an opportunity to encourage the writing of new worship songs for congregations and faith communities. Built into the weekend was the chance to develop, write, score and record and present a new worship song. songwrite was about gathering together as a safe, supportive Christian creative-arts community. This meant gathering together not only songwriters, but also experienced musicians, mentors, coaches, thinkers and tech-minded people. The following account is from the songwrite blog. Ed.

“songwrite has come and gone at Kippax UC, Canberra this past weekend. Around 30 folk from many parts of Australia. Many having written or shared a worship song in the context of a weekend time of community before, let alone had their song turned into music score or mp3 recording. Andrew Dutney (Rev Professor) and Robin Mann as our special guests led us brilliantly, sharing along the way so much behind the crafting of some of their songs

songwrite was just as much about each one of us being encouraged (and we pray, empowered) to share their songs as gift – in worship and often as a prophetic voice in their communities. Saturday night’s “open mic” time, when 16 or so of us got up and shared – and importantly, the rest of us sang along, was one of the high-points. Another highpoint was the sense of collaboration and networking; being affirmed in our musical gifting. Our support team of coaches, techos and musos helped so much in this regard.

Kippax UC proved a marvellous venue – the hospitality of the church folk there was just amazing; great catering, so many ‘creative spaces’, hospitality, admin support. We could go on. Thanks Kippax, and particularly Gordon, Erin, Hannah, Dean and all who worked alongside you. it was great making the songwrite connections via your three Sunday worship services, with 6 of our new songs being shared and sung.

Really, songwrite has not really come and gone at all. Anything but! There’s a clear sense among the 30 of us, that we’d like another songwrite weekend; we’d like to explore how in an ongoing way we ... and the many, many other worship songwriters out there can be supported and encouraged, and ultimately the triune God can be worshipped and served in fresh ways.”

Grace and peace, David MacGregor, Sharon Kirk (coordinators) February 18, 2013

http://ucasongwrite.wordpress.com/tag/uniting-church/

Common Dreams 2013

COMMON DREAMS is an alliance of Australian and New Zealand kindred organisations which promote the study, discussion and implementation of Progressive Christian and other progressive religious streams of thought and action. Its principal method of pursuing these objectives is through its major “Common Dreams” conferences which are held each three years plus the promotion of visits by leading international scholars and the sale and distribution of the materials that result from these activities.

The next Common Dreams conference will be held in Canberra over 19th to 22nd September, 2013 and it will feature as keynote speakers the renowned US scholar and writer, Professor Marcus Borg, leading Canadian theologian and writer, Bruce Sanguin, David Felten, a co-founder of the Living the Questions educational materials organisation, plus a group of leading Australian and New Zealand writers and speakers, including Dr Val Webb, Dr Lorraine Parkinson, Dr Margaret Mayman, Dr Greg Jenks, Rabbi Aviva Kipen, Norman Habel, Dr Nigel Leaves and others.

For more information and registration see the website:  http://www.commondreams.org.au/index.php
The Warm Heart in Winter

More and more lonely, your path struggles on through incomprehensible mankind. Rilke (Lament)

Winter arrives and the face looks suddenly more blotchy. Summer's healthy glow has gone from the brow and a mean pallor is asserting itself like sickly moonlight from the darkness within. Under the strain of countless bygone disappointments the flesh has drooped into irregular, irredeemable saggings that now wither into an insipid glare from the mirror. It is you. It is winter.

To save the day, a cheery mirror smile is attempted, but this is instantly recognised as a mistake. Joyless desperation never works. There is something utterly implausible and futile about this forcing of the lips, this clumsy disturbance of the cheeks; something so failed and frightening that the traumatised inner portrait takes another turn for the worse.

Yes, it's the descent into old age and winter — two journeys barely discernible from each other and rolled into one. What a well-suited couple, hand in hand as the darkness gathers and the cold rain comes down. All of us are getting older of course, but some of us are getting old — me included, and as the beloved Rilke has plainly declared: "Who has no house now, will never build one. Whoever is alone now, will long remain so . . ."

Yet it's not all over. There is a promise about old age, something to do with the soul that still needs to flourish. There is surely the chance of ripening into sweetness — not sickly sweetness, but the sweetness of a well-ripened plum. Maturing into fullness is the idea — yet fullness with a lightness of being. The prune is another idea but we won't go into that just yet.

