

A TRUTH THAT COMES FROM LOVE

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I REMEMBER THE NIGHT THE OLD CHURCH BURNED down. I watched from our kitchen window as the flames reached into the sky. I looked on in a trembling fear. Like a great sin was being committed. It was as though I was a witness to crucifixion itself.

God's house ablaze. It was shocking and yet, I could not deny, also powerful, symbolic: a reckoning. Burn it all down. All of our history, all of our suffering; the great injustice of Australia: burn it all down. Wasn't the church itself complicit in the whole bloody mess of colonisation?

My father just shook his head. All he could say was thank God his father – my grandfather – was not around to see this. I don't know what caused the fire. Probably a kid messing around. Whatever happened, it burned down a memory. A blessed memory.

It was an old tiny white wooden church on what we called the mission: the Three Ways Aboriginal reserve on the fringes of the town of Griffith in south-west New South Wales. My grandfather had preached in that church. So had a couple of my uncles. We had baptised people there, married people there and there blessed those who had passed on.

We held ourselves together there. We shared our sorrows and pooled our hopes.

As a boy, I sat in awe and fear as my Uncle Cecil mopped the sweat from his brow and, with spit flying from his mouth, told us of the struggle of good against evil and how we could choose the light of redemption or burn in the eternal fires of hell.

He jabbed his finger as he spoke and his gaze always seemed to land on me. I fidgeted and squirmed and looked around. I would often feel ill and leave the church with a blinding headache. Yet even at that young age I felt the power of the Holy Spirit surging within me. It was real and it was personal.

That church was a haven. Men and women would turn out in their Sunday best: long dresses and pressed white shirts, with their Bibles – well thumbed and marked – tucked tightly to their breasts. We would strum guitars and sing hymns. If I close my eyes tight, I can take myself back there. Back to that little old church on the mission. Me with my spit-down hair and around me all the people I would call my own.

And I can hear them sing. One song above all: ‘The Old Rugged Cross’.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame.

It is the women’s voices I hear loudest. The voices of my aunties soaring above the men, carrying the words off out the church window to the world beyond.

The song seems timeless to me. Old. But it was written in the twentieth century by an American evangelist, George Bennard. Country music star Ernest Tubb made it popular. That’s probably what brought it to us. My people loved old country music.

'The Old Rugged Cross' spoke to us even more profoundly. It was the song of the forsaken. And we were the church of the forsaken. We were the church of the crucified Christ: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' – my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

This is the cry of the afflicted. Christ did not die a glorious death. His death was not a triumph. Those who seek to render the resurrection as a victory miss the enduring power of the crucifixion. Christ died a scandalised death. He died a death of abandonment.

Lost and in pain. A death unjust. He died an earthly death of humiliation to offer us the gift of salvation. Christ died betrayed, so that Christians to come would go to their deaths in praise. That's what I saw in the cross. It was what I heard in that hymn. That in our affliction, in our suffering, we could find grace.

Why would we look to a Christian God? Isn't this the faith of the coloniser? Didn't the Bible also bring the gun?

Yes.

The missionaries came to 'civilise' us. Our lands were stolen and we were herded onto reserves.

On one of the missions that my family was from – Warangesda – on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, the missionary John Brown Gribble would hunt people down if they tried to flee. He would ride after them, tie them up and drag them back. To Gribble, the outside world was a living hell. He wanted to save us but in saving us he brought his own tyranny.

Gribble called himself a man of God. But where was God for us?

This is the plight of the afflicted. As the French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil wrote, 'Men struck down by affliction are at the foot of the cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God.'¹

Isn't that what Christ faced? In his moment of affliction, he was so far from God. As Weil said, 'Affliction constrained Christ to implore that he

might be spared; to seek consolation from man; to believe he was forsaken by the father. It forced a just man to cry out against God.’²

Simone Weil has been a profound influence on me. She has opened my eyes to the depths of affliction. That in our affliction God leaves us. There is nothing to love. ‘A kind of horror submerges the whole soul,’ she wrote.³

In that darkness, ‘the soul ceases to love’. But love itself lives on in the emptiness. We go on wanting to love.

In this way, God will one day return to reveal love. The soul that ceases to love falls ‘into something which is almost equivalent to hell’. For us, what would hell be? Hell would not be the coloniser. Hell would not be the mission. Hell, for us, would be the loss of wanting to love. We could not allow those who would crush us to steal our love. This is our resistance.

And how we longed for love. How we loved each other. How we loved even those who wronged us. In that yearning for love, even when the soul ceases to love, we kept open the possibility of God’s return.

