

# WANGARATTA JUBILEE ADDRESS

JOHN RYAN

**F**RIENDS—one and all in Christ: Monsignor John has suggested that before I commence I might offer a word of explanation as to why I have been given this honour. The reasons are mainly circumstantial. I am one of the priests ordained from this Parish. Though not born here, I have come to call Wangaratta home. My family first came here in 1945, as a boy I personally shook hands with Ned Kelly's brother Jim and as a pupil at St Pat's School I was here in the Church for the burial of Father Maurice Byrne. Later I would be part of a working bee that cleaned bricks from the old presbytery to be used in the building of this current one. I worshipped, played tennis, football and danced here at St Pats. For a time I worked down the street at the Council Offices and regularly met up with the lovely Patricia outside the Church after work! On the occasion of the centenary of the Parish in 1963, and as the opening celebration of that occasion, Kevin Howarth and I prostrated here before the altar and were ordained priests. From mid 1993 through 1994 I was blessed to serve as assistant to Frank Jones, and God willing I will be buried here along with my mother and father—my grave awaits me with only the date of death to be added to the headstone!

Having said all that I feel I can now ask you to be kind to me as I humbly attempt to do some justice to this privilege of presenting what must surely be something of a mixture between a homily and an address.

\* \* \*

These moments when we gather to celebrate a Jubilee belong to special time, not like normal time when moments move onwards,

one after another creating in their turn past, present and future. That kind of time is commonly known as *chronos* time and it is what our watches measure. Our time here is different because here we are striving to lock into our presence the whole hundred and fifty year story of our Parish; we know it as *kairos* time!

Flowing before us today is a muster of people, living and dead, family and friends, strangers known and unknown, young and old, rich and poor and colored, successful and not, good and bad, happy and sad—yet all of them somehow united with us as brothers and sisters under the loving fatherhood of our God. Moving with this parade are a series of events joyful and sorrowful, some challenging, others enlivening from the start, winding us with them into an overall pattern of dying and rising which envelops the whole of any human history, especially this history of our Parish. We are so grateful to Peter Murray who has marvelously recorded so much of this for us in his magnificent history—*As The Spirit Leads*.

Through this history that prophecy of Ezekiel has been struggling to unfold as our graves have been opened and we have strained to correspond to what St Paul has just described as the Spirit of Christ within us seeking to raise us to life. Through our history that same story of Jesus and his involvement with the family of Lazarus has been lived out anew rendering death to be ultimately inoperative for whosoever lives and believes in Him.

Before delving further into this history of our parish, let me pause to share with you a story of a man who lived his life within our time frame from 1905 until 1961 and whom I will suggest has much to offer us as we gather

to celebrate our Jubilee.

Dag Hammarskjöld was a Swedish diplomat, lawyer, economist and author who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations from April 1953 until his death in a highly suspicious plane crash while on a peace mission in the Congo in September 1961. He is the only person to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously; and something of his greatness can be gleaned from President John F. Kennedy's description of him as 'the greatest statesman of our century.' 'In comparison with him', said Kennedy, 'I am a small man'.

Though born into a devout Lutheran family, Dag as an adult abandoned his Lutheran faith and entered upon his own search for meaning. While outwardly successful, decent and impressive in everything he undertook he was not seen as particularly religious, and when after his death a diary recording his spiritual search was found, many were surprised.

Like all who undertake the search for the answer to the question of what constitutes a life well-lived Dag's journey took him through many different insights. Was life about eliminating one's vices and pursuing virtues, or was it about doing one's best to advance the health and happiness of one's fellow man; maybe it was pursuing a cause that one was willing to die for or being as conformed to the image of Jesus as one could be. All of these are good and to be recommended but none of them had for him the feel of being a key or a final answer, a point towards which our life is ultimately heading!

It was in 1952, at age forty-eight, almost on cue to be the fruit of a mid-life crisis, that he wrote: 'Goodness is something so simple: always to live for others, never to seek one's own advantage; night is drawing nigh—*For all that has been—Thanks! To all that shall be—Yes!*'

That statement of gratitude for all that has been and resignation to all that will be has captured the attention of seekers everywhere and found its way onto posters and into books



*Fr John Ryan is a priest of the diocese of Sandhurst. He has been involved with The Spirituality Centre, Randwick, the St Peter Centre, the Ministry to Priests, the Catholic Institute for Ministry, the Humanita Foundation for the Study of Christian Sexuality, and as a Councillor.*

of quotations worldwide. From the very beginning it presented itself to me as the context within which to situate this Jubilee reflection.

