

Mystics, Theologians and God-botherers - Sunday 7 April 2019

St John's Anglican Cathedral: Richard Rohr

About a decade ago, the late Episcopalian bishop of Jerusalem, Mark Dyer, famously observed that about every 500 years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. In 500AD, it was St Benedict and the formation of monastic communities and the first great mission of the church beyond Rome. 500 years later, it was the mighty schism between the eastern and the western church. In the 1500s, it was the protestant Reformation. Dyer believed we are now living in and through another of those 500-year sales. In her book *The Great Emergence*, author Phyllis Tickle borrowed Dyer's phrase and explored the question at the centre of this current rummage sale. She observed that "Each time of re-formation has the same central question: Where, now, is the authority?"

This question is growing louder - and more urgently cosmic in nature. The relationship between science, faith and the ecosystem is now the central defining issue facing humanity and all biological life.

What it means to be human, what do we mean when we talk of sin and salvation and how do we understand its reach and impact, what is the role of faith in shaping culture and the relationship of Christianity to other faiths, what is sexuality and its connection to identity, how community is formed, these are not merely questions of faith. These questions are at the heart of civilisation.

Our political misadventures - and the role of journalists that comment on them - amplify Tickle's cardinal question. In the public sphere as much as our private lives, where is the authority? In short, where are the prophets?

Society has done our work for us. It has sifted through our house and marked those items that don't belong. Only when the house is decluttered do we start to see the precious furnishings draped in beauty before us. This great disruption is our great invitation, but without a clarion voice, we do not know how to discern the treasure we steward or have the authority to speak for it.

104 years ago in France, a child was born of New Zealand and American parentage. His international heritage is no doubt one reason his voice was such a clarion call to the Western church. That child, Thomas Merton, went on to become a Trappist monk and author. His life ended abruptly at the age of 53, his work barely begun.

Last December, Richard Rohr gave the keynote address at the Catholic Theological Union conference in Chicago, marking the 50th anniversary of the death of Merton. Richard considers Merton a true prophet, saying that "this man, like almost no one else in our time, put together the mystical depths and the political implications of the Christian message. He did it in a way that confirmed for many of us a kind of "deep Christianity."

Richard believes that Merton "almost single-handedly" called the Western Church to recover the contemplative tradition that had been maintained in the Eastern churches and in other religions of the world. Richard is committed to the perennial tradition - truth embedded in all faiths - as well as the discipline of being committed to the faith of our heritage. This is a tradition that is grounded in the mystics, those that spoke of encounter from a place beyond mere doctrine, a place of inclusion, not endlessly marking the boundaries.

But many clergy did not embrace contemplation, Richard said, because it threatened their "job security" and monasteries demanded celibacy and solitude, making contemplation inaccessible to 99 percent of people. He tells of Merton blasting a group of monks for not being contemplatives but merely introverts pretending to be spiritual while avoiding reality.

Richard once shared that, as an adolescent, he saw Merton with Mother Theresa in 1961 at the Abbey of Gethsemani, where Merton was the Abbot. It left an indelible mark on the young Franciscan. Of the encounter, he said “I kid you not, action and contemplation walked right in front of me!” Almost 60 years and over 30 books later, Richard has made his life’s work a continuation of what Merton started. However, he had no delusions about his ability to achieve this goal. In the opening pages of an early book, *Everything Belongs*, Richard wrote

“How do you make attractive that which is not?

How do you sell emptiness, vulnerability, and non-success?

How do you talk descent when everything is about ascent?

How can you possibly market letting-go in a capitalist culture?

How do you present Jesus to a Promethean mind?

How do you talk about dying to a church trying to appear perfect?

This is not going to work.

(admitting this might be my first step).

This honest admission has beautiful synergy with Paul’s disturbing declaration from today’s New Testament reading in Philippians 3, most especially the words from verse 10 “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” - so far, so good - “and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” This second part is indeed a mystery.

When everything in our society is about ascent, Lent is a difficult message to carry, when it necessarily includes sharing in Christ’s sufferings. Richard, having faced both a heart attack and the return of now incurable cancer in the past year, is embodying the inevitable ignominy of his own body, but far more difficult has been the constant criticism of his message of grace from within the church.

