

Some Thoughts on Baptism

Introduction

*"Now the artful young rogue, while they held their colloque,
With his ear to the keyhole was listenin',
And he muttered in fright while his features turned white,
"What the divil and all is this christenin'?"*

*He was none of your dolts, he had seen them brand colts,
And it seemed to his small understanding,
If the man in the frock made him one of the flock,
It must mean something very like branding.*

*So away with a rush he set off for the bush,
While the tears in his eyelids they glistened-
"Tis outrageous," says he, "to brand youngsters like me,
I'll be dashed if I'll stop to be christened!"*

A Bush Christening, A.B Paterson, The Bulletin, December 16th, 1893

Banjo Paterson was not especially given to Christianity. He was married in a church and was buried by the church – in fact his remains are located in Northern Suburbs cemetery, but like the young Mike in our story, Paterson had his doubts: the Christian church was about *branding*: an institution that objectified, dominated and abused - not unusual in rural Australia. This Australian discomfort with religion was nevertheless unsympathetically remarked upon by a range of observers of the time: not everyone sided with Paterson. Beatrice Webb, the British feminist, and socialist for whom Christianity was a basic component of cultured society, wrote this about dear old "Oz". "The squatter has established no church or school at his gates. He has provided no instruction, no religion, no ideal of refinement or culture to his subordinates". The essayist, Francis Adams, wrote something similar: "The heathenism of the bush is intense. Everyone is at heart a pessimist".

Baptism, the Problem of Brokenness and Joy

My experience of the bush is limited, but my sense is that Adams is right about Australian pessimism, although he does not really understand it. In the bush, there is an intuition of, a foreboding awareness of life's precariousness, tenuousness, shakiness, instability. Nature determines things – the rural economy depends upon the moods of climate – as do the livelihoods of so many. Financial success or ruin are always around the corner; brokenness is always lurking in the shadows. There is in the bush, a sense of the stark reality about nature and the social and human condition.

It is in this context of the bush, but also beyond, that the Church has often misunderstood its own teaching. In particular, the sacrament of baptism has frequently been cast as a ritual focused upon, obsessed about, human darkness, human sinfulness, "original sin" from which we need to be rescued. At its worst, it has been used to exacerbate human pain, casting the human condition more darkly than need be, the need for God's grace in terms of gritted threat – hence Peterson's story about Mike's fear of "being branded".

In the next few minutes as I lead you guys through the sacrament of baptism, the words, "sin" and "evil" will recur. But baptism is *not* about darkness and pessimism. We acknowledge the brokenness of life, what is referred to as sin, because we see it in ourselves and we see it in our social, economic and institutional life. But, ultimately baptism is about

joy: we renounce evil *in order to live joyfully and freely*. Today, River's baptism is about, Jesus Christ sharing in this new life, River's life. It is about the Christian church, this community celebrating River with you. As Timothy Radcliffe, the English Dominican says;

The public renunciation of evil and adhesion to Christ at baptism, was an act of cosmic rebellion, against fatalism, cruelty, violence and despair. The new thing that the Gospel in general and baptism in particular imparted to the world, was a deep joy in the goodness of creation, in the goodness of God.

Let us do this together!