There appears to be a fork in the road in one's "late middle age" where the plum of self can either develop according to one's lovelier aspect or else go down the path of a personality's more dismal and heartbreaking qualities. The light touch of loveliness is a very inviting prospect, since there has been enough bitterness, heaviness and conflict in the rat race already.

Of course there is the old curmudgeon stage that all eager pilgrims must go through on the difficult road to wisdom and this is a healthy growth phase necessary for shaking off the world's angering oppressive nonsense in order to become a happy hermit, a grinning grandpa or a rapturous philosopher-painter in the shed.

The trick of good ripening is to keep the heart warm. This appears to be the great task of old age and rather than closing the doors as we do in winter to keep the house warm, we must open the heart as wide as possible. That's what keeps it warm. Perhaps this is a lifetime's work and it's better to start earlier than later.

It is said that some faculties start to fail or not work so well as we get old. This is obviously so but it may also be discovered that some things start working better than ever. Oldness may compromise eyesight, and usually does, but it can also produce an astonishing capacity for X-ray vision whereby certain funny old folk can see through things very easily.

Seeing through things can bring a certain measure of despair, yet it brings humour, relief and a measure of forgiveness also. Smiling old X-ray visionaries can see through such well-defended things as corporate systems, celebrities, appalling individuals, cultural ways and the juggernauts of ruthless power — and quickly discern the pathos and fear within these entities, and recognise the complex tragedies that created such mad fraudulence. X-ray vision begins by seeing through yourself. Historian Manning Clark may have been referring to this when he asked us to "look with the eye of pity".

It's not a case of old faculties that don't work any more; it's the ways of the world that don't work and don't wash in the old liberated mind. The prestigious earthly power of politics, commerce, art and entertainment becomes an ineffectual transparency. Prime ministers and opposition leaders who are younger than oneself become objects of dismay, pity or amused fascination.

Yet that which is valuable and true remains, and without the obfuscating detritus of cultural claptrap, authenticity shines more clearly than ever.

It's not that cynicism has taken hold; it's more to do with the emergence of a quality we might call "mature innocence". The innocent child sees that the emperor is not wearing clothes but mature innocence sees that this naked person is not even an emperor — and that deep down, nobody is an emperor.

There may be less and less of the temporal world we can subscribe to or take part in as we age — not because of physical incapability, but because we become discerning and spiritually disinclined. Nationalism, religious categories, mass fixations, popular pastimes or collective certitudes: these things may seem like hubris and piffle to an old soul who's had enough of all that and is developing the wings of mature intelligence.

There's a sense in which the wiser of the elders are a sort of dispossessed indigenous people. They have their stories, their own spirituality, their peculiar dignity and ways, which are not greatly valued in the booming imperial world. Material progress has overtaken them, yet there they always are — confronting and in varying...
degrees of pain, but connected to something sacred and ineffable, and somehow prophetic and disturbing to humanity’s remnant conscience.

In preparation for an eagerly awaited concert recently, I decided to refresh my hearing by granting the long-suffering ears some respite from any radio broadcast or recorded sounds for about a week, in the belief that the music from the forthcoming concert would fall like seed on this fallow ground and germinate more joyfully. This may have been a flawed theory derived mostly from childhood and my father’s insistence that potatoes could have grown in my ears, but I did it and went about my business in a solitude and silence that grew richer and more delicious as the days passed. A comforting spaciousness gradually opened up and grew around me; an ethereal emptiness alive with an atmosphere of freedom and creativity — not because I got hold of something, but because I got rid of something.

Ripening age probably means, more or less, you’ve had much of many things, so it’s hardly surprising that the joys of solitude and “not having” should present themselves.

Not-having is a skilfulness of being, acquired slowly over a lifetime that has included episodes in the crucible of suffering and sin. This ability naturally helps when it comes eventually to the not-having of life, but while we still live and breathe in a madly overstimulated world of material orgy, it can be such a sumptuous rapture if you can bear it; this peace and freedom you have contributed to a booklet of Lenten reflections for each day of Lent 2013. More can be found by using the website address listed below. Ed.)

