

**Sermon preached by Father Michael Lapsley, SSM
for the 175th Anniversary of John Keble's Assize Sermon
Christ Church South Yarra, Melbourne, Australia
18 July 2008**

Tonight we give thanks to God for John Keble, and for all the leaders of the Oxford Movement.

This month we celebrate the 175th anniversary of John Keble's Assize sermon – the opening shot of what came to be known as the Oxford Movement and led to the catholic revival in the Church of England – the Established church of England.

Today we are part of an Anglican Communion pulling itself apart over issues of human sexuality – where schism is threatened – concerning openly same-gender loving persons in the episcopate and now, in the Church of England, over women as bishops.

Our church is hurting. It is a painful moment to be an Anglican.

Many would say that gender and sexuality are the presenting issues in the church while the core issues in the conflict are about the interpretation of scripture and about power. Our calling to preach good news to the poor, to set the captives free, has been sidetracked.

We meet in the year that the Prime Minister of Australia said sorry to the ancient people of this sacred land for immense pain caused since the beginning of colonisation and especially to the stolen generations.

On the way to Australia for World Youth Day, the Holy Father indicated that he would say “sorry” on this soil, for inexcusable clergy abuse, guilt, and shame which we share and need to acknowledge has also disfigured our church and created many victims.

In God's world, the poor are being squeezed like never before through the combination of escalating food prices and the cost of fuel – while the divisions between the haves and have-nots become greater. We live on a planet where climate change has begun to impact on all of us; a world where poverty, war and the AIDS pandemic continues its ravages.

What is God's dream for the whole created order? What is God's dream for us all made in God's image and likeness? What is God's dream for the Anglican Communion – part of the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church?

Is our God too small? Does the Holy Spirit of God continue to lead us into all truth?

What brought you here tonight? What does the Keble Mass mean to you? Perhaps more importantly, what does it mean to be a catholic Anglican?

I have been thinking and praying about what I might preach tonight ever since Archdeacon Alison Taylor first wrote inviting me to be here, many months ago.

As I criss-cross the world, sadly with a strong carbon footprint and permanent jet lag, I have been reading both the *Oxford Apostles* and Georgina Battiscombe's life of Keble – *John Keble, a study in limitations*. I have to confess that at one point I was forced to put down *Oxford Apostles* in favour of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*.

As a 21st century Christian it is not easy to enter fully into the world of Oxford in the early 19th century – even then, a rarefied atmosphere remote from the lives of most British people – and even more remote from the lives of the good citizens of Melbourne (which was yet to be settled by Europeans two year's after Keble's Assize Sermon). At the same time, we know that some of the ecclesiastical battles and fault lines within the Diocese of Melbourne today originate in 19th century England.

Nevertheless I know that the implications of the Oxford movement shaped and formed my own life in very profound ways for which I am deeply thankful. This is also true of the Anglican Communion as a whole. To take but one dramatic example, the Eucharist has become the normal Sunday service for most Anglicans throughout most of the Anglican Communion.

As a child growing up in New Zealand, the Eucharist was the main service. Sacramental worship was the normal diet that nourished us from birth. I learnt in Confirmation class that there are seven sacraments. I was told in relation to the sacrament of penance that “all may, some should and none must.” Good advice. And so I became a regular penitent. During Lent I was exposed to Compline and began to learn about the seven-fold monastic office that preceded Morning and Evening Prayer.

Without the Oxford movement the religious orders would not have come back into our church, having been dissolved three centuries previously. Thus perhaps, ever so slightly and precociously, I wrote to the Provincial of the Society of the Sacred Mission in Australia in 1962. He replied that, as I was only 13, I need not worry too much about training at that stage!

I have to confess, that when I arrived in Australia in January of 1967, I had only heard of one church, Christ Church St Laurence, in Sydney. It was some time later that I came to appreciate the parallels of grand opera, ballet and catholic worship!

I had come to Australia to begin my training as a priest and to test my vocation to the religious life within the Society of the Sacred Mission. In class-ridden English society it was SSM that had provided the opportunity for working boys and men to become priests while sharing the life and being formed by a religious community.

Part of SSM's unique contribution was the way it taught us all to think theologically – to seek diligently and to behold reverently. Both catholic and evangelical wings within our church have often eschewed the use of our critical faculties. We learned the equal dignity of manual and intellectual work. Together we sought to do theology.

It was at St Michael's House, the SSM seminary in Adelaide, during the war in Vietnam, that I discovered the relationship between faith and justice. Our provincial, Fr Dunstan McKee, became a leader of the campaign for peace in Vietnam. There were people who wrote immediately to withdraw their financial support of SSM.

Although we were a multiracial community at St Michael's House, we had no contact with Aboriginal people – indeed it would be fair to say that racist and disparaging comments about the ancient people of this sacred land were generally thought to be quite acceptable.

John Keble's biographer describes him as a study in limitations. We as catholic Anglicans had our limitations and, I guess, we still do. But then again I sometimes wonder what future generations will say about *our* limitations, *our* blindness.

