

CREATING COMMUNITIES OF MEANING

As a biblical scholar, when asked to interpret a passage I am used to asking two basic questions – what is the context and what is the literary form? These two questions shape my reflection on the theme of the 2002 Catholic Education Conference: *Catholic Schools - Creating Communities of Meaning*. I begin with the question –

What is our context today?

The shadow of 11th September hangs heavily over all of us providing stark images of one aspect of the context in which we live and educate our young people. In this context the topic for the conference struck me as being most appropriate and a source of hope for all our shattered dreams. Living in community with a school Principal I was aware of all the ways one Catholic school was supporting its entire community of staff and students, including a small number of Islamic students, through the crisis of this event. I walked around to the American Consulate and read the cards and notes attached to the many wreaths sent in to express grief and sympathy. Many of these notes and cards were written by students, indicating that schools were obviously helping young people deal with their complex emotions.

While I begin with 11th September this event must not be allowed to limit the horizon in which this topic is explored. This act of terrorism was but one expression of a broader social phenomenon that is called postmodernism where there are no certainties, no absolute truths, no shared groundwork for ethical or moral decision-making. Everything is relative and meaning becomes the transitory interpretation of **this** action, **right now**. The past offers no sureties and the future holds no obligations. This is a brief thumbnail sketch of the world we find ourselves in at the dawning of this new millennium. It is difficult to imagine anything more contradictory to Christianity than this postmodern perspective.

Narrative meaning-making

If I were asked to describe the literary form of the postmodernist approach I would describe it as 'episodic', where life consists of random, isolated incidents and meaning is sought within the moment. In place of a view where meaning is only what I give to **this** moment, Christianity offers a narrative – a story that has beginning, a continuation and a future unfolding into God. The literary form of Christianity is narrative and the narrative nature of Christianity offers the opportunity to find meaning within a horizon that extends beyond this instance to hold both past and

future. For those who embrace this narrative, the story becomes my story, and my search for meaning takes place within a community of people who assert faith in the ultimate meaning and purpose of life.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was brooding over the waters (Gen. 1:1-3).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And the one who sat on the throne said, "Behold I make all things new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21 1-2; 5-6).

In these words of scripture we have the beginning and ending of the deep narrative enfolding the Christian story. This narrative uses the language and images of mythology, for it is only in the language of myth that the deeper truths can be expressed. The importance of myth for human meaning-making is expressed in the following reflection on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Contrary to the common conception that myths are not true, Tolkien understood that they captured something elemental.

"The truth that myths are designed to express concern not only the world around us, but the world within us; not so much its surface appearance, but its inner form ... For a myth is a way of describing the rules by which the world is made – 'deep magic from before the dawn of time'" (Farrer 2001, p. 4).

I find it fascinating that at a time when the language of science turns to chaos theory, and philosophy resorts to postmodern uncertainty, three of the most popular recent films – *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and *Lord of the Rings* – create worlds of imagination and myth. For all the sophistication of our age, we hunger for the deeper narratives whose symbols speak a profound truth that transcends the rationalism of postmodernity. Through our

educational approaches we strive to open young people to an appreciation of the deeper narratives of our evolving human story.

Having briefly described the context and literary form that I wish to work with in approaching the topic of making communities of meaning, I now want to explore the process of meaning-making that we find in the scriptures and then use this as a model to look at some ways in which schools are currently creating communities of meaning.

Meaning-making in Christian beginnings

Christian faith had its origins in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. One of the first issues facing the Easter community was how to make sense of the crucifixion; what could this horrific death mean? A Roman crucifixion was an act meant to terrorise any would be revolutionaries into submission. Not only was it an execution of one criminal, it was a public display of Roman brutality and a demand that subject people give up hope for freedom. It was an attempt to forestall any uprising by killing its leader. As Caiaphas said, "It is better that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:51). At first it seemed that the Romans were successful. Jesus died alone. Most of his followers fled. Some went into hiding in Jerusalem (John 20:19), others left the city (Luke 24:13-35) and since many were originally from Galilee some no doubt set out for their former villages. Do not think those first disciples saw the hand of God in the actions of Good Friday. Whatever hopes they had for a messianic kingdom were destroyed with the sound of nails being hammered into flesh and wood.

