

# FROM STORY TO HISTORY

DAN O'DONOVAN

THE OPENING part of John's Gospel, a poem, speaks of the eternal 'Word' of God. God spoke this word of his to us, in time, to heal what had become wounded and unwell. He named him 'Jesus', which means, in Hebrew language: God-does-the-saving-(if-we-allow-him).

'In him was LIFE', we are told.

Though he was in the form of God, adds St Paul—poetically again—'he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant'.

Being himself Life, he therefore *had* life to give us.

The same Life was *Light* for us, John continues, helping us to understand, and see our way forward.

## *Three Australian Catholic Indigenous Statements*

Of course, there have been more than three. I'm choosing these three because, together, they express with particular force the view that, for each, one stage has ended, another begun.

1. Pat Dodson's departure from the ordained ministry. Like young David in King Saul's heavy armour, Pat felt he needed more freedom of action as he explored his own origins.

The break, when it came, was painful, but friendly, and has remained so. Pat is now Adjunct Professor at Notre Dame University Broome Campus, as well as leader of his own *Yawuru* people, and a national political eminence. This he could never have become as a Catholic priest in the 70s.

2. Jimmy Chi's melodrama, *Bran Nue Dae*, a nostalgic gem I had the joy of seeing in Perth. What a mixture, of so many things! But its title defined it.

Between dae and dae, there comes a nite, however. Maybe out of that we are dawning steadily now, feel Jimmy and the Kuckles.

I still remember the old mission yards,  
the old days, the old ways, the times that were  
hard,  
the friends of my childhood, when I was young,  
the fathers, the brothers, the old Irish nuns,  
—sings Theresa.

3. On 14 August 2006, a meeting was held at Nungalinga College, Darwin, to commemorate 100 years since Bishop F.X. Gsell's arrival in Darwin as a missionary priest.

Fr Martin Wilson MSC delivered the 'Occasional Address', and was followed by four speakers, (two indigenous, two white), each of whom was tasked to comment on his Address.

One of the four was Lorraine Erlandson, an indigenous Catholic theologian and staff member of Nungalinga College.

It seems to me that her response to Martin Wilson's talk on this occasion has not received the attention it deserves. It is a thoughtful paper, firmly focussing on the person of Jesus. Indeed—in the circumstances—a bold testimony, well on target still.

## **A few passages**

'One of the things that has completely confused me with the Church has been the connection of Christianity to Dreamtime. So, your comment, Fr Martin, that nowadays we profit from the perceptive investigations of anthropologists and that we are bewitched by the Dreaming is what grabbed my attention in your paper.

It would appear from Pope John Paul II's address to the indigenous Australians in Alice Springs in 1986 that this was an affirmation of

the Dreaming. Have the anthropologists led the Church into a set of beliefs quite different from Christianity and to uniting the two as one? Does this help us come to know the truth about Jesus?

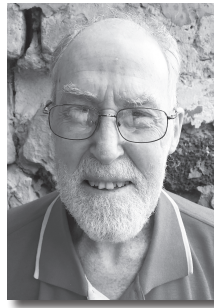
I believe the Church in doing this has undone some of the work of the early missionaries in bringing people into a relationship with Jesus by practically saying you can belong to the Church and retain your traditional Aboriginal beliefs and this in effect has almost made Jesus irrelevant.

Both Aboriginal Religion and Christianity contain a set of beliefs which govern the way of life of the believers. As these beliefs have been united and worked out in the Christian faith and worship there appears to me to be a need for guidance and direction from the Church's Religious leaders to the indigenous people.

Some of my perceptions are that some people have almost excluded Jesus in the connecting of the beliefs and overlook the fact that as Christians the relationship is with Jesus and that he is the one we are following.

After Vatican II in trying to rectify mistakes of the past in relation to culture we appear to want to leave people in the comfort of their culture and the gospel is not challenging things in the culture because as Church we seem to have an attitude that all is good in the culture. The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction from where it was with the early missionaries that it needs to find a point of balance....'

If indigenous Catholics, such as Pat Dodson, Jimmy Chi and the Kukkle—a whole indescribable range of Indigenous Christians Australiawide, in fact—are now, after the dark



*Fr Dan O'Donovan is a diocesan hermit living at Beagle Bay Aboriginal Community in the Catholic Diocese of Broome.*

night, in search of a Bran Nue Dae, they will be on sure ground heeding Lorraine's observations.

'In him (Jesus) says St John the Beloved, was LIFE.

The place of meeting him, as Life, is first and always our own inner soul, (or, heart: *liyarn*, in Nyul-Nyul language over here) once it has been purified of rubbish.

In there, we seek and find him, in the Spirit, then we begin to find him everywhere, as Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr has so beautifully explained from her own experience.

As Creator, God fills the whole universe, and we are in union with God, through Jesus in our soul. As that old Christian mystic, St Simeon, called the New Theologian, has put it.

Blessed are you, Lord  
Who have placed in my heart  
The light of your commandments,  
And planted within me the *Tree of Life*  
Making me another, spiritual Paradise.  
For, you have brought into my soul  
another Spirit,  
Your own divine Spirit,  
to abide with me in love.

*What matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures, not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in Gaudium et Spes, always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationship of people among themselves and with God.*

—Pope Paul VI, 'Evangelization in the Modern World', ch.2 par.20