Lenten reflection

Monday March 4, 2013

Today commemorates the work of The Rev. Paul Cuffee, a Shinnecock Native American, who died in 1812. The Rev. Cuffee ministered on Long Island, with most of his journeys made on foot. Cuffee is described as “humble,” a word that is out of fashion in our 21st Century, with our secular admiration of arrogant self-flattery and “do-it-yourself” individualism.

What might it mean to be humble? And why might we want to aspire to such a quality?

The reading from Colossians (3:12-17) commemo-
rat ing Cuffee includes these verses: (12)

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... (14) Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

One way to clothe ourselves, or practice, humility is to listen more. Much of my work as a hospice chaplain involves listening to people’s life stories. Rather than speaking, I mostly ask open-ended questions and listen attentively. Patients and families say that this act of listening honors their life, and respects their experience. They say that they feel blessed to have someone genuinely care about their life, enough to be quiet and listen.

May I suggest that being humble may involve caring in the moment more for the story of another person than about conveying our own expertise or importance? May we each be so clothed....

The Rev. Meghan F. Froehlich
Executive Leadership Coach and Hospice Chaplain
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

(The clergy of this diocese in Cleveland, Ohio, have contributed to a booklet of Lenten reflections for each day of Lent 2013. More can be found by using the website address listed below. Ed.)


http://trinitycleveland.org/blog/category/lenten-meditations-2013/
The Ikea Effect, Slow Church and Laboring Our Way Into Love

February 6, 2013 by Christian Piatt

A man buys two dogs to live with him in his apartment. They drive him and his neighbors crazy. They bark at all hours, get sick all over the place and cause rifts between him and his neighbors. And yet he insists that, despite the tremendous amount of work and inconvenience they present, he loves them.

So the question is: does he do all the work and put up with the nonsense because he loves them, or does he love them because he’s invested so much of himself in them? Researchers looked at this question, particularly with regard to the wild popularity of the DIY furniture store, Ikea. Basically, you pay them to give you some furniture in a box that you have to take home and build. Sometimes you screw it up. Sometimes it takes a lot longer than you expected. Sometimes you scrape the skin off your knuckles and call the furniture names that would make your mother blush. In the end, if most of us assessed the value of our time against the money we’re saving by buying the furniture unassembled, it’s a net loss for us.

So why do we do it?

I was talking to my friend, Andy, about this very thing just last week. He is quite the pro at home brewing, and he brought a couple of bottles of his homemade imperial stout over for us to sample. It was great, but the fact is, none of us can brew something better at home than the stuff we can find at a fine artisan beer shop, can we? Even if we can, how can we possibly justify the time it takes to buy the ingredients, prepare the equipment, monitor the fermentation, bottle it and store it, when we could just go to the market and buy a six pack of some great beer?

Put another way, why would anyone set out to prepare a garden bed, plant the seeds, pull weeds, water and tend to a few rows of vegetables when we could go to any grocery store or farmers market and get the same quality organic produce for a few bucks?

It’s the same reason my kids’ Christmas presents are shoved somewhere under their beds right now, despite their voracious desire for those things a few months ago. They asked for it, and they got it. The most they had to do for it was sit on a fat man’s lap at the mall and ask. Yes, the trinkets and toys offered some momentary distraction or entertainment, but they don’t mean anything. They don’t care about those things because they haven’t been required to invest in them.

Most of our lives are filled with things we consume without having anything to do with creating them. Just try, for one day, to list all of the products and services you enjoy – from clothes and milk to roads, computers and radio programs – but for which you don’t have to labor, aside maybe for paying for them. Now, consider which would mean more to you, even if they cost you the same: a car you drove off a lot, or one you built yourself by hand?
That’s the Ikea Effect.

This is nothing new. Our grandparents spoke of the age-old dignity of work, but post-industrial-revolution, that idea became kind of silly. Why, after all, would we break our backs anymore when we don’t have to? If we can make something easier, why not do it? And so it went, until we found ourselves literally surrounded by things with little or no meaning. And although we’re comfortable and most of our needs and wants are satisfied, there’s something missing: meaning.

We want to care. We want to have a stake in our lives. We want more from existence. We want love, but it seems that love requires something of us. Love is work.

This is precisely where so many religious institutions have fallen short. We have succumbed to the trends of the surrounding culture, employing professionals to prepare the perfect space and the ideal services to accommodate all comers. All you have to do is show up. We’ll take care of the rest. We don’t want to require too much from you because then you might be scared off. You might look for something easier, and we’d rather have you here.

