Graduation Address
Emeritus Professor Brendan Byrne SJ

20 March 2015
St Michael's Uniting Church, Collins Street, Melbourne

To a Far Country: There and Back

Those of you—family and friends—who have come to support and celebrate the graduates this evening should be very proud of them. In the course of their studies, they’ve courageously journeyed to a foreign land. What do I mean by this? The opening sentence of an English novel written in the middle of the last century has become a kind of axiom. The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley begins: ‘The past is a far country; they do things differently there’. To do a degree in theology involves a journey to the past, to a ‘far country’, where ‘they do things differently’.

That is certainly true of Biblical Studies. It is clearly the case, also, in Church History. Systematic Theology, too, if I’m not mistaken, still requires a considerable exploration of the past, especially the Patristic era when all those credal formulae about the Trinity and the Person of Christ were hammered out. Even Pastoral or Practical Theology, while it might not mean a journey to the past, involves journeys that are, perhaps even more demanding: going beyond personal comfort zones—to the fringes of society, to people in marginal situations of various kinds. If you’ve lived with someone doing CPE, for example, you know what I mean.

But Biblical Studies probably involves taking a journey to the past more expressly than any other area of theology. This evening, with particular reference to the text from St. Paul that we heard earlier, I would like to show why I think that journey is worth taking—and hopefully uncover some of the riches from that far country that are worth bringing home.

When we travel overseas, we can do so at various levels of engagement. If we’re going to a culture very different from our own, we might feel more comfortable on a package tour, with a reliable tour guide who can deal with the locals, iron out any problems that arise, and in general interpret the culture to us. I think you would all agree, though, that it makes a great difference to go to another country armed with some knowledge of the local language. Then we can engage directly with the locals, talk and bargain with them in the markets, perhaps get invited to their homes. That way we experience the culture at first hand, rather than having it explained at one remove.

Applying this image to Scripture, we might say that the commentaries, especially the more popular ones, are a bit like the tour guides who interpret the foreign culture to us and keep us under watchful control. But if we know something of the original languages—Greek or Hebrew as the case may be—we can, as it were, escape the guides and ‘talk to the locals’ at first hand. We can experience the ‘otherness’, ‘the strangeness’ of the culture—and discover how more richly diverse it is than we could ever imagine.

That said, I am well aware that a good number of you graduating this evening have gained your degrees writing in English as a second, perhaps a third or fourth language. To add the biblical languages to that achievement is to ask a very great deal. Nonetheless, I trust that not a few of you, having tasted something of the culture of that ‘far country’, may be inspired to tackle one or more of the biblical languages so that your next visit may be even more engaging.
But what about St. Paul—albeit not everyone’s favorite biblical writer, I know! One of the reasons that we do continue to read Paul—and one of the reasons that his letters found their way into the New Testament—is that he simply couldn’t address any issue, great or small, without relating it to the ‘big picture’, the ‘Great Story’ of salvation that lies behind it all: a Great Story begun in the Old Testament and, for Paul and fellow believers, finding fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who Paul, very attractively describes at one point as ‘the “Yes” to all the promises of God’ (2 Cor 1:20).

The extract from 2 Corinthians 5 printed in our program deals with a serious falling-out in relations between Paul and the community at Corinth. While he has been engaged elsewhere, rival teachers have come from Jerusalem, casting doubt on his credentials and indeed on whether he is in fact a genuine apostle. Has he got letters of recommendation from the leading apostles in Jerusalem? (see 2 Cor 3:1-3). Is his preaching confirmed by spectacular ecstatic experiences and spiritual transports? (see 2 Cor 5:12-13). Paul is in a difficult position. He’s not going to win an argument on those grounds. All he can do, really, is to point out again and again the conformity of his whole life and preaching to the basic Gospel he proclaims, the Gospel of the Crucified Lord. That is why in the passage in question we find him drawing at such theological depth upon the Great Story that lies behind it all.

After many years of engagement with Paul, I really think this passage provides the best summary of the basic Gospel and the ministry flowing from it. I can only, though, touch on a few points—sufficient, I hope, to illustrate what I mean.

Right there at the beginning of v. 14 we run into our first translation challenge: The translation as printed in the program—about which I cannot complain since I supplied it—reads:

14. For the love of Christ urges us on, as we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

‘Urges us on’ translates a Greek verb synechei open to at least three distinct meanings. First, ‘hold together’—as when you’re holding a lot of parcels in your arms and trying to get into your car without dropping any of them. Now the sense of the love of Christ—that is, Christ’s love for us—holding the believing community together in love is attractive and certainly true. But it introduces an idea somewhat foreign to the immediate context. A second meaning would be that of ‘enclose’—as, for example, by a fence or surrounding stockade. Not so attractive and, again, not relevant to the context. The third sense is a bit more subtle and not entirely single in meaning: ‘press in on’, ‘constrain’, or ‘control’ or, as in the translation in the program, ‘urge on’. It could be linked to the other two meanings by the sense that by putting pressure on someone from all sides you compel them to move.

I’ve always been very attracted by the translation in the Jerusalem Bible: ‘For the love of Christ overwhelms us’. Defending that translation at a conference of biblical peers could be a challenge but here tonight, among friends, it might be allowed to pass. Paul, who of course for a time

---

1 As many will recognize, the description of the schema of salvation as ‘the Great Story’ is indebted to the novel by Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo, 1997) p. 229.
persecuted the early believers—persecuted Christ in that sense—has a very strong conviction of Christ’s personal love. As he says in Galatians, ‘I live now by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and delivered himself up for me (2:20). It is easy to understand him saying to fellow believers, ‘The love of Christ overwhelms us’, not in the sense of constraining our freedom but in the sense of setting us free from all less worthy attachments, to be caught up in the rhythm of that utterly unselfish divine love.

