

9 April 2022

On Understanding in Parables
Community member reflection

In a world where integrity carries so much currency but counts for so little I feel that a few disclosures are in order. I have always struggled with religion. The idea of religious devotion to a deity or deities has always deeply unnerved me. I understand it, but I find it a trying task to lean in to. Yet here I am, preaching on my journey to this abundant and diverse waterhole. So here goes.

I was born to lesbian parents, not wholly unusual today but mildly groundbreaking for the time. My mothers gave love profusely and unconditionally; I have often joked that the nature of my conception and birth meant that there was zero chance of me being an 'accident'. John Howard's quote unquote reforms of the Australian marriage act prevented two mothers from appearing on my birth certificate. Instead, a mother and a parent appeared; for me, this was deeply delegitimising collateral damage in his self-serving ideological campaigns.

Though I wasn't to know it at the time, my first experience with religion would come from donor father. Raised in a deeply catholic family he was an altar boy in the local church for much of his early life. Before my birth he had had a tangential relationship to my family. When my mothers were seeking donation for their first child he stepped forward, and fathered my older twin brothers. A portion of his still deeply catholic family cut ties with him. Fathering the children of a lesbian couple was an affront to their supposedly refined religious sensibilities. Despite all this, in an act of selflessness the degree to which I don't think I will ever witness in my life, four years later, when my mothers decided to have another child, he stepped forward again. And now I'm writing this.

He played a deeply formative role in me and my brother's lives. He gave me most of my hobbies and a deep respect for the two most important institutions in my life; the Collingwood Football Club and the Australian Labor Party. He was, for all intents and purposes, a father. I say this because the categorisation of a relationship like this one is difficult, near impossible. For someone looking in, it was not uncommon for the comment to be made that while he gave me my life, my purpose and acted wholly paternally, he was never quite my 'father'. And for me looking out, never wanting to rock the boat, I was caught in this kind of limbo of recognising this comment, but wanting nothing more than his status as my father to be acknowledged. Sure I knew how I felt, but the way other's felt, or didn't feel, was deeply troubling. Even writing this now I am struggling to find the words to convey the emotion and torment of this dichotomy.

I feel I should tell you at this point that my father is dead. Otherwise, his death within this speech may seem like a narrative device, which I don't want. So yes, he is dead. 'The rare present tense sentence that, once it becomes true stays true forever'.¹

I fear I have painted my life up until this point as impossibly difficult filled with internal angst, but this is not the case. I had, all in all, a fairly normal and happy childhood and my early teenage years progressed commensurately. Through all of this however, I never had an affinity toward religion. In fact quite the opposite. At school I would treat my religion and values education as a fact finding mission, as a way to find inconsistencies in the word of god so that ultimately my teacher would leave with egg on their face. Indeed I recall describing myself to my year nine teacher as a 'militant atheist'. Whatever that means.

Late in year nine my father lost his battle with cancer and died. The grief was indescribably cutting, but I felt relieved that the battle of anticipation that accompanies terminal diagnoses was over. I have a memory, that I think I have

¹ I wish I could say that I came up with this but I borrowed heavily from author John Green's podcast 'The Anthropocene Reviewed' episode titled 'Auld Land Syne' minutes 4:00-6:00. The passage and phrase were too hard to go past!

manufactured, of a crucifix in his room at the hospice. A memory that the sight of it angered me deeply. God had not saved him from diagnosis, nor from death, so why would he save him now. More than this why should we pay homage to this God in my father's final moments. Indeed God was an easy person to blame and reject in a situation that made, and still makes, little sense.

Accompanying his death was again the dichotomy that I spoke about earlier. I knew the inevitable questions and comments that I would face from people at school. If I went public about my father's death: 'I know you're sad, but he wasn't really your dad'. To insulate myself against this I did not tell anyone what had happened. The possibility of not belonging to the club that everyone else did was paralysing.

I think it was around this time my grandmother began attending a church in Cook. The church was on Saturday nights, it was ecumenical and centred around a period of meditation and the priest sounded like something of a Marxist. 'What is this? A church for rejects and misfits?' I thought to my militantly atheist self. That would be the only thought I would give to Benedictus for some time.

As time went on I, like so many do, grew around the grief of the loss of my father, and finished high school with relative ease. I started Uni in late February 2020, and of course, the pandemic soon struck. My life, up until that point, had been constantly moving and lockdown was the first time in a while that everything stopped. In the stopping of everyday life, everything seemed a bit futile.

