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Call and Response: The Truth Will Set You Free (John 8:31–32)

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Good evening everyone. I am very grateful for the opportunity to talk in this Call and Response series – I'm the first contributor for 2018! Let me start with a few words about me, and how I come to be here tonight. I was initially attracted to Benedictus when I heard Sarah interviewed on the radio, a couple of years ago now. Since then, I've been drawn further into the community by Sarah's leadership and by new friendships, and also by the opportunity to play music here (I'm a keen oboist). I was on the brink of giving up the oboe, so it's been a pleasure to get back to it.

Professionally, before my retirement 4 years ago, I was an academic in the political science field, and before that a policy adviser – a very 'Canberra' background, I suppose. During my time as an academic, I mostly worked at the University of Canberra. I taught a lot of people there, but I also learned a lot, both about myself, and also about how deep and intricate the connections are between our lives and how we understand the world around us. I think that goes for faith, as well.

The British journalist and religious writer Malcolm Muggeridge once wrote that he would have been perfectly happy in a secular world, except that God would not leave him in peace.

I suppose I feel the same way, although I am not sure in which direction the communication runs. Has God been searching for me, or have I been searching for God? Or perhaps, it doesn't really matter which it is. Either way, what matters for each of us is that we find a truth by which we can live our lives. But that truth is not self-evident: for me, at least, it has proved as elusive as the motivation to find it has been powerful.

I was brought up in an agnostic household. Neither of my parents was religious. Of the two, my Mum was the more atheistic. She was a rationalist, a humanist, and a feminist. She did however want her daughters to learn about the Bible and so we were dispatched on a weekly basis to Sunday school where I remember to this day the marvellous thrill of learning the word 'ziggurat' – a Babylonian pyramid-temple, and an excellent spelling-bee word as well.

I've sometimes thought my journey might have been easier if I had been brought up in a conventionally religious household. But then such are the storms of adolescence, I would have had to rebel against religion before I could find it again. As it was, I had to find my own path into it.

When travelling in Australia or elsewhere, if there was an opportunity to go into a church I would always respond to it. I would go up the back of the building if a service was in

progress, but most often I would wander in when there was no one there. There is always a sense of calmness in a church.

Academic life, of course, is sternly secular, even anti-religious. After all, it was Karl Marx, the hero of social science when I began to study it, who said religion was the opium of the people. It's a good line, but in a fundamental sense, it's deeply unfair. If there is one thing that we can say for sure about religion – it gets right into the most serious issues, life and death principally, but also what is the meaning of our lives? What meaning does it make sense to give to them?

We could study philosophy to find out, but I wanted something more intimate, something more in tune with the rhythms of my own mind. This part of my journey led me, not to Christianity, but to Buddhism. I should explain that I have always been prone to depression, which I think is well described as a disease of loss. It was that ongoing battle that led me to try to learn to meditate. What better teachers, I thought, than the Buddhists?

I had heard of a Buddhist community in the north of Canberra, and one Sunday morning I drove up there. What I heard profoundly moved me. 'We over-theorise ourselves' said the resident teacher. How wonderful I thought. How profoundly true.

Thus began a number of years in which I studied the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. In all its forms, Buddhism is both highly cerebral and very practical. There are many scriptures, but they do not easily yield their meaning. It takes a certain type of person to pursue them.

There is a certain spiritual muscularity about Buddhism. Stilling the mind takes a lot of concentration and motivation. Practitioners would go on long retreats, and meditate for hours. Some would set themselves targets which involved reciting many thousands of mantras. The intent was devotional, of course, but was there an element of Dharma gymnastics in it? In all human religious life, there is a tendency for form to take precedence over substance.

Then, soon after I began to meditate, in the mid-1990s, my father, whom I loved dearly, died quite suddenly. Sudden death takes us all unawares. Despite the presence of my own immediate family, I had never felt so alone. I redoubled my meditation practice. But somehow, there was nowhere for me to go. My Buddhist practice died away.

Fifteen years after my father, Mum died, after a long illness. Mum fought death as hard as she could. She did not want to go, she could not bear the thought of not seeing us, her children, again. She had always been such a reserved person, a private person. Now there were deep emotions, revealed piece by piece as she endured the last days.

And this brought about a quite astonishing event, which I am still at a loss to explain. I am one of those people who has lived in the same house, in the same part of Canberra, for many years. There is a church down the road, one of those seventies-type modernist ones. Anglican, as it happens, but it could have been any denomination.

I had seen it without really noticing it properly. Until one Saturday evening, with so much on my mind and in my heart, not knowing quite why I was doing it, I walked through the door.

It was a service of some kind, but a very casual one. The community was sitting around at tables, chatting. 'Come and sit beside me', said a tall dark-haired lady. I did, and so began this phase of my journey. I was invited to attend Bible study. I imagined this was some kind of tutorial, but of course it was highly devotional Bible study. I felt completely out of place, but the turmoil of my Mum's death was threatening to overwhelm me. Something very deep was pulling me along and now, seven years later, it continues to do so.

So what kind of Christian am I? Certainly, I am not a conventional believer. But I don't think that matters. If my recent years of Bible-reading have taught me anything, it is that the founder of our religion was hardly a conventional person, and neither was his greatest disciple, the apostle Paul.

When Jesus said 'then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free', he meant that he was the son of God, and those who saw and believed this would be set free.

But – and this is the thing about the Bible – you can stop there, or you can let the verse take you beyond, to another level. This idea of a truth that is somehow associated with freedom seems to go well beyond doctrine.

Importantly, in this unfolding twenty-first century, it is a truth we can work out for ourselves. It matters what we think, and it matters to each of us what we think. This was really important to me because my starting point was to have no faith at all. But perhaps for all of us, religion works best when we find our own way into it. We are not meant to take it on authority. And perhaps that is why the kind of truth of which Jesus spoke is profoundly liberating. It liberates us from having to belong. We already do. How amazing is that.

Of course, we still need the institution of the church. Without the physical presence of the church down the road, and the people that made it live, there would have been no way for me to go forward.

But I am still moving, and that desire for truth, for learning more, has brought me here, to Benedictus. So, I give thanks for Sarah, and for all the community here. May the truth set you free, too.