

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE MOST REVEREND DR PETER CARNLEY AC
AT ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET, SYDNEY,
ON 6 OCTOBER 2019
TO MARK THE 200th ANNIVERSARY OF THE LAYING OF THE FOUNDATION STONE

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I am sure you will understand if I say something this morning about foundations. I feel reasonably well qualified to do this, having myself laid a few foundation stones in my time; I even think I might be able to pass on a few tips. First, you need a silver trowel, like this one. As you can see, this is a very splendid antique specimen, made of solid Sterling Silver, with lovely hallmarks; and it has an ivory handle (something to be frowned upon today). It happens to have a very sharp point – sufficiently sharp that it could not come on board as cabin baggage, because airport security classified it as a lethal weapon. This trowel, which dates from 1907, was passed on to me by an English friend for use in the laying of the foundation stone of a chapel at St John's College in the University of Queensland in 1980. It has not been used since for its originally intended purpose, though it comes in handy at Christmas time as ideal for cutting and serving Christmas Pudding, and it is also just the thing for distributing wedges of Pavlova. But that is not the end of it. A trowel like this is part of a regular foundation-stone laying kit, which also includes a little hammer, also made in this case of (to be frowned upon) ivory; this is used for gently tapping the stone into the mortar. So, some mortar is brought on what those in the trade call a float, and the trowel is used to spread it out on the place where the stone is to be laid, though not too smoothly; it has to be roughed up a bit so as to get some purchase on the stone. Then the stone is tapped into place; the residue of the mortar is tidied up around the edges, and the job is done. Of course, you also have to remember to make a speech.

But, there are other kinds of foundations. When I was a child I remember occasionally coming across a garment hanging over the chair in my mother's bedroom. It was pink with multiple hooks and eyes, and was comprised of a series of long narrow pockets into which you could slide in and out thin strips of plastic-like material; though this was before the age of plastic, so I fancy these may have been made of whale bone – also something to raise a frown today. I came to learn that this was the kind of garment that David Jones purveyed on the women's clothing floor -- in a sub-department labelled "Foundations." Whether the worthy women

who gathered in the crowd outside on 7 October 1819 wore a similar garment is a historical hypothetical, though Queen Victoria set a very firm fashion trend, when she wore such a garment just twenty years later, on 9 February 1840, the day of her wedding. You may have seen a replica of this Victorian curiosity on TV. But we have all witnessed scenes on the movie screen - as for example, in successive re-makes of Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women* - in which similar garments with lots of strings attached are pulled and tugged into place by helpful sisters, while the wearer holds on to a bedpost, grimacing bravely until the socially desired hour-glass shape is eventually achieved.

Now, you might think this apparent fascination with such things a little kinky, but it gives me the language that I need to draw upon today. The purpose of this kind of garment was to lay a foundation for what was to be placed over it, by providing shape, and form, -- and a measure of control over body parts that without it might be a bit unstable and - shall we say - wayward.

When Lachlan Macquarie laid the foundation of this building, presumably with something like this silver trowel, on 7 October 1819 he was not just in a formal and public way marking the commencement of a material building. He well knew that as Governor he held responsibility for setting a fledgling colony on a firm foundation in social and communitarian terms, so as to give it a desired shape and form, and to achieve a measure of social control. Otherwise it might have continued on the course he inherited from the previous administration, which was somewhat unstable and wayward. Indeed, it is serendipitous that this building was first conceived as a Court House, and was only turned into a Church instead some five months later. And the fact that a Court House stands next door as our neighbour continues to remind us that 200 years ago it was axiomatic that any civilized society would need to be set on the foundation first of law, ... and then, the social stability secured by the enforcement of law, would be complemented by the moral exhortations of religion. So, the solid sandstone base, which is now the crypt below us, that started out as the foundation of a court of law, and that as a happy second thought became a place of worship, is a kind of acted parable: it echoes the perceived relationship of law and religion in forming and shaping the good society. Law comes first, because the law lays down the basic rules of behaviour necessary for the community to hang together; religion then follows as it calls on people to live by standards of behaviour over and above those required by law, just as grace perfects nature: the law

requires us all, for example, to pay taxes in order to sustain essential services; over and above that, religion calls on us to be generous in sharing some of the rest of our resources amongst those not so privileged, in a spirit neighbourly care.

Whether the Anglican Church was ever established in the Colony of New South Wales used to be a matter of some historical debate, given that there is no actual law to this effect. Even so, Lachlan Macquarie appears to have worked on the assumption of the importance of the role of the Church in tandem with the State, with the aim of achieving a positive communitarian outcome.

Alas, the mood soon changed significantly. The early nineteenth century was already beginning to perceive the need for Church and State to be separate, something being advocated at the time by Jeremy Bentham. And, especially in the wake of American independence, it was widely argued that in emerging liberal democratic societies autonomous individuals should have the freedom to decide for themselves, particularly in matters both of religious preference and private morality. Thus, the complementary over-layer of religion to the rule of law tended more and more to become an optional extra, as the emphasis quickly moved from a communitarian vision of society to a view of things that emphasised the autonomy and freedom of the individual. As a consequence we live today less with a vision of community, and much more with a heightened consciousness of individual rights. In our world of competitive individualism, it even became possible for Mrs Thatcher once to say that “there is no such thing as society; there are only individuals and their families.”

In our kind of society, the individual is free in moral and religious terms to do his or her own thing provided he or she does not encroach upon the freedom of every other individual to do his or her own thing: “you do your thing and I’ll do mine.” The result is the moral pluralism of the present age, which in turn obliges us to live with a kind of uneasy truce based on the tolerance of a plethora of different and often conflicting points of view. But, unfortunately, when you think about it, in such a society, the concept of moral truth actually goes out the window. In its place what is accepted as right and good becomes what each individual happens to approve of, as a matter of personal preference. This inevitably means, we are not

all that good at public moral debate. Instead, in our kind of society, street marches and placards tend to become the regular way of expressing and promoting a moral point of view.