But if I don’t have to invest anything into the community, the community doesn’t really matter that much to me. That’s because there’s not really any of me in it. I want to see a part of myself in the world around me, and that requires something of me. It’s counter-intuitive, particularly in a post-industrial and affluent society who doesn’t have to do for itself unless it chooses. But if we look around us at the growing popularity of do-it-yourself practices, we within the institutional church stand to learn a lot from what people are showing us they really need.

About Christian Piatt

Christian Piatt is an author, editor, speaker, musician and spoken word artist. He co-founded Milagro Christian Church in Pueblo, Colorado with his wife, Rev. Amy Piatt, in 2004.

He is the creator and editor of BANNED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE and BANNED QUESTIONS ABOUT JESUS. He co-created and co-edits the “WTF: Where’s the Faith?” young adult series with Chalice Press, and he has a memoir on faith, family and parenting being published in early 2012 called PREGMANCY: A Dad, a Little Dude and a Due Date.

http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christianplatt/2013/02/the-ikea-effect-slow-church-and-laboring-our-way-into-love/
Afghan Youth Orchestra brings message of hope on two-week U.S. tour

By Katherine Boyle
The Washington Post
Published: February 2

The lulling sound of the sarod is loved by many, but the fretless instrument is difficult to master. That Negin Khpolwak’s fingers are tough enough to press the strings is, in itself, a musical feat. But the sound of her sarod is all the more powerful because Khpolwak is an orphan, only 16, born the same year that the Taliban took control of her native Kabul, the same year it pummeled pianos with grenades and chopped off the hands of men who dared to strum sitars.

Eleven years after the fall of the Taliban, Khpolwak now performs in the Afghan Youth Orchestra, a celebrated ensemble of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul, where she studies.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music began a two week U.S. tour beginning at the State Department on Feb. 4, 2013. John Kerry welcomed the Afghan students on his first official day as Secretary of State. (Musadeq Sadeq/AP) - An Afghan youth, Sayed Menhaj Sadat, practices playing the cello in a class at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul, Afghanistan.

“Normally, Afghan girls are not picking traditional instruments,” Khpolwak said in a phone interview through an interpreter. “I am one of the first. It’s an honor to play with the orchestra and to act as an ambassador for Afghan music and culture.” Khpolwak seems aware of the symbolism: She is a girl attending school in a country where the Taliban silenced both women and music. On Sunday, she and 47 other young Afghans will board a flight bound for Washington to showcase their talents and triumphs when the Afghan Youth Orchestra begins a two-week tour of the United States. The tour will include a free concert at the Kennedy Center on Thursday, master classes at the New England Conservatory in Boston and a performance at New York’s Carnegie Hall.

The students, ages 10 to 21, have not practiced their entire lives to get to Carnegie Hall, but the school wasn’t built for Langs, Mas and Perlmans. Ahmad Sarmast, an Afghan music professor educated in Russia and Australia, founded the school in 2010 to bring music back to the country after it was banned in the name of the Taliban’s extreme interpretation of Islam.

“Music can play a role in bringing about social changes and breaking taboos,” Sarmast said. “That’s why many of the activities are designed not only for education but also to contribute to establishing a civil society in Afghanistan.”

Half of the school’s 141 students are orphans or former street hawkers. Children from every ethnic group and social class attend the school, where tuition is free, and 35 girls are enrolled. For the poorest students, the school is the jolt out of poverty; some families are given monthly stipends for their children’s lost wages. And orphans audition to learn music and other subjects alongside promising students from middle-class backgrounds.

Milad Youssufi, 18, won third place at an international piano competition in Frankfurt, Germany, last year and will audition at the Berklee College of Music in Boston next week.

The Afghan Youth Orchestra is more than a development project. For Sarmast and the school’s many international donors, it serves as a powerful symbol of successful reconstruction in Afghanistan. And by performing in Washington and New York, the seats of U.S. political and financial power, the orchestra hopes to showcase what a decade of investment has achieved.

“All these countries, especially the people of Afghanistan, are tired of always seeing the reporting on Afghanistan in negative colors,” Sarmast said. “The donors see that the outcome of this tour can change the perception of Afghanistan.”

