

ADVANCE AUSTRALIA, WHERE?

Lawrence Peak
January, 2021

Last Tuesday we celebrated Australia Day – when we thought of our nation, its past history and heritage, its present day standing and the future in store for our country.

These days, it has become quite an issue of contention with many indigenous men and women calling it “Invasion Day” and wanting to move the date because January 26th commemorates the landing of the First Fleet and the troubles and conflicts that ensued with the local aboriginal people. Troubles and conflicts that are still with us today!

Of course there was also a lot of good that came with that first settlement which led the way to the establishment of our modern Australian nation – and many are of the opinion that we should take it all on board and acknowledge our entire history, the good the bad and the ugly! Celebrate the good and learn from past mistakes so that they never can happen again.

We have all seen maps, haven't we, with a large arrow, often in red, saying “you are here”. We have them all over the campus of the University of Sydney to help visitors find their way around except that quite often afterwards, they become obliterated with stickers and advertisements for various clubs and societies, and graffiti. Soon it becomes almost impossible for a visitor to use the maps at all!

As a nation too we need a statement saying “you are here” – and often here too things are so easily obliterated

With minority groups shouting “listen to us – we have the truth”

And vested interest calling out “No – think our way! – our way is the way to guaranteed happiness”

And there is so much shouting and jostling and emotion and advertising and political maneuvering that it is very difficult to find out precisely where we stand at the moment as a nation.

Perhaps around Australia Day we should pause, and take stock and consider where we are really.

We certainly have much to celebrate, we are indeed a great country with vast natural resources, high living standard, excellent performance in so

many sports, a good education standard and a spirit that draws us together in times of hardship and tragedy. We have seen this in past wars, bushfires, droughts, and very recently as the whole nation has battled the ravages of the Covid 19 virus. Our lifestyle and the standard of living are the envy of many.

But if we look a little deeper, perhaps we would also add to our congratulations a note of concern and caution.

- Do we celebrate and encourage our indigenous leaders so that they can set an example for their people and particularly the young people who are emerging. The Engineering Foundation of Anne Vans Colina and established by the late Geoff Dobell, is a wonderful example of this, and there are more; but is this enough?
- Are we adequately training for the future in an age of increasing technology – or will we be left behind? Do we still think that all we have to do is to export iron ore, wheat and wool to solve our problems and stay forever “the lucky country”?
- Are we able to cope with the increased leisure that we are bound to have when automation makes more and more inroads into our workforce?
- Can we deal adequately with the perplexing ethical questions that arise from the new medicine with genetic engineering, transplants, in vitro fertilisation and sperm banks etc. Who provides the moral guidance needed in today’s society.
- Are we ready to handle a society where more and more people want something for nothing. Where we are approaching the age of rights without responsibilities and where gambling and drugs are permeating the very fabric of our society to a level that would surprise and stagger most of us?

None of our blessings seem to be able to guarantee greater happiness, purpose, peace and stability, fewer suicides and murders, less crime and corruption and less selfishness.

How can we help as Christians – how can we help Australia generally to grow up spiritually? As we look to the future we need to first come to the realisation that we are fast becoming a country where conventional traditional Christianity is no longer special. Although there is a widespread urge for spirituality it is being searched for in new age religions, charismatic churches, and other faiths such as Islam, and Buddhism - not in the conventional traditional worship services of our forefathers. In many ways we are approaching the situation experienced by the early disciples when they strode out fearlessly into pagan and foreign nations to proclaim the message of the saving grace of God through Christ. They were certainly a minority then – and yet they were not deterred from their mission. And for us to achieve our mission in the present Australian scene, we too need to be strong and to grow up spiritually as did the early disciples for we too are now in the minority.

How do we know we are growing up spiritually?

FIRST Growing up is often a painful process because we need to leave things behind. As we grow, we grow out of things that were once dear to us. Did we once have a teddy bear or a rag doll or a golliwog when we were young . Our daughter Katrina had a much loved, extremely emaciated teddy that was dearly loved. Dianne and I well remember it getting caught up in the bed linen of a motel at Kiama – and guess who was down in the motel laundry going through all the linen of the whole motel until we could shout triumphantly “Eureka” and all was well. Now we cannot say we have really grown up until we have left our teddy bears behind - no matter how much they are loved. It’s no use striding in to clinch some important business deal if you are dragging a teddy bear behind you!

As we grow, we often have to step out of the security of the past into the world of maturity – and more than a few tears might have to be shed in the process. As we have grown, we may have had to say goodbye to many of our childhood acquaintances, our old school, our familiar haunts and customs, and for many even our motherland and the things that used to offer us familiarity and security.