That is Simone Weil’s profound teaching: that God forsakes us, departs from the world but leaves a trace – the soft touch – in our capacity for love. If we are to find God, love is our way home.

Simone Weil had her own powerful experience of God. Born into a middle-class Jewish family, she sought out the poor. She chose to work alongside those who toiled in factories. She felt there the deep sense of affliction; as she wrote, it ‘entered into my flesh and my soul’.

She said she felt the mark of the slave and in a moment when she was in pieces, ‘soul and body’, she walked into a church in a little Portuguese village and it was there that ‘the passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all’.

When I read her description of that soul-shaking moment of becoming one with Christ, I am reminded of how I felt in that little church on

the mission where the Christ of the cross spoke to the afflicted. How Christ spoke to me.

How I have wrestled with that. How my faith – a faith that is beyond belief – a faith that is, in fact, truth; the only truth: how that has vexed me. How do I look upon a world of evil and still see the faces of God? Victor Hugo said, ‘For six thousand years war has pleased the quarrelling peoples and God has wasted his time making the stars and the flowers.’⁴ Was he right? Are we condemned to war? Is this our natural state, and the stars and the flowers and the dream of peace just the folly of God?

This question has haunted me for as long as I can remember. As a journalist I have spent a lifetime reporting the evil we do to each other. I have seen people of awesome faith in all the countries I have travelled: people who redeem the human spirit. Yet I know how easily we bend to tyranny. In the battle for our souls, I can’t wonder if darkness will forever devour the light.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, written two thousand years before Christ, places the hero on a great journey to discover the secret of eternal life. But he learns that he will never find this life he searches for: ‘For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands.’

History, as the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel wrote, is a ‘slaughter bench’. So where is God? Perhaps Victor Hugo was wrong. God is not always in the flowers and the stars. For much of the past two thousand years, God has been at the head of his armies: from Constantine’s spiritual awakening in battle outside Rome in AD 312 to the end of Europe’s bloody Thirty Years’ War in 1648 to the wars of today, from Syria and Yemen to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Vladimir Putin’s ‘Holy War’ on Ukraine.

Affliction has no answers. Why would we be so abandoned? Why would God allow his own son to suffer so? Is this a God who would punish

those who are the most vulnerable? In the biblical book of Job, the great book of suffering, Job tells us about those who look away from us: 'Those who are at ease have contempt for misfortune, as the fate of those whose feet are slipping . . . The tents of marauders are undisturbed.'

There is no justice in affliction, no meaning. As Simone Weil wrote: 'It was not till Christ had known the physical agony of crucifixion, the shame of blows and mockery, that he uttered his immortal cry, a question that will remain unanswered through all times on this earth "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"'⁵

Job was forsaken as was Christ as were we. But it is through suffering that we come to know the world. For what would joy be without suffering? From where would we draw true love if that love was not tested? To love only in joy, to know the world only through joy, is to miss something essential about being human.

Job knew this. That in the midst of despair there is faith. There is love. As Job said, 'after my skin has been thus destroyed, then without my flesh I will see God'.

Some may think I am glorifying suffering. But only those who have not known it could accuse me of that. There are scars on our bodies and on our souls. Suffering is not glorious. There is no pride in suffering. There is, though, love. And there is truth. The truth that comes from darkness. The truth that comes from the cracks where the light streams in. The light that illuminates all. Then we become illuminated by love.

Simone Weil said of those who have been denied human dignity, 'These are the only people who, in fact, are able to tell the truth. All others lie.'⁶

Truth. Who can read the Uluru Statement from the Heart and not hear truth? It is the truth of the afflicted: the torment of powerlessness. It is a truth that has existed for all time. A truth that comes from love, the essence of God that precedes Christ. Jesus brought that truth to us. In

the crucifixion the truth broke open in our world. It revealed that in our moment of death, in our moment of pain, there is the truth of who we are, of how we have lived and what will live on after us.

There is truth in abandonment. In being forsaken. In crying out. But never in forsaking love. The afflicted must ask harder questions.

What truth is there in power? Power more likely comes from hiding the truth. Power grows out of our lies. The lies that we in Australia still tell ourselves, that this was a peaceful place, that history has delivered us to a place of virtue. We still like to tell ourselves that we can wash away the blood from our history and call our nation pure.

We would sooner rush to forgetting and call it reconciliation than to atone for what we have done. In our nation's pride, we don't kneel to ask for atonement. We don't tremble before God's truth. Instead, we imagine that we are God's fulfilment – that divine providence brought us here. That this 'empty land', as we called it, was just waiting for us.