The U.S. State Department, the World Bank, the Carnegie Corporation and Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education have invested heavily in the tour. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul awarded nearly $350,000 footing most of the estimated $500,000 cost. For international donors, the tour symbolizes progress in a country crippled by war.
“The Afghanistan National Institute of Music is an example of how far education, culture and youth have advanced since the fall of the Taliban,” said Eileen O’Connor, director of communications and public diplomacy for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the State Department. “We wanted Americans to understand the difference their tax dollars have made in building a better future for young people, which translates into reduced threats from extremists in the region.”

The World Bank has invested $1.8 million in the school as part of a $20 million vocational training project in Afghanistan. Isabel Guerrero, World Bank vice president for the South Asia region, sees the school as not only a development project but also an example of international cooperation.

“A network of goodwill is being created through culture,” Guerrero said. “Coming to the Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall is a huge deal for the students and their parents, and it creates a cycle of recognition of the value of this.”

The tour signals the growing potency of cultural diplomacy in Afghanistan amid ongoing negotiations over the United States’ post-2014 role in the country. And if the tour is as successful as Sarmast hopes it will be, violins could become the most powerful weapons of counterinsurgency.

One School, Many Functions

William Harvey often speaks of one of his first students. Shortly after the American violinist from Indianapolis arrived in Afghanistan, he met Marjan, an orphan who wanted to learn violin. “She pressed her face up against the window and watched as I played,” said Harvey, who conducts the Afghan Youth Orchestra and has taught violin at the school since 2010. He later learned that Marjan’s father was paralyzed after members of the Taliban beat him with an electrical cable.

“Thanks to the sponsorship program, she makes slightly more money per month than she used to selling chewing gum on the streets,” Harvey said. Most of the students have compelling stories, repeated dozens of times by international media outlets, in English as well as Dari and Pashto. And Harvey and Sarmast have their own riveting narratives. Sarmast, the son of well-known Afghan conductor Ustad Salim Sarmast, had to leave Afghanistan to obtain his doctorate in music. Harvey had wanted to move to Afghanistan since his first year at Juilliard in 2002, when he read an article about how the youth of the country hadn’t heard music in years. They both subscribe to the belief that the school offers hope to the Afghan people, and serves as a model for international cooperation.

“There’s a lot of weariness in the U.S. and cynicism about Afghanistan,” Harvey said. “What are we doing there? What can be achieved? These concerts answer those questions in the strongest way possible: Cooperation between Afghanistan and the international community has made it safe for young girls and boys to learn music.”

While the school was born of Sarmast’s hope to bring music to his homeland, it has become an invaluable lesson in cultural diplomacy. Sometimes called soft power, public diplomacy helped the U.S. government engage foreign populations through American music and culture during the Cold War. Jazz was the medium of choice in 1956, when the State Department funded Dizzy Gillespie’s musical tour of the Middle East, often seen as a landmark experiment in cultural diplomacy. The tour was so successful that the Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman and the Duke Ellington Orchestra went on tours in Africa, the Soviet Union and Southeast Asia.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music began a two week U.S. tour beginning at the State Department on Feb. 4, 2013. John Kerry welcomed the Afghan students on his first official day as Secretary of State.

Nicholas Cull, director of the public diplomacy masters program at the University of Southern California, said the United States decreased its public diplomacy efforts during the 1990s, preferring to let private international companies such as Disney or Coca-Cola represent the cultural face of the nation. He sees the tour by the Afghan Youth Orchestra as a sign that the United States is investing in public diplomacy once again.

“What’s most significant is that the U.S. has a history of sending culture out,” Cull said. “This tour enables Afghans to share their culture and stories with the U.S. It’s great that Afghanistan is getting a chance to speak, to be more than the passive recipient of the world’s largess.”

Ryan Crocker, former ambassador to Afghanistan and now a senior fellow at Yale University, says the tour is a point of pride for Afghan people: “Culture counts, but in the Afghan context, culture assumes particular importance in developing a national spirit in the post-Taliban generation.”

For those who doubt music’s impact on foreign relations, Crocker highlights that public diplomacy is part of a broader security effort in the region.
"I think I can speak for all donors that support the institute, that helping indigent children is worthy in and of itself, but [the school] also creates a human bulwark that is effectively saying, ‘Never again. Those people will never rule us again.’”