In attempting to explain this I must return to our history and visualize again with you the countless thousands who have preceded us as parishioners in this place. I see them coming together at various times and progressing in various ways towards a goal that draws them forward. True, as they come together they are motivated differently. For some they are gathering anxiously and in fear of missing out on salvation, for others it is part of their inheritance, their culture, something that their clan has always done. Others still see life as a parishioner as the only sane way to live both for themselves and their neighbors. Over the one hundred and fifty years it is a motley bunch with many and differing reasons for being who they claim to be and doing what they see themselves doing. Beyond their various motivations, what ultimately brings them together is a call, an invitation from their God, nothing more and nothing less.

That call goes back some two thousand years to a supper room where Jesus gathered with his disciples for a Jewish Passover Meal at a very special time in his life. That meal like Passover Meals before it was a ritual celebration in which the participants united with one another in reaching out to God for his blessing upon them, for acceptance, care and fellowship for now and into the future.

They did this taking their food and their

togetherness as symbols of their life through which they offered themselves in praise and worship to God, as I said, seeking his ongoing blessing and presence with them. All this was done in the context of thanksgiving for his call and care of them in the past. Thanksgiving!

On that particular night Jesus transformed the regular ritual by adding his life, and his about-to-happen death, to the offering telling the disciples to continue this new ritual in memory of him and as often as they did so he would be there with them so that from now on their prayer to the Father would be with him, in him and through him. It was to become a new prayer of thanksgiving in which they offered themselves in union with the offering of Jesus to their God.

Interestingly, this new ritual that also incorporated praise, worship and sought for blessing, would come to be known as ‘Thanksgiving’ or ‘Eucharist’. It was to become both the source and summit of the new relationship with our Father God that Jesus had come to share with us.

Forever now we are called to it solemnly with the words ‘let us give thanks to the Lord Our God’ and then immediately reminded that giving thanks is right and just, our duty and our salvation. The Parish is at the service of the Eucharist and the Eucharist at the service of the Parish. Today we celebrate the fact that in this place for one hundred and fifty years our brothers and sisters have been marching towards and out from this special meal that determines and empowers them to be who they are and who they are to be.

And who are we to be? Clearly a people who give thanks for all the blessings we have received. From the teaching of the Eucharist and the genius of seekers such as Dag Hammarskjöld, it would seem that it is only in gratitude that we can be open to receive the promised gifts we desire and pray for. Only a grateful soul can fully receive the grace of

God! Well might we ask, ‘Does the Lord join us in Eucharist if the words of thankfulness are not offered?’

If, as often happens, in a particular situation or circumstance in life we are not experiencing the presence of Jesus with us, the invitation would seem to be to search to find a way to pray over it a prayer of thanksgiving!

True—at any one time we are unable to embrace all of our reality within our thankfulness or offering, and so we repeat again and again the ritual until we can truly say, ‘for all that has been thanks’, and then the journey will be finished and we will be all together united with one another and with our God.

However we might see it the facts are that our Eucharist is a call to partake in a gathering in the form of a thanksgiving meal, something like what we are experiencing here in the entirety of today’s celebration.

Let us prepare now for this Eucharist and let our special focus be to give thanks for all that has been given to us through this Parish especially since its founding in 1863. As we stand alongside our ancestors and look forward to the future, at least part of our ‘Yes’ must be a commitment to do all that we can to restore our Eucharistic gatherings to what they are meant to be. This imagery of a meal and thanksgiving can give us the way forward to return our parishes to the robust realities they have been in the past.

For all that has been then, let us give thanks and for all that will be—Yes.

Keen that you would have something concrete to take home with you from this reflection, I decided to share with you this song. That it is in Italian I see as a special tribute to one of the major ethnic groups that have been part of our family since its inception.

*Grazie, Signore, rendiamo grazie a Te che regni nei secoli eterni.*

We will invite our choir to sing it for us a couple of times and then, please God, we will be able to join in with them.