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PITT STREET UNITING CHURCH
LAUNCH OF EQUAL VOICES

MONDAY, 3 APRIL 2017

EQUALITY AND DIGNITY

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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CLEARING THE MIND

Once again I express thanks to the Minister and congregation of this beautiful church for opening its doors for this evening's spiritual purpose.

I thank the Reverend Dr Margaret Mayman, the Minister, for her acknowledgment of country. She has come to us from New Zealand, where the honour to the Mauri people is older and tends to be less formal. The Mauri stood up for themselves earlier and gained a treaty. There may be a lesson in that for us here.

I honour the Reverend Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon, past Minister and other past ministers of this church and other Christian churches. We come for backgrounds in different religions, denominations and traditions. But we would not be here if we did not share a common sense of purpose to advance the unity of this spiritual reflection on the place of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, intersex and otherwise queer human beings who are searching for acceptance and acknowledgment amongst the people of God.

On such an occasion, remembering the things that have divided us, it is specially important to clear our minds of the pride that is an obstacle to making true progress tonight:

- * Pride of different religions;
- * The pride of different denominations;
- * The pride of the religious against the non-religious;
- * The pride of those who should have the entire truth within them.

My partner Johan van Vloten is not with me tonight. He declines to attend any religious occasion. He tells me:

“Don’t expect me to turn up at your state funeral if it has religion in it. They are such cruel people. And I cannot understand how you take any of it or them seriously”.

In a few weeks we will be going to help celebrate the international day of all forms of homophobia and transphobia in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. The event has been inaugurated by the Council of that city. We accepted the invitation because, at the time we met in Kings Cross in 1969, Johan’s home was in Lawson, an adjoining suburb.

“You could tell them what it was like back in 1968. You could tell them whether you felt oppressed by the laws and attitudes of that time.” I say.

“I did not feel oppressed”, Johan declares.

“But that is only because I went along with the rule of silence and deception. It was imposed on us. There are some who wish we could go back to those days. A few are in positions of power and influence. Most of them are religious. So I don’t understand why you have anything to do with them”.

Going through this oft repeated conversation gets me thinking about my own journey to this church tonight. And why I have come. Indeed, why we have all come.

I grew up in the Church of England. I derived my religion, as most people do, from their parents. Because it is a link with their parents, it is something close and personal, especially when other links have been severed by death or distance.

I attended St. Andrew’s Church at Strathfield. It was a church of the Sydney Diocese, simple and plain, without undue ceremony. No bells or smells. Jesus of the manger. Of the donkey. Of the cross. The biggest denomination in those days just after the War. A good place to be. Now I know that the Anglican Church in Sydney is often hostile to gays. Astonishingly it is not all that friendly to women. It opposes them for bishops and for priests. It suggests that, in marriage, women should agree to “submit” to their husband. That is certainly not the kind of relationship that I could ever have with Johan. Fat chance of him submitting to my benign rule.

Yet in my growing up, I never once heard our minister refer to the LGBTIQ issue. On the other hand, I do remember he invited Pastor Martin Nielmöller, a hero of the Lutheran Church in the face of the Nazis.

He addressed our congregation. He is the one who urged Christian people always to speak up and act up in favour of what is right.

Sadly, today, I know from my travels that the Anglican Church does not always follow this message. Some of their dioceses are making progress. But in Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi, Cameroon, Jamaica and Trinidad it is dangerous to be gay and even in Sydney, it is not a welcome truth.

Realising this, when I was younger, I shed many a tear in the silence of my bedroom as I reflected on my sexuality. I did not really feel guilty about it. I read widely and knew about the science, thanks to Dr Kinsey's research. My feeling was mainly one of puzzlement. How could the church of Jesus Christ possibly be hostile to a small group for something they had not chosen and could not change? When I worked this out, I felt a whole lot better with myself. But it is not everyone who is supported to make that journey in their minds. For many, the challenge and the crisis last lifelong. The antipathy of parents, families, churches and community are profoundly stressful. Some, who find themselves in this situation escape by throwing their religion away. Others cannot do that. Not a few of them are forced by intolerable pain to harm and even kill themselves to find relief from the stress that religion, law and culture put upon them.

When HIV and AIDS came along, Johan and I rolled our sleeves up and tried to do something about this great wrong. Johan became an Advocate. He helped and supported people living with HIV. His first client, who was late in getting on to antiretroviral treatment died. At his funeral, in a church, there were prayers from his family who had in truth abandoned

him. There was no mention of the Ankali's who had been his true friend in need. That merely reinforced Johan's view about religion.

I got involved in the global effort of the United Nations to secure the treatment for millions and to persuade countries to reform their laws and to stop the impediments to access for all. The struggle towards that objective continues to this day. Inequality and stigma exist in Australia. But in many parts of the world it is a scourge all too often sustained by people who call themselves religious.

EQUAL VOICES APOLOGY

So this of course, most religious people in this world are not deliberately cruel or unkind. Many have been misled. Many have sought after simple solutions to life's unavoidable complexities. Many embrace literalism in reading the relatively few scriptural texts that are used to hound a people into despair. They are selective in their literalism it would be a sad predicament if it were not so brutal and destructive in its consequences.

Fortunately, like shining lights, there are religious leaders who show the true path to the core of their religions. Bishop Tutu could no sooner believe in hatred of gays than he could of privilege for whites. It is fundamentally incompatible with the core of his religious belief.

But should an apology be extracted for all the tears and pain and cruelty of the past? Would it not be enough to let the past rest and be forgotten? Let bygones be bygones?

In another area of great injustice, Australia's treatment of its indigenous peoples, Kevin Rudd felt that an essential step to move forward was to offer a formal apology. One can see in its cadences the influence of Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd imbibed at church each Sunday. The beauty and grace of the language, its brevity and verbal power, gathered up widespread support.

I do not feel myself that an apology to gay people is a precondition to making progress on that front. Intruding into the inner sanctum of the spiritual life of any individual is often dangerous and sometimes oppressive in itself.

The apology prepared by Equal Voices substitutes for the music of Cranmer the congregational compromises of earnest and prayerful reformers. But like Mr Rudd's apology to the indigenous people, it offers words of reflection. It collects the wrongs of the past. By naming them it is hoped to put them to flight.

To be a member of Equal Voices, it is not essential to subscribe to the apology to those who never thought ill of those who are LGBTIQ themselves, there may be no need. For those who never thought ill of them, there may be no occasion. For those who accepted past church teaching who have moved on, the movement itself is an apology. As it is the act of coming to an event like this.

So here we are once again, in this beautiful city church, long now a welcoming space for LGBTIQ Australians, their families and friends. The wrongs of the past and of the present are many and burdensome. We are few. But sometimes individuals and small collections of sincere

people can change a world in spiritual directions. In October, the world will remember the 500th anniversary of the action of Martin Luther in mailing his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg. From that gesture a great change emerged that cannot be expected that our gestures will have the same consequences. We would not want the bloodshed, zealotry or mindless conflict to ensue.

Simply, the quiet reflection on the emphasis due to the gestures that bind human beings together and the acknowledgement for the need to change when spiritual change when love for God and love for one another takes us to a higher understanding. By listening to the different voices we will enrich ourselves that bring us all closer to one another and an understanding of the meaning of the mystery of existence.

Hatred has no future. Exclusion is no longer legitimate. Religion is reconciled with love. Kindness prevails. Love secures its dominion.