The State Department is investing heavily in this message and, in turn, funding music, art and museums in Afghanistan. It invested in the renovation of the Padshah-seh-Ughur Mausoleum in Kabul, the Herat Citadel, an ancient site that dates to 330 B.C., and in Afghanistan’s vibrant tradition of film through the Afghan Film Project. “Buzkashi Boys,” a film co-produced by Afghanistan and the United States, was nominated for an Academy Award last month.

But investment raises delicate questions of how the international community can help Afghanistan rebuild its lost culture without imposing its will.

Harvey and Sarmast see the school as the answer to this sensitive question. Foreign and Afghan teachers work side by side to instruct students in Western and traditional music. Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education sanctions and supports the school financially, but welcomes donations from foreign governments and private sponsors. Even the music selection showcases the fusion of Western and Afghan forces: On the U.S. tour, the orchestra will play a version of Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” scored by Harvey for Western and Afghan instruments.

With all the talk of symbolism, one could easily forget that the institute teaches music, not foreign relations. Harvey is quick to remind his students that they are musicians and ambassadors. “It’s a balance between the big and small pictures,” Harvey said. “I tell my students, ‘You are the ones who are saving music for Afghanistan. You are the ones who are taking the leadership role.’ It’s important to talk about it, but it’s also important to tell a violinist if his wrist is in the wrong position.” And while the students are aware of the significance of an American tour, they’re still young people visiting a new country for the first time.

“The most common question I’m getting is how often we’re going to eat pizza,” Harvey said. “Lucky for them it’s my favorite food, too.”

Source:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/afghan-youth-orchestra-brings-message-of-hope-on-two-week-us-tour/2013/02/01/5dfe8f38-6966-11e2-95b3-272d604a10a3_story_2.html

Affirmation

Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
And a generosity of service
That gives without counting cost
A life overflowing with Grace
Poured out from the One
Who gave everything
That we might show
The power of love
To a broken world
And share the truth
From a living Word

Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
And a yearning to share it

John Birch

Source: http://www.faithandworship.com/liturgy_Lent_2.htm#ixzz2NbM7yg1w
Speaking up for those who can’t

Editorial

Published: March 2, 2013 - 3:00 a.m.

A READER asked in a letter on these pages on Friday why The Age "crusades" in support of asylum seekers. He said "most of us", referring presumably to Australians generally, wanted a reduction in migration and that refugees should simply be rejected. Irrespective of what the majority may or may not support, The Age has its views. We respectfully welcome the opportunity today to explain our position on asylum seekers, especially as this nation begins a prolonged and no doubt bitter election campaign.

We crusade for asylum seekers, and do so proudly, because we believe in liberty and justice. We believe that civilisation is enhanced by aiding the disadvantaged, not by demonising classes of people or ostracising individuals. We believe in equity, in giving people opportunities to build better lives, and in fostering the human spirit, not quashing it. And we believe democracy and this nation's economy is, and always will be, enriched by the extraordinary diversity of people who have come from all over the world to make Australia their home.

These are ideals that Australia, too, supports. They underpin the nation's signature on international conventions regarding refugees. They amount to some of the fundamental reasons why this nation has gone to war in past decades, in Europe and in Asia: to fight for liberty, to aid the oppressed and to seek peace. It is incumbent on us to deal fairly and compassionately with people who come to our shores seeking refuge, many thousands of whom have fled the very countries where Australian troops have served.

Over 159 years, The Age has supported successive waves of immigration. We have particularly urged governments to be responsive to the plight of asylum seekers. We did so in 1947, when the Chifley government agreed to accept 12,000 refugees a year from Europe, people displaced after years of battles and anxious to begin a new life. Thirteen years later, The Age hailed how the refugees and migrants had "brought their skills and much of their culture to increase our national stature and broaden our horizons". Many of their children went on to become some of the greatest leaders this country has seen - judges and state governors; titans of industry; innovators in science and engineering; political leaders as well as doctors, teachers and artists.