The tents of the marauders remain undisturbed and yet they sleep fitfully. The cries of those buried under the weight of our history haunt the dreams of the powerful. So much so that when they hear the truth, they turn away. Simone Weil knew that power was bad for the soul. She said that at the point where power and love 'are separated, a supreme anguish exists'. And here we are, the afflicted, talking the truth of love and hope and forgiveness.

The Uluru Statement speaks back to what the contemporary German theologian Jürgen Moltmann called 'the idolatry of the nation'. He was referring to the war-torn Balkans, but he could just as easily be speaking of us. In *The Crucified God*, he asked what we ask here: 'If it becomes possible to heal there the festering and hate-filled memories, and to overcome "national thinking" ecumenically in the spirit of Christ . . . then there will be a resurrection of life out of the ruins and above the graves.'⁷

This is the divine mission of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, to resurrect ourselves out of the ruins and above the graves. To Moltmann – like Simone Weil – all Christian life is an answer to that question: why hast thou forsaken me? Moltmann writes: ‘Unless it apprehends the pain of the negative, Christian hope cannot be realistic and liberating.’⁸

Those who profess love of Christ yet turn a deaf ear to the cries of the forsaken must surely ask what their faith is for. Christian identity, writes Moltmann, ‘can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ’.⁹ With each passing year, with each Easter commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that we continue to witness the suffering of those afflicted – when we mark another year of injustice for the first people of our land, where is liberation for any of us? All we have are the unmarked graves and the idolatry of the nation.

The crucified Christ asks of us too – the afflicted – to forgive. In his prayer offered to God before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus said: ‘You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they may also be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.’

The contemporary Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf writes that in the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit – we find love and reconciliation, an ‘unconditional embrace of humanity’.¹⁰ Forgiveness is unequivocal. Jesus cries out on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Jesus would ask for forgiveness even for those who want him dead.

It is not selective forgiveness but forgiveness for all. Volf says, ‘Christ justifies the ungodly.’¹¹ We must love our enemies as we love our neighbours. But how? In a world of evil, how do we forgive those who have committed evil against us? In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf writes that it starts with an acceptance that none of us are innocent. We are all with sin. We are, he says, ‘morally divided’.¹²

Sin is 'both the rot deep in our souls and a prowling beast of exclusion that holds captive entire societies, cultures and communities'.¹³ Forgiveness, says Volf, demands we act with will. It is a will to embrace, 'not as a simple switch to turn the practice of embrace on, but as a site of struggle for the truth of humanity'.¹⁴

In forgiveness there must also be forgetting – or, as Volf would say, non-remembering. It is not erasure of the past. It is, in Volf's words, 'remembering rightly'. So that history does not poison us. So that we are not filled with vengeance or resentment. So that we do not become what the perpetrators would have us become – an imitation of them. So that we do not lose ourselves. So that even if love departs, the desire for love never leaves us. That is the way back to God.

The Uluru Statement is a testament to love and forgiveness and remembering rightly. It is a testament to hope, even as we approach hope with caution. Hope can be a dangerous word. A false god. The conceit of modernity is a linear progress that delivers us to a place of peace. Western philosophers have removed God and inserted history. Yet history itself is a killing field. As Moltmann says, 'The nineteenth century's hopes for humanity have left us living on the mass graves of the twentieth.'

Walter Benjamin, the twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher, wrote of the angel of history, an image taken from Paul Klee's artwork that depicted an angel with its arms outstretched and its head turned to the past. A past of unending horror, seeing only catastrophe. What we call progress, he said, is this tempest. He imagined the dead waking 'to piece together what has been broken'.

Moltmann reminds us that 'no human future can make good the crimes of the past'.¹⁵ It is why, he says, we need transcendent hope. A hope that raises the dead. A resurrection. As Moltmann writes, 'Without hope for the past there is no hope for the future.'¹⁶ We should not seek a future 'in history' but a future 'of history', in which the 'tragic dimen-

sions of history' will be 'dissolved'. The resurrection, he says, does not blow from the past to the future but from the future to the past and 'heals what is unhealably broken.'

Isn't that the essence of the Uluru Statement? To heal us. To face the truth of our past not with vengeance, not to erase, but to remember rightly. To put all our souls at rest. It speaks of voice, treaty and truth. It is the cry of the afflicted who have suffered yet respond with limitless love. As Christ's affliction – his death of abandonment – gave us redemption so that martyrs may meet their end gloriously in praise of God, so in our abandonment we offer a redemption for this nation.

The old church on the mission is no more. I have travelled far from my home and the old people who filled that church with their voices are mostly gone now. In those flames, though, that burned the church to the ground, their voices – the voices of prayer and song – escaped. They left the hold of gravity – of the evils of our world – and attained a state of grace.