This spills into the political process, insofar as legislative measures tend to be judged primarily by pragmatic concerns - not least, their capacity to win votes - at the expense of reasoned argument. And we do not have to look far to discern the roots of contemporary unthinking populism of the kind signalled both by the incessant tweeting that takes the place of the considered expression of a point of view, on one side of the Atlantic, and the bullying and bluster that does not appear to have been of much help to date in resolving Britain's Brexit woes, on the other. When the best thing that can be done, is actually to stifle reasoned debate by trying to shut down parliament altogether, we justifiably wonder if modern liberal democracies may in fact be heading for big trouble. Clearly, we are not the only ones to sense the lack of a communitarian narrative capable of giving meaning to our shared life together. Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to speak of "an idea whose time has come"; alas, I fear that we have come to a time that is bereft of credibly compelling and creative ideas.

Now you might think, that I am about to urge a return to the communitarian ideal of Lachlan Macquarie with its assumption that religion may be called upon to complement the rule of law, and thus to play a part in this way in setting the foundation of a civilized and healthy community. But, alas, that would be a bit too trite; the Macquarie model is now history. I doubt if there is much of a chance of resurrecting it any time soon. Perhaps, the best we can do today, is pause for just a moment to think again about our own basic understanding of the relation of law and religion. For when you think about it, it might actually be necessary to take the Macquarie model of the foundational rule of law, supported by a complementary religious over-lay, and turn it on its head. After all, is it not true that more often than not in the history of human civilizations it has been the other way around? The law itself has not come first, but has itself been informed by preconceived moral insights and religiously motivated impulses. I am thinking of those foundational moral insights that appear to apply in all cultures and at all times, rather than as temporary expedients tailored for a specific context, insights that have come to humans generally with the force of an absolute claim on their lives, and that lead theists therefore to speak in terms of the moral pressure of the will of God: After all, historically it is the expression of the perceived will of God in the Ten

Commandments that in fact underpins much of subsequent law making, both civil and criminal, in western societies. In other words, it may be, that grace does not perfect nature, but rather that our apparently natural social and legal reasoning needs initially to be informed by a clear grasp of a more absolute and compelling set of fundamental moral values. It is this foundational grasp of shared moral insight which then leads to the articulation of laws, not the other way around.

Perhaps a prior operation of grace has actually been part of our experience, even if subconsciously, more often than we think. The work of Lachlan Macquarie, himself, for example, in establishing a hospital in nearby Macquarie Street, was not just the out-come of a kind of unprincipled legislative fiat, at best motivated by purely pragmatic concerns. Indeed, by the same token, the same foundational moral impulse that moved him, also informs our contemporary commitment to the provision of universal health care. For it is incontestable that, whether two hundred years ago, or now, indeed, for the last two thousand years, a foundational imperative to care for the health and well-being of others has been communicated to our kind of society via the parable of the Good Samaritan, who poured in antiseptic wine and soothing oil, and actually paid himself for continuing care. Clearly, the role of religion is not just to add a kind of superficial or complementary take-or-leave veneer to something established by law. Rather, the religiously based moral impulse comes first.

Likewise, we may search in vain in the recent exercise of ministerial discretion for hints of the Old Testament ethical principle that it is God's will that we should be compassionate and considerate of "the stranger that is within your gates," or hints of Jesus' teaching about being positively welcoming and inclusive of ethnic diversity: I am obviously thinking of the treatment of the little Australian-born girls of parents of Sri Lankan origin by contrast with the treatment of selected *au pairs*. And the point is: if we are troubled by "the still small voice of conscience" in an environment that seems obsessively concerned about the protection of borders at the expense of the protection of people, then we can recognize ourselves to be, deep down, much more foundationally religious than we may think.

In the first-century, despite the emerging rediscovery of the thought of Plato that helped focus St Paul's attention upon an ideal world beyond this one, in ethical terms the Stoic

philosophy of the Roman world was still a powerful force. The Stoics of Paul's day thought that the best way to live meant conforming to the dictates of nature, by doing what was thought to be reasonable. Paul, as a man of his time, had much in common with them: a good deal of the language of his letters is Stoic, and the patterns of his moral argument are Stoic. But he parted company with his Stoic counterparts in one important respect: Whereas the Stoics tried to discern what seemed to them only natural and reasonable, Paul substituted the person of Christ: "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus." Those who heard his letters were exhorted to behave in a way compatible, not just with reason, but with their relation to the Raised Christ. This did not follow as a kind of take-or-leave optional extra to complement the rule of law, as grace perfects nature. Rather, for Paul, Christ, indeed, became the sure foundation. For the Stoic it was perfectly natural and reasonable, for young men to listen to wiser older men; it was natural and reasonable for wives submissively to obey their husbands, even if on occasion it meant being roughly mistreated by them; likewise, for the Stoic it was perfectly reasonable for servants to obey their masters, or risk a flogging. For Paul, a trusting faith in Christ came first: these Stoic household codes had to be transformed from the very outset by the unique quality of the love of Christ and his call to neighbourly care. For the Stoic it was natural and reasonable to be a good citizen. By contrast Paul declared: "our citizenship is in heaven," a citizenship in which the Spirit of Christ was experienced as heaven-sent and quite literally inspirational. This concretely known and transformative reality of the inner texture of their shared life was no mere optional add-on, but dependably and utterly foundational in giving life shape and form.

Perhaps it may yet be so for us.