Spiritually too we need to put things away as we grow.

Paul says

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. But when I became a man I put away childish things.

Maybe we have to put away

- Our Sunday School picture of God as an old man or a Santa Claus or a Superman
- Our selfishness, for as we draw nearer to Him we think less of ourselves – we give more and take less.
- Our preoccupation with the immediate. Often we chose the quick path which is the easiest for the moment and it doesn't test our patience – but which is no real solution in the long term.
- Our pride – for as we draw closer to God, we begin to appreciate what true humility is. We acknowledge that we are what are because of what God has done for us. And we are no longer cocksure nor do we have all the answers.
- Our simplistic faith of black and white that we had as teenagers. Maybe as we live out our lives we encounter shades of grey that cannot be slickly categorised. This may be very important as we endeavour to speak with and listen to members of other faiths.

SECOND. Growing up means becoming stronger. As our youngsters grow we see them becoming taller and stronger in their limbs and minds. They run faster, they are more aware of the world around them, more vocal in their opinions, more mature in their outlook.

And to grow spiritually means becoming stronger in so many ways. Paul in Galatians says

“But the fruits of the Spirit are joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith meekness and temperance”

These are the gifts God gives to us. Notice He doesn't promise wealth, health, popularity, long life or better education! But He does guarantee that we will grow in the fruits of the Spirit if He lives in our hearts.

If we are growing in these fruits – if we are more loving and gentle and humble and faithful than we used to be; in short, if we are becoming more like Christ we can know that we are growing spiritually.

THIRD and FINALLY Have we risen above the technicalities of our faith for this is also part of growing up spiritually.

In car driving, there are many technicalities, when to change gear, how not to stall the engine (if it's a manual car) how to change lanes, how to park in a tight spot, how to do a three point turn, how to handle roundabouts and so on and so forth. A recent driver came out one night to her car with a torch. When asked why by her passenger, she replied so as to see where the pedals are of course!! Needless to say the passenger went home another way!

The mark of a good mature driver is one who drives automatically so that they can concentrate on each situation in its entirety as it arises. He or she has risen above the technicalities of which pedal to press.

In music, there is a great difference in pianists and conductors between the clever technician and the master who has risen above the technicalities. The technique has to be there – no musician could achieve anything without it; but it is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. I often think the hi fi enthusiasts are more taken with their equipment, woofers and tweeters filters and amplifiers than they are with the music they are supposed to be listening to!

You often see truly great pianists (such as the late great Artur Rubenstein) playing with their eyes closed. Bruno Walter once said of Fritz Kriesler "*He does not just play the violin, he becomes the violin!*" For these maestros, they and the music are one. They are not concerned whether the next note is a crotchet or a quaver or what lies over the next page for the music is in their bones. They have risen above the technicalities to a plane that involves their whole body mind and soul.

There are also technicalities for Christians, Church attendance, praying, reading the Bible, singing hymns, meetings and then more meetings! Indeed

these things are important for the life of the Christian – we couldn't do without them. But they are not an end in themselves, we are not doing these things to look or feel righteous and holy (as did the Pharisees on many occasions). By themselves they are sterile rituals.

No, we use these things to be receptive to God's Spirit so that He can flow into our lives and empower our lives and give them warmth and colour, perspective and meaning. And we will have come of age when we live each day in the presence of God. We will have risen above the mechanics of ritual and the technicalities of theological argument – and we will know, we will feel the fire of God in our souls.

So what can we say in conclusion about Australia and us. It is true that we cannot expect that Christianity will be the dominant religion or outlook in the future. When I was a child nothing happened on Sundays except Church and Sunday School and family. Everything else was closed. How different things are today!

Nevertheless, there is still an urging and a yearning for meaning and spirituality in the Australian people. They may not countenance coming to a service such as this – but it is there just the same.

We have a God-given opportunity to be the leaven in the bread as were the early disciples. We have the chance to be the lifting force, enlightening and inspiring people. We can show people what true Christianity is all about and it has nothing at all to do with stuffy church services.

To do this we may have to grow up spiritually, we may have to set aside thoughts and concepts that are not mature and not in keeping with the understanding of our modern age. We may need to grow in the fruits of the Spirit – qualities that are recognised and admired by almost everyone. And we might need to rise above the mere procedures of our faith that may not be as important as we first thought.

No, Australia is not now a Christian country, but God is still present and active amongst her people, and we can be part of it – and we can participate in the miracles that He still can work through the lives of His faithful servants.

I hope you all had an enjoyable Australia Day holiday - God bless Australia - Amen