



CELEBRATING RICHARD JOHNSON, OUR AUSTRALIAN CONNECTION ON CANDLEMAS DAY 2014

One of the secrets of being a poet, a priest, a Christian even, is the ability to make unlikely connections and links.

Unlikely linkages

Think of the infamous beginning to T S Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock."

*Let us go then, you and I,
when the evening is spread out against the sky,
like a patient etherised upon a table....*

What a linkage, what a connection to make. An evening sky linked and likened to an etherised patient on a table. Absurd, utterly absurd, and yet..... perhaps not.

Or there's the Christian Eucharist, the eating of bread and wine linked and likened to eating the flesh and blood of Jesus, I ask you, what a linkage, what a connection to make. Yuk! And yet..... perhaps not.

Or God Almighty revealed as a mere and footling man, in the doctrine of the Incarnation, what a linkage, what a connection to make Impossible, unthinkable, and yet..... perhaps not.

Today we bring together Candlemas and Australia What a linkage to have to make. Pity your poor, poor preacher, Candlemas and Australia, an impossible task and yet..... perhaps not. We will find a link. There's got to be a link. There is always a link.

So to Candlemas first. What a lovely word, celebrating as it does so ancient and beautiful a form of illumination, the candle.

Bright bore and vulgar villain

Candles are so satisfyingly primitive. You can actually see and understand what is going on: naked flame heats, melts and devours wax. liquescent wax seeps and creeps up a wick, heats into gas and inflames.

A liquid wax reservoir is damned up by cooler wax walls around the edge, but the hot liquid wax makes periodic breaches in them to trickle down the sides and congeal into fascinating shapes. The smell of snuffed candles drifting down an empty church, is the loveliest of nostalgic scents, redolent of a blest conclusion to innumerable church services during a long life. We love candles just because they are old and primitive, and we can see and understand how they work.

The electric bulb's a bright bore, the neon strip a vulgar villain, Candles, though, are lovely.

Old meets new

Candlemas, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is an example of the old encountering and confronting the new.

Aged Simeon, a Temple priest of the Old Covenant, on seeing the infant Jesus, embraces him as the longed for Messiah, as Israel's fulfilment, as the realisation of all his hopes and dreams. The New Testament is about to fulfil and replace the Old.

He composes in celebration what has become one of the world's most lovely and famous songs: "*Nunc Dimittis*", a song sung, or said, at every Evensong: *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word,*

A lovely prayer to use when we depart this life, a prayer of acquiescence and acceptance of death..... *Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...*

A song that also encapsulates the Gospel's essence in claiming Jesus the Christ *to be a light to lighten the gentiles*..... Albeit, a fragile, easily snuffed out light, and so like candlelight, all the more lovely for being so fragile,

Why did we ever allow lovely candles to be superseded? Easy peasey answer to that question. Because the world needed electricity, the old must and has to give way to the new. Though sadly, more often than not, in the face of resistance, conflict, angst and bitter regret.

The arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay in Australia, with a one-time curate from this church in Boldre on board, was also a meeting of the old with the new.

The *old* dispensation in this case was aboriginal Australia, primeval, stone age, primitive, as fragile and vulnerable as candlelight, with its own myths and songs, and beliefs, its own culture and wisdom and dreams and visions, and a way of life remarkably in balance and harmony with nature, rather than exploitative and aggressive, and communitarian rather than individualistic. The *new* dispensation destined to supplant it, was colonialism, slash, burn, trample, tame, control, possess, own, settle, profit, profit, profit.

Here then is the link between today's two topics, Australia and Candlemas. Both of them mark a hugely significant meeting of the new with the old.

In the case of Candlemas it was the *New* Testament replacing the Old, in the person of Jesus, Jesus as lovely, fragile and vulnerable as a candle's flame, soon to be snuffed out, on the great candlestick of the Cross.

In the case of the arrival of the first fleet at Botany Bay it was the *old* aboriginal way of life, lovely and fragile and vulnerable as a candle's flame, soon to be snuffed out, dispossessed, marginalised, disease-infected and ruined.

Changes that have wracked Mother Church

That is the story of human change, the meeting of the old with the new and the new with the old. Resistance, conflict, hatred, ruin.

Change is rarely easy, Especially for contented church people. Because if we are happy in ourselves and with ourselves if we are happier with what is, than with what might or must be. Then of course, we are suspicious of change and of newfangledness.

Which is why in most of the great debates that have wracked mother church during our life time like liturgical change, with all its new prayer books and hymn books, or the ordination of women, or the increasing tolerance of and sympathy with homosexuality, there has been so much opposition, it is why so many of us started out on the losing side, and have had to change our minds, be brought to our senses, to see reason and accept change.

We are able to do this, have been able to do this, though, only if motivated by love of the old rather than hatred or fear of the new. For wherever the primary motive is love, all can never be truly lost.

It was the forgiving love in Jesus, crucified by the haters of his new Kingdom of love, that so broke the hearts of the disciples that it enabled them to unleash his love in themselves and others enough to convert the world. The vulnerability, suffering and misery of Aboriginal Australia broke the hearts, ultimately of enough folk in that mysterious land to unleash eventually a change of attitude that makes Australia these days one of the most attractive countries in the world to live in.

If ever we get depressed about mother Church because numbers are not what they used to be and the young don't seem to want to know us.

Take heart

We should take heart that the Church to day, has indeed been changed and renewed and is in so many ways better than in days of old. We are so less stuffy, so much more relaxed, so much more open-minded, livelier, less rigid, less patriarchal, parsons are more human, preach shorter sermons, don't bluster or blush at peccadillos, all of us are more tolerant of foibles, children, sinners. Most of us come to Church these days, not because its our duty, but because we love to come. It is good to be here.

And how much better the new Australia than the old. A few years ago the prime minister of Australia apologised for past cruelties and evils to the aborigines, and there is a deep and genuine attempt to right the wrongs that still cripple so many aboriginal communities. The White Australia nonsense is long gone, the land is now a multi-cultured, a far more tolerant, less uptight land than it used to be, one that in so many ways is a light to the world its democracy vibrant, it is a nation that punches far above its weight politically as well as in sport.

So as old Simeon rejoiced in the new era heralded by the infant Jesus so we rejoice in our New old Church and in our New old Australia to which we are connected by a doughty Boldre curate called Richard Johnson of long ago, and now as well by a rather more shonky, ambivalent, but nonetheless bonzer, fair-dinkum true-blue, Australian citizen and House for Duty, God-bothering, sky pilot with his doughty pommie Sheila, Diana.