12 months later I began attending Benedictus on a regular basis. I would like to say that in this moment of stasis I found meaning in deep introspection which led me down the Christian path to Benedictus, but this is not the case. I felt more open to the idea of religion, my year nine arrogance, and the anger that Christianity had caused in my earlier years had certainly dissipated. I think I told Sarah that I decided to come because it was a good excuse to spend time with my Grandmother, whom, thanks to lockdown, I had not seen very much of. I can't really say what spurred me on to come to this church of the misfits, I wish I could, but I can tell you why I stayed.

What I have come to realise is that the practice of Christianity is different from the idea of Christianity. Attending and participating at the waterhole is just as important as what the waterhole serves to teach and represent. I think an ornithological metaphor helps to illustrate this.

For a long time I have been an unashamed bird watcher. People often ask me what my favourite bird is. 'Favourite bird' I ask puzzled. I like all birds, some are more exciting than others, indeed I disdain the Noisy Miner and its predation of small bird species, but I don't simply have a favourite bird. 'Where do you go birdwatching?' people often follow up with. 'What do you mean?' I think, I'm always bird watching, whenever I'm outside I'm taking note of which bird I can see, and hear. It's just innate within me.

So what do I mean by all this? Well as I said at the beginning, I have struggled to apply this same sense of innate observance to religion. But I have come to partly realise this observance at Benedictus. Sometimes I will go weeks and weeks without truly grappling the meaning of readings or Sarah's reflections, despite their profundity. But I have noticed that in the weeks when I am struggling, the weeks I need it most, everything just clicks. Sarah's words answer all questions that I have and I leave the waterhole completely satiated.

I mentioned this to a more religiously inclined friend and he said that this is what it felt like to meet God. Meet God? Where was the booming voice or the man with the long white beard? If this was god, he was not the man that The Simpsons made him out to be. Why would God make himself so fleeting and infrequent? This is where I have become fond of meditation. In times when I'm getting nothing out of religion, having a practice is important to sustain me even without the 'felt sense' of things. Through this I have learned, that if we are to meet God, it needs to happen halfway where gains are made in humility and vulnerability – nothing stems from year nine arrogance.

But isn't this the paradox of Christianity. As we have just heard, Jesus says 'To you the secret of the kingdom of God has been given; but to those who are outside everything comes by way of parables' – in short Jesus speaks in parables so that only those listening will be able to hear. 'Gee thanks!' is the first thing I think. What a divine cop out. It is little wonder that people find it hard to break in! But of course, as always, there is more to this.

It is at this point that I think I should probably address the elephant in the room. I am a little bit younger than the average age of Benedictus attendees. I think it is perhaps not a coincidence that Sarah has asked me to speak about my experience of the Benedictus waterhole; and it would be remiss for me not to comment on young people and church going more broadly. There are, I think, an endless number of reasons why less and less young are attending church. But to me, there are two obvious ones.

The first speaks to this idea of Christianity as practice vs Christianity as belief. I feel like the problem with declining attendance by young people at churches is partly the hurdle of getting to church as opposed to religion itself. Especially when the religion is non-didactic and pedagogical as it is at Benedictus. I say this because many of my friends display genuine interest when they 'find out' I attend church. They are first interested in why I attend, then they are interested in attending themselves. I suppose, once it is explained, they see the opportunity as more of a 'try before you buy' and not a lock-in contract. But bridging the gap to attend church to see what it's like is easier said than done.

The second reason is that young people tend to categorise Christian religion into two broad extremes. On the one end there is the Sunday morning in-the-rows-of-pews dictatorial belief. On the other end there is the kind of worship typical of Pentecostalism, what I would crudely refer to as 'Scomo church'. The God of which, the Prime Minister tells us, he wore holes in the carpet beside his bed praying to for vaccine procurement, seemingly to no avail. While I don't agree with these categorisations, they are the categorisations the friends my age make, and certainly

a reason they cite, implicitly or otherwise, as to why they don't attend church. As I said at the beginning though, the problem isn't necessarily with religion itself, I think if more people knew there was a mid-ground to these extreme categorisations they would be more willing to attend.

So what can we do about all of this? Should we make it our goal to evangelise young people en masse? Is this the solution? I think the answer is probably no but I'm not sure. For me, thanks to Benedictus, I have found the mid-ground between the two extremes. It has taught me and I have tried to learn that the more we meet each other halfway, the more we will realise that coming to this waterhole flows out into the world. Thank you.