



WELCOMING THE
outsider

Homilies for the year of Luke

GEOFFREY PLANT

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*In memory of my parents,
Frank and Ruby,
whose lives were the finest homily.*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of homilies for Year C of the liturgical cycle, the year of St Luke. I have called it *Welcoming the outsider*, thereby sounding a note that resonates throughout Luke's gospel, and which is particularly evident in the stories unique to Luke. In Luke's infancy narrative, which functions as an overture to the gospel, the good news about the birth of Jesus is first announced to shepherds – people regarded as outsiders because they were unable to observe the full rigors of the Jewish Law (homily for the feast of the Epiphany). At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus returned to Nazareth and preached in the local synagogue. What an uproar he caused by reminding the locals of God's graciousness to two outsiders – Naaman the Syrian and a widow living in the town of Zarephath (fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time). And when asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' Jesus tells a story in which the hero is an outsider, a despised Samaritan (homily for the fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time). Luke alone tells the story of another Samaritan, one of ten lepers healed by Jesus, but the only one who returns to give thanks. The story that we know as the Prodigal Son is about two brothers who are both outside (though in different ways), and a father who goes outside to meet them (homily for the fourth Sunday of Lent). One of the criticisms constantly levelled against Jesus by the Pharisees was that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. Anthropologists point out that you can learn a great deal about a society by looking closely at who eats together. They argue that the dining table is a miniature of society at large. In choosing to eat with 'outsiders' Jesus confronts us with a powerful parable of the kingdom, not in words but in action (homily for the twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time). In Luke's gospel, the final words that Jesus spoke from the cross to another human being were addressed to an outsider: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' Jesus died as he had lived, welcoming the outsider (homily for the feast of Christ the King).

A homily attempts to build a bridge between the word of God and the congregation for whom it is preached. This involves exegesis, a term that means 'to thrash or lead out.' Since there is no text without context, the homilist seeks first to thrash out the meaning of the text for those who first heard it. The

second step is hermeneutics, a word related to the name Hermes, messenger and spokesman of the gods in Greek mythology. What message does this passage of scripture have for a congregation over two thousand years later? At the end of the Scripture readings at Mass the lector says: 'This is the Word of the Lord', and the congregation responds: 'Thanks be to God.' But we must keep in mind that this timeless Word of God is expressed in human words, in first century words and images. Like all words, they are limited by the age that produced them. Each subsequent generation of believers, and each culture, must journey beyond those first century words and images and allow the eternal Word of God to become incarnate in their own language and culture.

An earlier version of these homilies appeared in the *Australian Catholic Record*, and I am grateful to Fr Gerard Kelly for permission to reproduce them here. I would also like to express my gratitude to the parishioners of St Luke's Parish, Revesby, for their support and encouragement over the past nine years. I am a priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney, and that is reflected in many of these homilies. Those of you using this book as a resource for your own preaching will have to be creative in substituting local examples if I have been too parochial. In one homily, for example, I used a story that reflects the traditional animosity between two teams in the Australian Rugby League competition. But such animosity exists between teams in all sporting competitions, so nothing is lost by changing the names to reflect local prejudices. The homily for the Seventh Sunday of Easter refers to examples of religious intolerance in Sydney, but I'm sure this city doesn't hold a franchise on bigotry. Once again, preachers will have to substitute local examples if the homily is to ring true.

Creative homilists are literary scavengers, seeking an interesting story, an amusing anecdote, a deft phrase or an offbeat insight that can be dragooned into the service of the gospel. There is little originality in these homilies and I am ever conscious of the observation made by Bernard of Chartres (1080-1130), and recorded in John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon*: '*Nos esse quasi nanos, gigantium humeris incidentis,*' we are dwarfs, but we stand on the shoulders of giants.¹ So, let me acknowledge some of the shoulders I have stood upon. I have made good use of the *Sacra Pagina* and *Anchor Bible* commentaries on the New Testament, and I highly recommend Fr Brendan Byrne's study of Luke's gospel, *The Hospitality of God*. I still draw inspiration from William Barclay's *New*

¹ As quoted by John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, IVc, PL CXCIX, p.900.

Testament commentaries, and more recently from those by Bishop Tom Wright. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to the many books by Fr William Bausch, particularly *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. Fr Anthony de Mello's collections of stories are always close at hand, and Fr Ronald Rolheiser, the Reverend Alan Jones and Thomas Merton are constant companions on my own spiritual journey.

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Sample

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

(Y E A R C)

*And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power
and great glory. (Lk 21:27)*

January, the first month in our calendar, is named after the Roman god Janus, a name that derives from the Latin word for doorway. The month of January is therefore a doorway to the New Year. The god Janus was often represented with a double-faced head – one face turned backwards to the past; the other face towards the future. At the beginning of a new year we often look back over the past, and then look ahead to make resolutions for the future.