It seems that the first generation of the Oxford Movement with their own preoccupations had little appreciation of, or concern for, the historic injustices done to Roman Catholics in England or to members of other Christian bodies, let alone the social injustices of their days. Not so much later, a generation of catholic Anglicans became deeply committed to work among the poorest in the slums of London in churches such as St Peter's London Docks

Personal holiness and lifetimes of faithful pastoral care were hallmarks of the catholic revival across the generations. John Keble's decades of faithful ministry as a parish priest along with his collection of poems and devotions *The Christian Year* are sources of inspiration today as they have been for previous generations.

I would like to focus now on my experience in Southern Africa where I have been living for the last 35 years. The Anglican Church in Southern Africa has been characterised by a strong catholic tradition. Many of the religious orders from England found a home and worked faithfully for many decades throughout Southern Africa, in education, health care, theological training, and pastoral care. Generations of African leaders were formed through Church institutions of many churches including our own.

Sadly, most of the orders failed to indigenise effectively and are disappearing one by one. Sometimes it seemed more important to know how to use the butter knife correctly than to understand the ecumenical councils. This in no way detracts from the extraordinary contribution which they have made. Although we are still a delicate flower, all but two of our thirteen members in the Southern African Province of the Society of the Sacred Mission, are African. By God's grace we will continue to grow and flourish.

The Community of the Holy Name in Zululand, to mention one of the women's communities, has successfully indigenised and has a steady stream of vocations.

Racism and apartheid was the "elephant in the room" for all of us in Southern Africa. We were all infected and affected within the church and within the religious orders. In some situations it was possible to speak about the "elephant in the room", in some it was not. The church spoke against apartheid more and more loudly. We passed beautiful resolutions. Our orthodoxy was more often beyond reproach than was our orthopraxis. We had our heroes, who were also vilified not only by the apartheid state but also by some of their fellow Anglicans

Allow me to speak briefly of three Anglicans – two who are already among the communion of the saints and one who is a living ancestor – all steeped in the catholic tradition of our church. They were all signs of hope and have been a great source of inspiration to me personally.

Oliver Tambo – was a spiritual giant – once an ordinand of the Diocese of Johannesburg – he went on to become President General of the African National Congress – he remained unashamedly an Anglican formed in the catholic tradition – who because of the depth of his spirituality was able to unite a whole nation, including people of other living faiths and traditions, behind him. And not only a nation, but a broad cross section of humanity united in the cause of freedom for the people of South Africa. His humility, commitment, and willingness to sacrifice himself was awe inspiring and made many of us willing to lay down our own lives.

Trevor Huddleston of the Community of the Resurrection – one time Archbishop of the Indian Ocean (only Anglicans would manage to create a title like that!) – the man who opposed apartheid in South Africa firstly as a parish priest, became president of the British anti-apartheid movement – a leader in the worldwide struggle against racism, was committed to interfaith dialogue, decades before it became a buzzword. In a truly Biblical way Father Huddleston lived out the unity of catholic worship and the struggle for justice.

Desmond Tutu – no one who has ever met him will doubt for a second his authentic spirituality and commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ – brought up in the catholic tradition. He continues to be a giant on the world stage – a champion of the rights of black people. Under his pastoral leadership our province decided to ordain women, without splitting the church. He has been forthright in his apology to same-gender loving persons for the pain we in the church have caused.

Participation in the struggle to free South Africa was the context in which I have sought to live out my own discipleship as a Christian, as a religious, as a priest of the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, but above all as a human being.

Some of you will have heard me speak a number of times about how I experienced the presence of God with me when I was bombed, fulfilling to me the promise of scripture, “Lo I am with you till the end of the age.” I also felt that Mary the mother of Jesus understood what it was that I was suffering. God accompanied me on my journey of healing through the prayers and love of beautiful human beings from all over the world.

Today God has called me to a worldwide ministry accompanying hurting people on their journey towards healing. I believe that God created one human family and that God is the mother and father of us all, and that all of us – *all of us* – are first class citizens.

In God’s dream we are all one – living together in harmony with all the riches of our diversity – as the disciples of Christ we are invited to be Christ’s co-workers in building God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

The Oxford Movement brought to the fore the sacrament of reconciliation.

What would it mean for us as catholic Anglicans to be reconcilers?

At this critical moment in the history of the Anglican Communion are we willing to listen to one another’s pain; to share in the pain of God by becoming ourselves, wounded healers?

As Keble continues to teach us as he once did to a whole generation:

New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought.

New mercies, each returning day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice.

Old friends, old scenes, will lovelier be,
as more of heaven in each we see;
some softening gleam of love and prayer
shall dawn on every cross and care.

The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we ought to ask:
room to deny ourselves; a road
to bring us daily nearer God.

Only, O Lord, in thy dear love,
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray.

(John Keble, from his poem “Hues of the Rich Unfolding Morn” in *The Christian Year*, 1827)