Today there are more than 7 million long-term refugees in official and unofficial camps around the world, waiting to be resettled. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the average wait in these camps is 20 years, up from nine years in the early 1990s. These people have fled wars, persecution and famine. Some people have resorted to paying people smugglers to get them on a boat to Australia. They are no less deserving of care for having done so. For the Australian government to detain these people indefinitely - to freeze any processing of their applications for asylum, as it has done since August - is to shirk our responsibilities under international conventions. To be clear, we are not even trying to deal with applications speedily. The government has dumped some in detention facilities on Nauru or Manus Island, where they are being held as part of a "message of deterrence", as the Gillard government calls it, to others who might be tempted to follow.

About 9000 others are in some form of detention, including 56 who have received adverse assessments from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. These 56 are in genuine limbo. Once branded with an adverse assessment, they cannot be released into the community and they are unable to be relocated overseas. A former judge is reviewing the reasons for their detention, but her decision has no legal effect; their future can only be determined by the immigration minister. The problem with all this is that ASIO’s assessment is based on a person's past conduct or past associations. Whether that person, having fled their home country, poses a risk outside it is really little more than a guess. Besides, there is always the prospect of someone changing his or her conduct; rehabilitation is a critical feature of our justice system generally. How can we, as Australians who treasure the ideals of democracy and justice, who celebrate the freedoms of speech and of political thought, stand by while people who came in search of those ideals are detained without end?

When racially charged riots erupted in Cronulla in 2005, The Age argued it was time for Australians to "take a long, hard look at ourselves before irreparable damage was done to our reputation as a tolerant nation, one that had reaped the benefits of successive waves of immigration". In the past week, however, the Coalition has sought to stir irrational fears all over again. It suggests Australians should be warned if asylum seekers are housed near them - as though there was something inherently unsavoury about asylum seekers. Coalition leader Tony Abbott on Friday tried to raise the spook factor further, saying people on bridging visas are "disappearing" into the community.

These comments represent a particularly base form of politics, a vilification of one class of people who have no voice and no ability to defend themselves. The Age abhors the despicable and highly profitable industry of people-trafficking which flourishes almost unchecked in the region and which landed up to 17,000 people by boat in Australia in 2012. The parasites who foster this trade must be tracked down and punished, and the industry stamped out. To do so requires unrelenting and high-level cooperation between Australia and its nearest neighbours, especially Indonesia and Malaysia. It would be a travesty, though, if political parties used the plight of asylum seekers to strike division among Australians for the sake of gaining an edge in the electorate. Such toxic games do not resolve the problems; they exacerbate them. They do not help speed the processing of asylum seekers, nor do they weaken the people smugglers. They merely lessen us all.

This story was found at: http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/speaking-up-for-those-who-cant-20130301-2fbt2.html
If Jesus Read The New York Times

Chris Glaser

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If Jesus read The New York Times, he would not see a world so different from his own, except in externals. He would still see the poor, the hungry, and the marginalized. He would recognize military occupations, tribal warfare (even in Washington), and rulers who act like gods. He would experience déjà vu as he read about a variety of attempts at world domination, this time not by the Roman Empire, but by corporations, governments, ideologies, religions, even terrorists. Misogyny, patriarchy, racism, and xenophobia would not surprise him. And misuse of God’s creation has been with us since Eden.

Religious battles, spiritual abuse, clergy misconduct, religious hierarchy, fundamentalism, exclusivity, scapegoating, judgment, and self-righteousness—he challenged all of these in his own time. Wealth and greed in its myriad expressions (money, property, possessions, knowledge, ancestry, etc.) he has already testified as stumbling blocks to entering God’s commonwealth.

Drones have replaced crosses, weapons of mass destruction have replaced the swords we were to beat into ploughshares, AIDS has displaced leprosy, terrorist acts by individuals and governments alike have more “sophisticated” expressions—but all still intimidate the human spirit. Equally harmful, they may distract us from the life of the spirit. There’s even been a recent slaughter of the innocents.

Violence comes neatly packaged in celluloid and video and digital formats, but the violent games of the Roman circus might also have been considered “wholesome” fun in their time. The internet provides just the latest opportunity for greedy lust to overrule the better natures of our hearts. Prisons, at least in the West, are more humane, but those in the U.S. house a higher percentage of the population than in Jesus’ time.

So Jesus’ calling still has relevance, as he quoted Isaiah, “to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of the vision we need, and to let the oppressed go free.”

