



AUSTRALIAN SEASONS AND THE LITURGY

It is, unfortunately, an oft neglected principle that the foundation of the Christian spiritual life, from a gospel perspective, resides in a spirit of deep attentiveness. As given dramatic representation in the cure of the blind and the deaf, Jesus opens the eye and the ear of the disciple so that the world might be listened to more keenly, and in turn, that the approach of the Kingdom might be discerned more readily.

If this be true generally, this cure of the heart is given particular focus from the vantage of the cultural context in which the disciple finds themselves. The disciple, with ears and eyes opened by the touch of the Spirit, discerns the footprints of the Kingdom's advance within their particular culture and celebrates such advent.

Key to culture is the experience of landscape and the recognition of how landscape informs consciousness. In Australia particularly the landscape, as an abiding Other in its ancient and rugged beauty, extreme and different, persists in its refusal to be colonized. It calls us into itself and waits to speak its truth to us – a call which indigenous people have long sought to communicate to white latecomers to the land. The landscape is a theatre of activity in which we need to be particularly sensitive. Its murmurs, rhythms, and irruptions are sacramental – if we have but the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

This is not an easy task for white Australians who come from somewhere else, and who, often in consciousness, remain somewhere else. In our disappointment, or frustration, with the land for its failure to be 'European' we most often remain blind and deaf to what is actually taking place. We fail to see and hear what and how the landscape is, itself, celebrating.

This has implications for our liturgy. Despite the potential richness in acknowledging the powerful resonances, we can celebrate our Christian liturgy as if this prior, natural 'liturgy' was not even occurring. Small wonder, then, that our own Christian liturgy can be experienced in its practice as disconnected and, at worse, alien.

However, the imperative of spirituality to depth our skill of attentiveness, to become those who listen more sensitively to what is taking place around us, ought to develop a sensibility in liturgy that takes the correlation between the community's prayer and the experience of landscape seriously, and which seeks authentic means by which the correlation can be integrated into the language, gesture and symbol of prayer together.

The experience of seasonal patterns within the landscape is a case in point. The demarcation of seasonal patterns in Australia into the traditional four is one of the primary illustrations of our failure in cultural sensitivity. The Australian landscape does not admit of European seasonal categories. The seasonal pattern of course varies throughout Australia, but our seasonal rhythms and transitions are quite unlike that of Europe. In an earlier article, "Fire and Water" (Compass 26[1992]) I outlined a possible understanding of these seasonal changes for south east Australia. The actual designation has limited application for a country

which is as vast as Australia but yet I believe the underlying principles remain both valid and useful.

Key to these observations is the acknowledgement of the interplay between the three primary natural Australian symbols (light, fire and water) and the paschal mystery that the Christian liturgy celebrates.

In the Australian experience light has a particular intensity. From being an instrument of clarity to becoming an agent of bleaching, the Australian light both invites life and growth and shrivels it as its intensity grows. For a significant part of Australia this possibility and threat of light is experienced in the last quarter of the year and culminates in the celebration of Advent in which we await the light of Christ, journey into that light, and are enlightened by its mystery but also exposed by it.

This season of light, in different ways, gives over to a season of fire. When the light has become most intense, and has begun to shrivel the landscape, fire becomes endowed with a symbolism of destruction and purification. In this we witness the peculiar natural manifestation of the paschal mystery on this continent. Death occurs, certainly not through cold and ice, but through aridity and firescape. Life is experienced as occurring through rejuvenation of the landscape, its deliverance from being so parched in drought or charred through bushfire. The colour of life is green against the backdrop of a bleached or charred earth and the experience is one of restored equilibrium.

In this third main season, fire is no longer a symbol of destruction as it is of warmth and sustenance. Water, too, takes on a different symbolism. From being the symbol of relief and reassurance against the impending death of drought and the intensity of heat, or as a symbol of luxuriant growth in northern Australia, it becomes, itself, a symbol of destruction through flood or creeping dampness.

Precisely at that time of the year when these two realities of fire and water change in their natural symbolism, we conjoin them ourselves as Christian disciples proclaiming Christ risen in the Paschal liturgy. We are doing in our Christian liturgy precisely what the 'liturgy' of the landscape is doing. Is it not strange that in most ways we have yet to become aware of this?

So often it is lamented that in Australia we do not celebrate Easter in 'spring' and therefore its celebration seems out of place. But such a sentiment is evidence of the spiritual failure alluded to in the beginning. The Australian landscape, especially once exotic species have been taken from the horizon, does not know spring in any European sense. Given what is taking place in the natural transition of seasons, Easter could be celebrated at no more appropriate time for us in this place than when it is around April.

Creating bridges between the 'natural liturgy' and Christian ritual remains a challenge for us here in Australia. Facile transpositions must be avoided. Otherwise we descend into liturgical gimmicks that trivialize what we are doing. Notwithstanding, in language, colour and symbol we must continue to develop those bridges. Then our liturgy becomes in every sense an articulation and celebration of the Paschal Mystery at the heart of all creation.

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