

What song shall we sing? Words of consolation? Or excruciating kitsch?

After the bushfires, what do you say? As the plane plunges, what song do you sing?

I have a question: Where is consolation found?

I heard two answers: In secular rituals. In the transcendent consolations of scripture.

I had a thought.

Imagine you are in a plane when it plunges, lifts, plunges, steadies, and then begins to gently 'wobble'. Imagine yourself hearing the concerned yet calming voice of the captain over the gasps and cries of passengers.

This frightening situation was very real for me last Saturday as I was flying to Hobart after preaching at BCA's 90th anniversary celebration in Melbourne.

My distressed fellow passenger grasped the arm rests and gasped repeatedly, 'No! Ah! Oh, no!'. This contrasted sharply with the man a few rows back vainly trying to calm his mate who had burst into hysterical laughter. We were a motley bunch: scared and unsure.

Prior to 'the plunge' I had been revising my sermon for later that afternoon at the Installation of the new Dean of Hobart. My text? – a Hymn of the early Church: the Song of Christ in Paul's letter to the *Colossians* (1:15-20).

My sermon challenge to the Dean and Cathedral was to be: 'Will YOU sing this Song of Christ?'

Of course, God has this habit of turning a preacher's words back on himself – 'John, will you, yes, you, yourself, sing this Song of Christ, even as the plane plunges?'

Where is consolation to be found amidst the anxieties and tragedies of life? Where are the strong beliefs that sustain our living?

In an excellent article in *Inside* [<http://inside.org.au/less-is-more/>], Amanda Lohrey discusses Australia's emerging secular rituals for mourning and remembrance. Noting that Australia is increasingly diverse and less religious, Lohrey refers to the memorial service for victims of the Victorian bushfires on the National Day of Mourning held at the Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne and addressed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

Lohrey asks, 'What to say that doesn't sound worn and trite, that binds a number of disparate groups together in a moment of solidarity and offers genuine comfort?'

What did she think of the Prime Minister's message of consolation?

'(A)n overheated rhetoric of populist heroism and political promises'. Or more bluntly, 'excruciating kitsch', quoting the former editor of *Wildfire*.

A participant in the memorial service commented to me, 'If you think entertainment and sentimentality can heal the human spirit, it was OK.'

As Lohrey states, 'It is not easy to compensate for the transcendent consolations of scripture and the promise of a better place in the hereafter.'

Moreover, 'if they (Rudd and Turnbull) had not been constrained by the secular nature of the occasion and had felt free to speak of their own religious conviction – Rudd an Anglican, Turnbull a Catholic – they may well have made a better fist of it.'

Undoubtedly so.

When the plane plunges; when my world comes crashing down; when loss and grief are unbearable,

- may Christ's promise of his presence, 'Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age' be real to me,
- may the resurrection of Christ be my trust and hope,
- may the promise of my eternal dwelling with Christ where there will be no more tears and sorrow give me comfort and resilience to go on, and
- may the 'love one another' of the brothers and sisters be to me the living reminder of the love that suffers, of the Lover who knows of suffering and human anguish, who died that we might live.

So shall the Song of Christ be sung and lived;
heard and celebrated.

Shalom,
+John

Just in case it may seem that my criticism indicates that I am uncaring of the victims of the fires please go to my Reflection/Lament at the Ecumenical Service for all those affected by the bushfires.
http://www.anglicantas.org.au/index.php?item=file&target=Vic_Bushfire_Reflection]