Meaning-making began with the experience of Easter when a community of frightened men and women discovered Jesus present in their midst. Easter faith has its origins in community. All but one of the Easter appearances occur to groups of disciples, such as the women who go to anoint the body (Mark 16:1), the two disciples travelling to Emmaus (Luke 24) and the group gathered behind closed doors in Jerusalem (John 20:19). Mary Magdalene is the only recorded individual privileged with a private Easter appearance and she is immediately sent back to the community of disciples (John 20:11-18).

From this starting point of Easter, Christian faith takes years of reflection as the community tries to make sense of the fact and manner of Jesus' death, now that Easter has confirmed that he truly was a man of God. The world of meaning that the disciples knew prior to Easter would have led them to interpret Jesus' death as the ultimate sign that he was a false prophet, a man cursed by God. In Jewish Law a man who dies on a cross could never

be understood as a man of God for their law says he is cursed. "*If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God*" (Deut 21:22-23). All Jesus' teaching and miracles would then have been perceived as an expression of Satan's power. In themselves of course such miracles prove nothing; what matters is the power lying behind such manifestations. Is it the power of God, or does this man cast out demons because he is the prince of demons? (Mark 3:22).

For the disciples, the Resurrection and its affirmation that God was acting through Jesus' life and death, meant going beyond their former Jewish framework. The scriptures they knew were no longer sufficient to provide meaning when God was obviously doing something new. Trusting the truth of their experience of Jesus and his resurrection, the disciples began the task of formulating a new meaning for the life and death of Jesus. The cross required a totally, almost impossible, reinterpretation as an act of God's salvation rather than a sign of God's curse. Within a few years, as Gentiles joined the community, the disciples were forced again to go beyond their former understandings. Judaism did not have a strong missionary thrust. Jesus himself worked predominantly within Israel. Again, the key to stepping into new meanings was the ability to trust this new experience as an act of the same Spirit that they themselves had received. As Peter said, "*Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*" (Acts 10:47).

From the process of meaning-making I have described above in the New Testament, I single out three key aspects, one of which will be taken up below:

- ◆ the disintegration of the past;
- ◆ trust in new experiences;
- ◆ the leadership of charismatic individuals and the support of the community.

Individual leadership and communities

In the New Testament model described above leaders emerged and worked with communities to interpret the meaning of Jesus' life, death and rising. This process led towards the creation of new stories. I now look at the role of leadership within the school, and the leadership of the school within society in the vital task of meaning-making.

Schools have as their primary purpose the time-honoured role of education. This is their primary

purpose and it is probably the driving passion that has led most teachers into a work that is both a profession and a vocation. It has been my experience that we have many women and men who are outstanding educators. These are people who are constantly open to the changes in society, to new educational approaches and who have a vision of what they want to achieve in the educational process. These men and women are more than good practitioners and more than skilled classroom teachers. They bring to their teaching a critical, reflective mind that seeks to articulate and embody a larger vision of education. What type of leadership is needed today in the postmodern context I described above?

Reading against the grain

Again I draw on my primary field of study, that of biblical scholarship, to suggest an approach I believe is needed within the Catholic school system if principals and teachers are to offer strong leadership today. The phrase I use comes from recent feminist biblical criticism – reading against the grain.

During the mid-twentieth century, women scholars began a new reading of biblical texts. As women moved into higher theological studies they began to be critical of translations that were inaccurate. They noted that some translations disregarded the presence of women in most cases and hid them under terms such as 'brothers' and 'men' where the Greek and Hebrew texts clearly read 'brothers and sisters', and 'human beings'. Such faulty translations distort the scriptures for all people, both women and men. Not only did these scholars make corrections to faulty translations, but also they began to realise that the text itself was biased towards the male perspective. The texts were written in societies where **men only** had authority and public leadership roles, and the texts tended to recount only those public events. This was not a translation difficulty; it was the text itself. This new awareness led scholars, both men and women, to read the scriptures with greater sensitivity, alert to the patriarchal nature of the text and with a realisation that women's stories are either not there, or their significance is down-played. Scholars noticed that women are often nameless characters and are present in the story as voiceless participants in the actions of men.