And his calling to us still resonates. “Give to the poor.” “Feed the hungry.” “Provide shelter.” “Welcome strangers.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Love your neighbor.” “Love your enemy.” “Do not judge.” “Pray in secret.” “Seek, and you will find.” “Do not be anxious.” “Blessed are the merciful.” “Avoid anger.” “Do good to those who persecute you.” “Avoid revenge.” “Forgive as you have been forgiven.” “Don’t shut others out of the temple.” “Woe to religious leaders who tie heavy burdens on others.” “Be compassionate as God in heaven is compassionate.” “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

If Jesus read The New York Times, I believe he would lament over the world as he did over Jerusalem, “You who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Newly Published Books

*The Abundant Community; Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*

Peter Block and John McKnight  

We are discovering that it takes a village to do more than raise a child. It is the key to a satisfying life. It turns out we need our neighbors and a community to be healthy, produce jobs, protect the land, and care for the elderly and those on the margin.

Our consumer society constantly tells us that we are insufficient and that we must purchase what we need from specialists and systems outside the community. We outsource our health care, child care, recreation, safety, and satisfaction. We are trained to become consumers and clients, not citizens and neighbors. John McKnight and Peter Block take a thoughtful look at how this situation came about, what maintains it, and the crippling effect it has had on our families, our communities, and our environment.

Right in our neighborhood we have the capacity to address our human needs in ways that systems, which see us only as interchangeable units, as problems to be solved, never can. We all have gifts to offer, even the most seemingly marginal among us. This book suggests how to nurture voluntary, self-organizing structures that will reveal these gifts and allow them to be shared to the greatest mutual benefit. Block and McKnight recommend roles we can assume and actions we can take to reweave the social fabric that has been unraveled by consumerism and its belief that however much we have, it is not enough.

Each neighborhood has people with the gifts and talents needed to provide for our prosperity and peace of mind — this book offers practical ways to discover them. It reminds us of our power to create a hope-filled life. It assures us that ultimately we can be the architects of the future where we want to live.

In their extraordinary new book *The Abundant Community; Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*, Peter Block and John McKnight use a wonderful quote from Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen’s book *Reaching Out*. I think it speaks very well for itself...

“Hospitality ...is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open wide a spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find root and bear ample fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own song, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”

Adrian Pyle


"When you accept the findings of critical biblical scholarship your ideas of God, Jesus and the Church are radically transformed.
You begin to view with suspicion many of the "official" doctrines framed within creeds and doctrine.
It can be an unsettling time.
But what happens when all this occurs as an ordained minister of the church?
How can you be true to academic research and uphold church formularies?
More significantly, what do you expound every Sunday morning as you are called upon to explain from the pulpit "the Word of God?"
What do you say to the faithful? How many academic insights dare you pass on?
Rex Hunt is an Associate of the Westar Institute and for many years was on the front-line, preaching to Uniting Church congregations.

In Against the Stream we are treated to a series of sermons that are an honest attempt to bridge the gap between the academic and the pew. They are insightful, replete with stories and events that make connections with people's search for meaning and their condition of living in postmodernity. The message of the man from Nazareth that is found in parables and aphorisms is translated into the thought-forms of the present era.

Rex Hunt is a masterful story-teller following the steps of the master!
The sermons in Against the Stream can be summed up by the word "honest". As Rex Hunt says in his sermon for Epiphany 5: "We've encouraged honesty in our thinking, becoming theologically vulnerable when much of the religious/church life in this city expects people to suspend their disbelief for a membership within a community, or for at least an hour or two each week."
It is that commitment to theological and biblical honesty that distinguishes this book of sermons and challenges us to follow what he considers to be the real Jesus.
He endorses the sentiments of the late Walter Wink: "We are freed to go on the journey that Jesus charted, rather than to worship the journey of Jesus ... We can take Jesus out of the ghetto of the churches and offer him to anyone looking for a guide to true humanity". This is a Jesus worth following.

It is probable that you would not read the book from cover to cover in one or two sittings. Rather, it is a book to dip into, savouring each sermon and pondering the wisdom found therein. It would be a wonderful book for a discussion group that could use it during traditional times of study – Advent or Lent. Likewise, it could be used for daily or weekly meditation, reading one sermon at a time.

Reviewed by Canon Dr Nigel Leaves, St John's Cathedral, Brisbane.