As we approach the inevitable exhaustion of capitalism, a steadily growing stream of pilgrims is finding comfort in Richard's words, carried as a legacy of Merton's, and Paul's paradoxical pursuit. Perhaps the courage of the early monks of 1500 years ago that eventually led to the first monastic communities are being echoed in our own time, as some flee the mindset of empire religion.

Perhaps then it is no surprise that some 20 years after he wrote *Everything Belongs*, Richard possesses that most absurd of qualities that society values - fame. Bono, Oprah, Melinda Gates, such a strange audience for an elderly, diminutive, unassuming Franciscan priest from the New Mexico province, whose home is a small hermitage and whose earthly possessions are very few. Richard is bewildered by this fame, for he knows it is meaningless. He once said it is willingness to live with bewilderment that characterises the true wise person. Richard's particular attraction is his ability to curate ancient and often arcane spiritual wisdom in an accessible form.

Richard is convinced that it is through the unavoidable and normal transformative journeys of universal love and necessary suffering - the two things that Paul mentioned in the passage from Philippians - that we come to know the endless outpouring and self-emptying nature of Reality - what St Paul called the Christ. Richard said:

“We must learn to be able to think and behave like Jesus, who is the archetypal human being. This becomes a journey of great love and great suffering. *These are the two normal and primary paths of transformation into God, preceding all organized religion.* This journey leads us to a universal love where we don't love just those who love us. We must learn to participate in a larger love—divine love.”

For Richard, this is the prophetic role of the church and the authoritative voice we are invited to reclaim.

Richard is particularly interested in the cosmic nature of faith - not as some oddity that crusty relics desperately cling to in an age of science and pluralism - but that, properly understood, ancient frameworks of spirituality - most especially Christian, seen through his own Franciscan lens - inform us of the here and now reality, cohesively and universally.

Being a Franciscan, Richard affirms not stewardship but kinship with nature. In this, he is unapologetically a panentheist, which often confuses him with pantheism. He invites us to seek Christ in everything. This speaks so authoritatively to the centrality of the Eucharist as the basis for all experiencing, but for the Franciscan is reflected in something as simple as chopping down a tree. To this day, Franciscans do not pull a tree out by its roots. They allow the tree to recover, and bow before the tree before taking the timber they need. Ancient, sophisticated spirituality of the true custodians of our lands understood this for countless millennia. Far from some peculiarity, panentheism, the kinship of all creation, is a vital missing link that has the power to help save the very planet we inhabit. Oh that the word dominion had never been used in Genesis.

Richard's Franciscanism also invites him to embrace a positive prophetic that seeks to live the truth, and avoids becoming mired in critique of what is false. He is a One on the Enneagram (a way of understanding the false self that he is particularly fond of). Ones are reformers, and like Martin Luther, another likely One on the Enneagram, Richard tends to see what is wrong and wants to change it. I have personally experienced this. He asked me one day "does that painting look crooked to you?" I said no, it looked fine. He could not help adjust it, all the while complaining that he sees fault in everything, and tries hard not to. But it is this seeing that allows him to see what trash needs jettisoning, and what treasures need restoring.

Richard is passionately non-dual or unitive. When asked which word is more important in the name of his community “the Center for Action and Contemplation” - Action or Contemplation - he answered “neither. The most important word is AND.” Richard expressed this in his book *The Naked Now*, where he wrote that “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that “us-and-them” seeing, and the dualistic thinking that results, is the foundation of almost all discontent and violence in the world.”

Richard spent 14 years as Roman Catholic chaplain of the Albuquerque State Prison. During this time, he became aware that men - who have run the show for centuries - have projected their unintegrated shadow energy and entitled status onto a powerless world. He saw the desperate need for men to embrace their true humanity through rites of initiation, a core feature of all ancient cultures. This work is now global, and I am blessed to work with hundreds of men who represent this work in Australia. Richard believes it will take five generations of initiated men to turn the ship around. This work has barely begun.

Richard is particularly fond of the West Indian poet Derek Walcott. His poem “Love After Love” expresses the vision and heart of Richard for humanity:

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

In the name of Christ, amen.