Reading against the grain requires two levels of alertness, firstly to one's own position. Each person reads a text from his or her own perspective. A woman will read the text differently to a man. A person from a white, western culture will read differently to a person from a culture that has experienced colonisation by the Christian West. The second level of alertness is the text itself. Who

has produced it? What culture? What gender? What is the original 'grain' of the text? It is impossible to read against the grain if you are not aware of which way it lies. Like an axe that cuts more easily with the grain, a reader can be carried along effortlessly. It takes a deliberate choice and effort to raise one's awareness to read against the grain.

With these two awarenesses,

- ◆ where do I situate myself with respect to postmodern ideas? Do I believe life is meaningful and the search for meaning is worthwhile or do I espouse the postmodernist denial of any absolutes?
- ◆ what is the 'grain of the current social text' which educators need to read for effective and moral learning to happen?

I turn now to fill out the description of the postmodern world in which we and our students live.

Postmodernism

One of the clearest expressions of postmodernism can be found in the writing of Jean François Lyotard. In the past various philosophies, no matter how they varied from one another, all shared a common goal of searching for some universal principle of truth applicable to all human life. Even if philosophy never found this, there was a presupposition that it could be found and that the search was meaningful. In contrast Lyotard disclaims any such universal truth is even possible and so a search for it is meaningless.

Lyotard describes a universal truth system as a 'metanarrative', which he defines as "a body of beliefs, writings and claims that presupposes that human existence as such is purposeful or meaningful" (Hogan, 1995, p. 110). Religion is clearly such a metanarrative which Lyotard's system would call a myth in the sense of an illusion. Lyotard defines postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. This approach completely rejects the possibility of any truth or meaning that might be universally worthy of humankind.

If this is the 'grain' of modern culture, it is clear to me that anyone involved in a system of education within a religious context **must** 'read against the grain'. While there are books that describe education **within** a postmodern perspective (Parker, 1997), Catholic schools need to situate themselves as teaching **against** the postmodern perspective. This is not to be blind to the postmodern world we live in, but to vigorously

resist the denial of truth and meaning which postmodernists espouse.

“Once upon a time...” – Rekindling the art of storytelling

We do have within our faith tradition strong foundations for mounting a resistance to the postmodern trend. Christian faith is a narrative, not metaphysics. We locate our origins within history and our Sacred Writings are primarily narrative. We have a story to tell with a beginning in the creative word of God, a middle where we find ourselves, and a final goal in the full realisation of God’s reign. This story only exists because of the living experience of men and women back then in Israel’s past, back then with the disciples of Jesus and right now in the lives of many who know with living certainty the truth of the Gospel. Because Christianity is grounded in historical experience, we need not be afraid of styles of telling the story that use the form of narrative and myth, alongside other forms such as ancient creeds, prayers, hymns, art and so forth. By reaffirming the narrative nature of Christianity, and the richness of myth as a genre, we offer young people an unfolding story in which they can participate and find meaning.

It may be that humanity cannot survive without myth and religion. The original, cosmogonic creation myths not only explain the physical universe to the human mind but are, perhaps, largely responsible for continuing the work of creation through the act of binding creation together.

Religion (*religio*) binds creator and creation into a living unity that allows the integrity of the universe to be sustained Postmodern science can explain this unity and tell us why it is important to respect it, but science, like governments and environmental agencies, can only make its appeals to our ethical consciences. It is the role of myth, religion and art to actually transform our consciences, to introduce us into the sacred experience of the greater world to which science and all rational discourse can only point (Tacey, 2000, pp. 169-170).

When religious systems stop telling and revitalising the sacred myths, the culture will create its own. “A long time ago, in a galaxy far away turmoil has engulfed the Galactic Republic”. So begins the first episode of *Star Wars – the Phantom Menace*. Like our Judaeo-Christian myth of Eden, *Star Wars* is located outside historical time and outside the geography of the known world. While the animation and technology of *Star Wars* amaze the mind, what stirs the heart is the perennial story of

goodness struggling with evil, of justice striving against oppression, of heroes and heroines trusting their integrity and right cause against more powerful foes. And the Galactic universe includes a transcendent power that the heroes and heroines can draw upon in their fight against evil – the Force.

