



The Meaning of Ritual

Earlier this week, I visited my eye surgeon for a scheduled post-op check up following my surgery earlier this year. I am pleased to report that all went well and my eye is pretty much in the condition we expected it to be in.

However, it's what happened after the formal consultation that was, if anything, even more important than what happened during the consult itself. My surgeon is aware of the fact that I am a Uniting Church minister, and as this was our final meeting for the year, he began to ask me questions about how I experience Christmas from the standpoint of being a clergy person. I talked about the busyness that often occasions this time of year, and how it also often highlights how much many people are struggling with life amid all the compulsory cheerfulness of the "Christmas season".

My surgeon is not, as far as I know, a "practicing" Christian. I believe he may have been raised in a nominally Christian family and possibly even attended schools associated with one of the mainstream Christian denominations - but, as far as I am aware, he is not a regular "church-goer" or even describes himself as a Christian.

Yet, as we chatted, he began to talk about how important he finds the Christmas Day service. He described having attended Christmas day services at both Westminster Abbey and Notre Dame on past occasions, and how deeply fulfilling he found such experiences, immersed in the ritual of the

Christmas service. He then went on to talk about occasions when he and his family had attended "Carols by Candlelight" events in both Australia and the UK, and how sterile and unfulfilling he had found these to be by comparison - as though they had tried to pick out the "best bits" of the Christian Christmas ritual without preserving any of the depth or structure of the whole.

I was deeply struck by what he had to say, and as I listened to him, I noticed how weary he looked. It was late in the afternoon - almost evening, in fact - and I knew there were still patients waiting to see him. He would probably still be at work for another couple of hours, on top of the long day he had no doubt already endured. Fatigue lines were etched deeply into his features, and a look of tiredness shadowed his eyes. And yet, here he was, not only attending to my medical needs, but also opening up to me about something that was obviously, to him, deeply personal.

I immediately forgot about the fact that my parking meter was running and that, at this rate, it would expire before I got back to the car. I forgot about my concern that I might be vulnerable to getting a parking ticket. Here was a deeply tired - probably exhausted - healer who was laying himself bare to me. I needed to stay and listen.

He described to me all the awful, traumatising things he had seen and heard about during the COVID pandemic. As a medical practitioner attached to a large hospital he had been part of that hospital's response to the pandemic crisis. He described the mistakes that had been made, as well as the initiatives that had successfully limited the pandemic's impact. He talked about the colleagues who were now suffering from PTSD, as well as his fears for the future given what hasn't been learned - or which has just been ignored - about the disruptive effect of pandemics.

"And that's why I like the Christmas Day service," he concluded. "It allows me

to draw a line under the year and every thing that has gone before. It lets me reset for the new year. And it does so in a way that secular ceremonies like "Carols By Candlelight" don't even touch."

We chatted a little more, then shook hands and wished one another a happy Christmas and new year. As I walked back to my car, it occurred to me that we in the Church are often cynical about people whom we call "cultural Christians" or "once-a-year-Christians". We deride the fact that they only attend services on Christmas and/or Easter Day. But we may in fact lose sight of the reality that, for these people, attending on Christmas or Easter Day means something. It's not just a habit or a token gesture - it's a moment of grace in otherwise difficult contexts that enables them to be fully human, to reset themselves for what lies ahead and come to terms with what has passed.

Moreover, it is the structure and shape of the ritual itself that helps make these occasions so meaningful and healing. "Ritual" often attracts negative connotations these days, the word itself used as a simile for "boring" or "out of date" or "irrelevant". Moreover, ritual is often attacked as a mechanism for "brainwashing" people, or for devolving them into a state of unreflective, uncritical belief. But what my conversation with my surgeon revealed was that ritual provided him with a structure and a process for taking him beyond and out of himself, into the heart of the deep mystery that is the possibility and presence of God in human life. It enabled him to contextualise and make sense of the year he had just experienced, to release what needed to be released, and to find the energy and hope to face the future.

As we approach the Christmas season and its many familiar rituals, this encounter is, perhaps, a reminder that we need to make the effort to view those rituals with "new eyes", to see in them possibilities and meanings that have become lost through over-familiarity. Perhaps for those of us who are regular "church goers", attempting to see ritual from the perspective of those who only

come at Christmas or Easter might invest in these occasions a new meaningfulness. If nothing else, it might remind us that the rituals which we often lament as having been discarded and left behind by the world are, in fact, at specific times hugely relevant and hugely important.

Remember In Your Prayers

Please remember Wilma de la Rue in your prayers. Wilma is recovering from recent surgery and hopes to get back to her life as a busy Grandmother very soon. Please pray for Wilma's swift and full recovery.

4U November Event

The final 4U gathering will be its annual evening extravaganza, to be held at **6pm in the Centre Hall on Saturday November 11**. Entertainment will be supplied by the wonderful **Savoy Singers**. For full details about the evening and the Savoy Singers please [click this link](#) and [this link](#).

Halleluiah Chorus Concert

On **Wednesday 13th December at 7:30pm**, Ringwood Uniting Church will host a rendition of George Fredrich Handel's famous Halleluiah Chorus. But it won't be just any old concert - attendees will also have the opportunity to join in the singing of this Christmas favourite.

For full details [click on this link](#).

Blessings,

Brendan



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