

LETTING IN THE LIGHT¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, for the Feast of All Saints, celebrated on 3 November 2019

I pray that, ... with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints ...²

I will be frank with you. I find the Feast of All Saints more difficult to preach on than the Trinity, commonly thought to be the most fearful topic. The problem is to know where to start or, indeed, where to go. I am indeed fortunate that, this year, two events have made the task less difficult.

The first is the arrival of a new book from Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury.³ Entitled *Luminaries*, the book contains accounts of 20 Christian lives, ranging from St Paul to St Oscar Romero.⁴ In his Introduction, Williams comments on the power of stories. He notes how Jesus used the story to break open our understanding and help us to begin to see the world in a new way. He suggests that “Christian faith is the practice of making sense of lives that make sense of the world. Jesus tells stories so as to change people’s world.”⁵

He says of his collection of stories that they are:

... reflections on the lives of people whose stories have the power to break open some of the categories that invite the reader into a new world. These are people whose lives seem to me to be ‘theological’ lives. Lives worth thinking about because they make sense in often critical, desperate or unusual situations.⁶

He suggests that people might ask why he has not included a specific person, to which he replies that his chosen people have been, for him,

... beacons of illumination: people who lived lives that open up perspectives and horizons for the rest of us that are unpredictable and enriching. Some are people I think I should have liked to spend time with, other frankly not! The point is not that these are straightforwardly good and attractive folk, only that they are people who let the light through, even in lives that are sometimes flawed and compromised.⁷

Williams did not include in his book the person who is at the centre of my second event. On 13 October, Pope Francis canonised John Henry Newman. Newman would have agreed with Williams about being flawed and compromised. In his own lifetime, he said, “I have nothing of a saint about me”.⁸ Like all of us, he had his flaws. He could be “angry, tetchy and over-sensitive”. That is, he was human.

¹ Readings: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

² Ephesians 1: 17-18

³ Now the Right Reverend and Right Honourable the Lord Williams of Oystermouth, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Luminaries: Twenty lives that illuminate the Christian way*, London, SPCK, 2019

⁵ Williams, p. x

⁶ Williams, p. xi

⁷ Williams, p. xii

⁸ Roderick Strange, “Lessons from a journey to faith”, *The Tablet*, 13 October 2019, pp. 4-5

Newman began as an Anglican, so his canonisation means something for us. One of the founders of the Oxford Movement, Newman has had a direct influence on this parish, given that the present interior of our building, with its focus on the altar and the presence of the choir in the chancel, follows Oxford Movement principles. The long-term theological trends of our life together have also followed the path that Newman began. Although not specifically a member of the movement, Bishop William Grant Broughton, who had this church as his cathedral, was influenced by them. Newman's hymn, "Praise to the holiest in the height", that we are singing this morning, was also sung at our centenary service 100 years ago.

An alternative name for the Oxford Movement is the Tractarian Movement, which derives from their having published a series of essays, called "Tracts for the Times",⁹ which set out their views. Of the 90 essays, Newman wrote 27, including the final one, "Tract 90", in which he put forward a catholic view of the 39 Articles. The most controversial of all the Tracts, this one did not persuade many people. In the end, it failed to persuade Newman himself.

In the afternoon of the Feast of the Purification in 1843, Newman, who was at that time the Vicar of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford, mounted his pulpit to preach what was known as a "University Sermon". These sermons were required to be preached on certain occasions in the university year and were attended by the Vice-Chancellor and other university dignitaries. Actually, it is somewhat of a misnomer to call them sermons. What Newman preached that day was more than 11,500 words long and must have taken nearly two hours to deliver. By contrast, my sermon has fewer than 1,800 words and will be quite long enough. Newman's sermon was his last major Anglican utterance before his conversion. In September of 1843 he resigned from St Mary's and, in October 1845, became a Roman Catholic.

The subject of Newman's sermon was "The theory of developments in religious doctrine".¹⁰ It is widely regarded as the most important of his Anglican writings and, just before his conversion, appeared developed into a full-size book called *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman took as his text the Virgin Mary's reaction to the song of the angels at the birth of Jesus: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart".¹¹ Newman said that Mary did not simply remember the words; she thought about them, she pondered them; she turned them over in her mind and thus developed them into some meaning for herself.

In Newman's opinion it was the duty of all believers to ponder on what God has revealed and to come to conclusions about that revelation. In this way, doctrine develops to take account of changing circumstances. You may think this a large conclusion to build on some words of Mary but Newman was right. What we take to be the doctrines and beliefs of Christianity are the result of the application of reason to our religious experience. I cannot emphasise too much the importance of Newman's conclusion for the conflicts that currently promise to cause division in our Australian church. We need to develop our doctrines about sexuality in the face of scientific knowledge and social change. It is not enough to declare that doctrine is unchanging, which it has never been.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracts_for_the_Times

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, Notre Dame IA, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, pp. 313 & 317. The text can also be found at: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/oxford/sermon15.html>.

¹¹ Luke 2:19.