This past year, in my biblical classes, I have added a new dimension to my teaching. We study Genesis. We analyse the symbolism; we look at comparative myths; we move away from a literalist understanding of this. But I have come to see that this is not enough. Analysis reduces the grand myth to manageable parts and in doing this while understanding may increase, the sense of original mystery can be lost. When we conclude the analysis, I ask the students to become storytellers, and without using their bibles to tell the story. I have done this with Genesis, The Prodigal Son, and the Passion Account. Gradually the students have become better storytellers and their stories have begun to capture the sense of a cosmic mystery. Reading the text is not the same experience as having someone tell the story – and yet this is where all our scriptures, and history originated – in the dramatic words of a storyteller. We all have this capacity to be storytellers. We entertain our friends with stories of the last holiday, the weekend party, the year nine’s latest disaster. There is the equivalent of the Irish *shanachie* lurking in each of us.

What might ‘reading against the grain’ look like in schools?

Within our religious education it will necessarily have a strong biblical basis as we find creative ways of telling the story of Israel, of Jesus and his disciples. Such creative telling will focus on the living people and their experience and their search for finding the meaning of this experience. It requires that teachers are aware that the text is the end product of a long and slow process of reflecting on events. The text frequently comes across as ‘the answer’ and we have to engage imaginatively with it in order to tease out the event and the questions that lie behind it. It is too much to expect young people to be able to identify with a text that is ‘the answer’ when they don’t even know the question. But if we can explore the text in a way that uncovers the questions and life issues that led to it, then our students have a hope of engaging with it.

Don’t tell the students, “the answer is 12”. They need to know the questions and be given a chance to see if the questions relate to their lives and so consider if this answer is important to them. The answer ‘12’ could be the answer to 6 times two, or the square root of 144, or the number of tribes in

Israel, or the number of days left till the VCE exams. If you can find the right questions, there is a hope that students will listen to the answer. Even more important is to provide opportunities for students to articulate their own questions and as teachers then offer guidance and support in their search towards answers.

So far I have made a plea for the biblical basis of teaching within religious education because this approach is a narrative that unfolds with the history of Israel and the early church. But the past two thousand years are also part of the story. Locate Christian faith expressions in creeds or rituals within the evolving story. I have taught a unit I called, "Gladiators, Barbarians and Crusaders" – it was an elective and was very popular. Similarly, I offered a unit called "The revolting church" which looked at the causes and effects of the Reformation. These are fascinating stories with all the ingredients that young people like in their stories: intrigues, plots, villains, heroes, blood thirsty battles, sex – and somehow from this story emerged statements of Christian faith and celebrations of rituals. Of course to teach like this we need the knowledge so that we can make it live. By relating our faith expressions, what we call doctrine, to a context of living people and their questions, we ensure that Christianity retains its narrative nature, rather than reducing it to metaphysics.

Moving beyond the religious education classroom, many schools trace their origins to a religious order and this provides an opportunity to tell a very specific story about a great hero or heroine of faith. Celebrations of the school's origins provide the chance to show the continuation of this story in the living tradition of the school. This is a time when you might bring out the school archives; display photos of the 'then' and the 'now'. These are ways of affirming the historical nature of what students are participating in. It gives them a 'family tree' to which they belong.

I am not a history teacher but I think history is essential if we are to resist the postmodern emphasis on meaning found only in the now of this moment. We all bear the imprint of our past and carry it with a mixture of pride and remorse; the moral person also considers the future, and lives in the present while bearing a sense of responsibility for future consequences. In this way, life is not a series of random events but the unfolding consequences of human decisions and actions. I would like to see history having a high priority in the curriculum and in the teaching of any subject. None of our current learning has suddenly erupted; each subject has its own story of its development. Do students taking computer studies know the story

of the first computer? Have they ever used binary code?

Celebrations of learning and identity

From my experience and observations, schools provide many ways for young people to celebrate who they are, what gifts shape their identity, the people who are part of their lives and key moments in their growth. Schools these days also provide a great breadth of curriculum offering students various fields of learning. Celebrations affirm the present experience, be it the musical or artistic gifts of students, the identity of the school community, or a transition moment as students move beyond the school, or take up leadership roles. Celebrations also create the future. A school may begin with a small music festival with only fifty participants. Years later it has grown to a major event on the school program with hundreds participating in it. These are ways of affirming that an individual's life does have meaning. These events also witness to the value of education, for they celebrate the development and learning that young people have acquired. Where postmodernism doubts even the value of seeking knowledge, schools affirm that this quest is worthy of our best efforts.