Which would be why Paul goes on to say:

15. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them’.

Note: Christ wasn’t raised just for himself. He was raised ‘for them’, that is, for believers, in the sense of drawing them already into the life of the new era that his resurrection has ushered in.

More about that new era shortly. First, a word about Paul’s next comment in v.16: ‘From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh’. ‘Flesh’ (sarx) is a notoriously difficult term to translate. Here is a case where we really have to accept that we are dealing with a different culture in a foreign land. The important thing to grasp, though, is this: while ‘flesh’ can refer to the physical make-up of a person, Paul for the most part uses the term in quite a different way: namely, to designate the old era—its values, criteria, and weaknesses, its dehumanizing alienation from God—the era that is being overtaken and in fact superseded by Christ. As Paul goes on to say: ‘So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (v. 17)’.

That statement, tossed off almost in passing, is really very remarkable when you think about it. Paul considers that what God has brought about in Christ is literally epoch-shattering—nothing less than a re-do of creation. Or, rather than simply a re-do or restoration, God is bringing the original creation, frustrated by human sinfulness, to full effect for the first time. To be ‘in Christ—technical ‘Paul-speak’ for being a believer—is to pass from the old era—the world of the ‘flesh’—into the new creation that has dawned in the resurrection of Christ.

The idea of a coming ‘new creation’ was not unknown in the Jewish religious culture that nurtured Paul. But there the new creation, the transformation of the universe, remained simply a matter of hope. For Paul, however, the new creation has already dawned, even if the old, for the time being is still around. Just as in the original creation the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep (Gen 1:2), so now the same Spirit signals the dawn of the new creation, making its presence known as the felt experience of God’s love (Rom 5:5). The challenge for believers is to live the life of the new creation in the physical conditions of the old—to live, as Paul would say, ‘according to the Spirit’ rather than ‘according to the flesh’. To live according to the flesh is to live for oneself; to live according to the Spirit is to be caught up in the self-sacrificial love of Christ, ‘overwhelmed’, as we might say, by what he has done for us.

So when Paul writes to the Galatians:

27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.
28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
he doesn’t mean that those ethnic, social, and gender differences have been abolished. What he does mean is that in the believing community they shouldn’t count. Criteria and judgements based on them belong to the old era that, in the community at least, has been overtaken by the new creation. The reason that Paul is so angry with the community in Galatia—and Galatians is a passionate and in places angry letter—is that some of the community are being cajoled into going back to the conditions, judgements, and way of life of the old era, whereas their experience of the Spirit should remind them that they are already part of the new (see Gal 3:1-5). I hope you can see what rich reserves of theology emerge as we run past a Pauline phrase such as ‘new creation’: how it conjures up an entire vision of a world made new.

What has brought Paul and all other believers into the aura of the new creation is the costly saving work of Christ. Because there needs to be a reconciliation between the community at Corinth and himself, Paul speaks here of that redemptive work under the rubric of ‘reconciliation’: God’s act of reconciliation in Christ. Just a few words in conclusion about Paul’s distinctive take on this divine act.

In regard to reconciliation we can think of two different scenarios. In the first case, two parties who have been at war or hostile in some other way for a long time eventually decide that enough is enough, and are ready, usually with the aid of a mediator, to make peace. I think that is what occurred, albeit imperfectly, in the Good Friday agreement between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. In the second scenario, one of the hostile parties eventually decides it wants reconciliation while the other remains hostile. The first party then takes the risk of reaching out in the face of the hostility and offering peace—a costly exercise if the offer is rebuffed. President Obama, when he first came to office, offered something akin to this one-sided proposal of reconciliation to countries hostile to the US such as Iran; I think he referred to it as ‘the outstretched hand’. Whatever about that, it is clear that it is this second model of reconciliation that Paul sees operative in the case of God’s outreach to the world in Christ.

18. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19. that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

In this unconditional offer of reconciliation the Son became vulnerable to the hostility of the powers arraigned against God, paying in his human flesh on the cross the cost of that exposure. For Paul and the other early believers—as also for believers of all subsequent generations—the resurrection of Jesus represents the triumph of divine love over the world’s evil and the dawn of the new creation. The summons to reconciliation that Paul and his fellow apostles make as ‘ambassadors of Christ’, is a summons to enter the new creation, to ‘walk in newness of life’, with the ‘newness’ of Christ’s risen life.

Surely Paul has wandered far from the track of seeking to put right his relationship with the community at Corinth. The community has heard the basic Gospel and assented to it long before. Why go over it again? He does so, I believe, because, for him, reconciliation was not a once-off affair. It was something that once embraced, had to be constantly lived out and passed on. Whether he knew of it or not, Paul would have thoroughly approved of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant told by Christ in Matthew 18:23-35. It is in view of this requirement to live out reconciliation that Paul makes his renewed appeal for reconciliation with the members of the community disaffected from him.
Conclusion

Is it worthwhile, then, to make this journey to the past, to Paul’s ‘far country’ where ‘they do things differently’? Having conversed with the locals, is there anything of value to bring back to the folks at home? Can the Great Story to which Paul so constantly appealed reach out across the centuries, catch us up in its vision and its drama, and make them our own? The motif of ‘reconciliation’ is surely one that needs little translation to be applicable in this country today.

Be that as it may, I think that the whole bundle of theological disciplines, the ‘units’ that have formed the content of the awards you graduates are carrying away this evening: all of these—Scripture, Systematic, Church History, Moral, Pastoral—represent ways in which that Great Story can be made to speak meaningfully to our world today. You have journeyed to that ‘far country’ and successfully returned, enriched, I trust, with all you have seen and heard. Congratulations—and as the cabin crew say on landing, ‘We hope you enjoyed your flight and that you will travel again with us soon’.