Newman also saw that the laity had a clear place in the development of doctrine. It was not just the prerogative of the bishops or other clergy. He said:

I think that I am right in saying that the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church in its various constituents ... manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, ... sometimes by the people. ... none of these channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect.¹²

When Newman was made a cardinal, he was required to have a coat of arms. The design he chose shows three hearts and he took as his motto the Latin words, *Cor ad cor loquitur*: “Heart speaks to heart”.

This phrase sets out the essential nature of belief, the speaking of heart to heart. Newman’s motto also captures the role of the laity in speaking from the heart and out of their experience of the world. If the leaders of the church are lagging, it is time for the people to speak out.

The Oxford Movement was not, as some might imagine, a call for more ornate liturgical exhibitions. It promoted an incarnational theology of real involvement in the world. In an Anglican sermon preached on the Sixth Sunday in Lent in 1841, Newman said:

A great number of men live and die without reflecting at all upon the state of things in which they find themselves. They take things as they come, and follow their inclinations as far as they have opportunity. ... But when persons, either from thoughtfulness of mind, or from intellectual activity, begin to contemplate the visible state of things into which they are born, they forthwith find it a maze and a perplexity. It is a riddle which they cannot solve.

How are we to look at things? this is the question which all persons of observation ask themselves, and answer each in his own way. ... Such is the need felt by reflective minds. Now, let me ask, what *is* the real key, what is the Christian interpretation of this world? What is given us by revelation to estimate and measure this world by? The event of this season,—the Crucifixion of the Son of God.¹³

In their day, two of the more uncomfortable consequences of the Tractarian Movement were the re-establishment of Anglican religious orders and a developing link with Christian Socialism. Taken together, these two have made significant contributions to social justice. The Brotherhood of Saint Laurence, an outstanding Anglican welfare organisation, had its origin in an ultimately unfulfilled desire to establish an Australian Anglican religious order that was devoted to work with the underprivileged and founded on Christian Socialist principles. Its influence on the church and on Australia has been profound. It remains a most significant independent and consistent Christian commentator on social policy in Australia.¹⁴

I want, therefore, to end this sermon with a comment on an outstanding social issue in Australia: the treatment of our First Peoples. I do not suppose that Newman had any clear picture of the situation of the Australian Aborigines of his day, although he was good friends with Bernard

¹² *The Rambler*, Volumes 1-2, 1859, p. 205 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensus_fidelium

¹³ John Henry Newman, ‘The cross of Christ the measure of the world’, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 6, Sermon 7, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1997, pp. 1239-40.

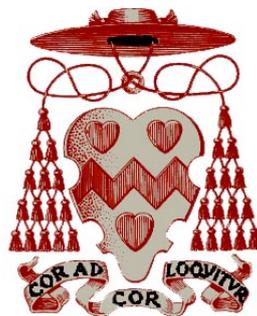
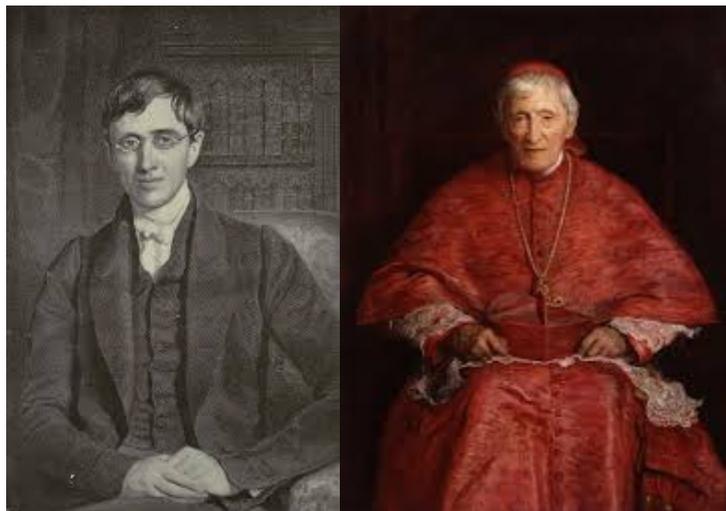
¹⁴ See, I R Carter, *God and Three Shillings*, Melbourne, Lansdowne Pres, 1947; John Handfield, *Friends and Brothers*, Melbourne, Hyland House, 1980; Peter Hollingworth, "Showing mercy and doing justice", Brian Porter (ed.), *Colonial Tractarians*, Melbourne, Joint Board of Christian Education, 1989, pp. 120-32

Ullathorne, the Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, who had been a priest in New South Wales from 1832 to 1841.¹⁵ But Newman had very close contact with another group of aboriginal natives, the Irish. In December 1881, Prime Minister Gladstone wrote to Newman, asking him to intervene in Irish matters by requesting Pope Leo XIII to silence certain Irish priests who were supporting rebel activity in that country. Newman wrote to the President of Maynooth College asking him whether the Irish people had ever consented to the occupation of their country by the English. He asked whether

It is a probable opinion and therefore may be acted on by an individual, that the Irish people has never recognised, rather have and continuously . . . protested against the sovereignty of England, and have seemingly admitted it only when they were too weak to resist; and therefore it is no sin to be what would be commonly called a rebel.¹⁶

The significance of such a principle for the situation of Australia's First Peoples does not need any further comment from me.

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¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Bernard_Ullathorne

¹⁶ Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: a Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 729