Belief in the vitality of goodness

The first sentence of Mark's gospel states, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus ..." (Mark 1:1). I draw your attention to the word 'goodnews'. The news we see on our televisions or reported in our newspapers is rarely 'goodnews'. We are saturated with images of destroyed villages, in Afghanistan and Palestine, of refugees in Italy and Woomera. Our daily intake from the media is primarily 'bad news'. Within this context schools need to actively attend to and promote 'goodnews'. At one of our recent congregation gatherings one of our sisters used the phrase 'the vitality of goodness'. Later I met with her to hear what lay behind this comment. She spoke to me of the power of goodness that she has experienced in her encounters with many people. That goodness actually nourishes her own life, encourages the goodness that lies within her own being, and can even repair hurts. I am reminded of another popular film that expressed this idea, "Pay it forward". Where evil has the motto of 'Pay it back. Take Revenge', goodness has the motto 'Pay it forward'. Give generously.

Acts of human kindness and generosity can be easily overlooked. In some way I rejoice in this. It means we still consider that 'the norm'. It would worry me if the first item of news was: "Today the residents of Raleigh St. baked casseroles to support their neighbour John, whose wife has just gone into hospital". When that type of action becomes

newsworthy, then we are in serious trouble. But right now, particularly for young people, such acts of humanity do need to be noted to counteract the terrible acts of inhumanity they see nightly in their living room. These small but significant acts of goodness that quietly go on in so many ways deserve our attention. At a time when terror and violence seem to have the upper-hand these actions express an irrepressible hope in human life. I know many schools have ways of involving their students with projects that involve helping others. It is important that from time to time the students have a chance to reflect on these experiences and on their learning less they miss the deep goodness that such projects demand.

Teachers – Prophets of hope

About ten years back there was a song by Trish Watts, *Prophets of Hope*. I believe every teacher is a prophet of hope. The very nature of the teaching profession requires that teachers work with the seeds of promise but do not usually see the full flowering of those seeds. You have students in your care for a few years, and with skill, frustration and humour you may see some small signs of progress. You may never know the rich impact you have on a student's life. Through contact with you a student has gone on to be an opera singer, an actor, a doctor, a cabinet maker, a green-peace activist. This is why teachers are prophets of hope. You work with what is, trusting what is still to come. Notice I said you work with what **is**. Hope is not a Pollyanna attitude that denies reality, nor is it wishful thinking. Hope is a verb, acting now in the present so that the future will emerge. Teachers must have this capacity or they would not be drawn to, or be able to stay in their profession. There are other forms of work where we could see more immediate results. If what I suggest is true, then you have in yourselves an enormous resource that the world, and in particular young people, need today. You have and live out the quality of hope.

Conclusion

I began briefly stating the current postmodern context that I described as episodic and therefore quite contradictory to a Christian perspective which is a narrative compassing original being, historical time, and end-time fulfilment. In a world where meaning-making may not even be valued, the scriptures can provide a model for Christian educators in their role of building communities of meaning. I identified the following features in this model:

- ◆ disintegration of past meaning;
- ◆ trust in the new experience;
- ◆ good leadership by individuals within community.

I took up this final point by asking about the type of leadership needed within Catholic Schools if they are to be communities of meaning-making. Here I used a term from feminist biblical scholarship of 'reading against the grain'. Within a society enmeshed in postmodern attitudes Catholic schools cannot go with the grain of society but need to work against the grain.

- ◆ Schools need to be communities where the story keeps being told and where the art of storytelling is valued within all areas of the curriculum so that the present moment is always held by an awareness of the past and the future.
- ◆ Schools need to be communities where there is belief in a search for truth and identity within a community.
- ◆ Schools need to be communities that believe in the vitality of goodness, that speak of this and so nurture goodness within all students and staff.

Finally I spoke of the great resource we have within the school system, namely our teachers who I described as prophets of hope. In a world where meaning is glimpsed only in fragments and the media tends to highlight 'bad news' teachers are exemplars to our young people of the virtue of hope. They are the storytellers, the keepers and shapers of the Dream.

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