Advent is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year, and the Scripture readings for this season are also double-faced – looking backwards and forwards. We look backwards to Bethlehem, celebrating the birth of our Saviour, but the Advent readings also invite us to look forward, to the final coming of Christ in glory. Today's gospel directs our attention ahead – to the Son of Man who is coming at an hour we do not expect. The language describing this coming is dramatic. It is a good example of what is called apocalyptic writing. Apocalyptic is a Greek word meaning to reveal, or literally, to remove the veil or curtain. The future is hidden from our eyes, as if by a veil or a curtain. We may have a fairly good idea of what the rest of the day holds for us, but then again we may be in for a surprise. I suspect that most of us don't really want to peep through the curtain, to know what the future holds in store for us, at least not in precise detail. However, we might be consoled to know that in the end, all will be well. Apocalyptic writing is invariably addressed to communities who are being oppressed and it brings a message of hope. It doesn't attempt to predict the future in minute detail, but it does bring an assurance that all will be well.

Apocalyptic writing has its own stock of symbols and images, and today's gospel offers us a typical example: signs in the sun and moon and stars; nations in agony; the clamour of the ocean and its waves; and men dying of fear. Such images or picture language, even if they are not to be taken literally, capture the mood of gloom and foreboding felt by a community facing persecution. But they

are not to fear, for the Lord is coming; liberation is near at hand.

As we begin this holy season of Advent we are confronted with an apocalyptic vision of the Son of Man coming in a cloud and great glory. It seems unnecessary to warn us to stay awake when confronted by such terrifying signs announcing his arrival. But will the Lord arrive in such a dramatic fashion?

I've always been fascinated by an amphitheatre that was built overlooking Sydney's Balmoral Beach. In early 1923 a woman by the name of Mary Eleanor Rocke began to purchase land at the northern end of Edwards Bay in Balmoral with the intention of building an amphitheatre on behalf of an organisation called the Order of the Star in the East. The amphitheatre was designed to face North Head and Middle Head, so it was ideally located to view the entrance to Sydney Harbour. The foundation stone was laid on July 28, 1923, and the amphitheatre was completed just over a year later. It towered over twenty metres above the beach and could accommodate more than three thousand people. It cost something in the vicinity of £20 000 to complete.²

And why did these people build such an elaborate structure looking out towards the entrance to Sydney harbour? The Order of the Star had as its sole purpose the preparation of the way for an expected World Teacher, or Messiah. They put it this way: 'We believe that a Great Teacher will soon appear in the world, and we wish so to live now that we may be worthy to know Him when He comes.'

It's hard to know whether the Order of the Star actually believed that their Great Teacher would come to Sydney, walking on the water through Sydney Heads. But that was the story that quickly spread about the amphitheatre. People generally believed that members of the Order of the Star had built the amphitheatre so that they would have box seats for the Second Coming. Alas, the Great Teacher failed to arrive and the amphitheatre was finally demolished in 1950. A block of flats now stands on the site. Throughout Christian history there has been no shortage of people who have predicted the time and the place of Christ's coming. We, too, are people waiting for the coming of Christ, but the gospel warns us that the Son of Man is coming

² For more information on the amphitheatre see P.R. Stephensen, *The History and Description of Sydney Harbour*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1966, p.389; Jill Roe, 'Three visions of Sydney Heads from Balmoral Beach', in Jill Roe (ed) *Twentieth Century Sydney*, Hale and Iremonger in association with The Sydney History Group, Sydney, 1980, pp. 89-104; 'Balmoral Amphitheatre', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (January 15, 1937), 4; Keith Newman, 'Amphitheatre To Become Flats', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (April 16, 1950), 2. For photographs of the amphitheatre, see <http://image.sl.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/ebindshowpl?doc=pxa215/a971;thumbs=1>

at an hour we do not expect. The Lord seldom enters our lives in a blaze of glory. More often than not, he speaks to us in and through the tedium of daily life, and so we must remain attentive to the present moment.

The Zen tradition tells of a man fleeing a ferocious tiger. The animal steadily gains ground and the hapless victim can run no further, for he has come to the edge of a cliff. If he stands his ground, the tiger will devour him. To leap from this height means certain death on the rocks below. In desperation he scrambles over the edge of the cliff, clutching a vine sprouting from a crevice in the rock face. But the fragile vine cannot bear his weight and will surely break. He must choose — death from the tiger above or the rocks below. But just at that moment he catches sight of a cluster of wild strawberries growing on a nearby ledge. Reaching out he plucks one and eats it with great delight. Ahh!

And? What happened next? Well, that's not the right question to ask. It is easy to be so obsessed with the tiger above or the rocks below that we fail to savour the strawberry of the moment. We're so often elsewhere rather than here, in the present moment. We're inattentive to what is right before our eyes. Consider the parable of the presbytery garden. When I arrived at my present parish I planted roses and gerberas, two of my favourite flowers, in the small garden bed in front of the presbytery. A friend who is a passionate advocate of native Australian plants keeps reminding me that much of the flora brought to Australia by European settlers (including my roses) is not suitable for our harsh and dry climate. It's taken us a long time to appreciate the beauty of Australian native species, and to acknowledge the reality of our dry climate. I've now started planting Grevilleas, and they are thriving, despite the dry soil and lack of rain. Be attentive to where you are!

Jesus criticised his contemporaries for not reading the 'signs of the times.' They looked to the sky and forecast the weather, but they were oblivious to the signs of God's presence in their midst. That can happen when we look in the wrong place, or fail to see what is right before our eyes. The Lord does not come into our lives in a blaze of glory, walking upon the water through Sydney Heads. More often than not, he comes to us, unannounced, unheralded and unexpected, amidst the ordinary tedium of our daily lives.