
The Mustard Seed



Armadale Uniting Church

Issue 34, Advent 2020

Greetings from Fiona

Greetings.

What a year it has been. We have all been pushed and stretched and pummelled by COVID 19, by lockdowns, by information and information overload. And we are not yet through the tumultuous 2020 US election and its ramifications for the whole world order...

As the end of 2020 draws near, we continue to wonder about the future and what is ahead – not a bad way to approach the season of Advent. In this waiting time we are called to make ready for another event whose ramifications for the whole world order continue to reverberate two thousand years on: the coming of Jesus - Child of hope for all nations and peoples, for all creation, for today and tomorrow – all our tomorrows - whatever awaits us there.

As Christians, how to live into such a time? How to live out the hope the Christ Child brought into the world so long ago – and continues to bring in these testing times – and beyond?

For us in the Armadale UCA congregation, as we prepare to make ready our hearts, our homes, our lives and our world to welcome again the Christ Child, we take stock of what we have been learning about how to live our faith and support and help each other over these past months.

During lockdown, we have met weekly via Zoom – on Tuesday and Thursday mornings for conversation and discussion, and, on Sunday mornings for a service of prayer, readings and an opportunity to respond to a simple reflection on the biblical texts set by the lectionary.

As your minister, I have been heartened by the commitment of so many to continue to meet together as a community of faith, listening to the Word - and each other - for strength and encouragement. We have grown in our openness and understanding. And what a joy to welcome five new members during this time!

Church Council continues to grapple with issues around next steps as a COVID `normal` or COVID `safe` world emerges. There are important and serious matters to consider. The

Greetings from Fiona (cont)

pandemic is not over yet. We are all vulnerable – some of us more than others. We must still take care and we must still take care of each other – especially the most vulnerable.

As a worshipping community in turbulent times, we bear witness to the ever faithful God who has come alongside us in Jesus Christ, the Child of hope born in Bethlehem. Truly in the extraordinary year which has been 2020, we may sing or hear or read these words with deeper appreciation and reverence: `The hopes and fears of all the years are met in You tonight`.

May the words of Advent - hope, peace, joy and love – become more real for you, draw you and your loved ones to greater faith and deeper wonder as the year turns, as Christ comes.

And as we journey into 2021, may we continue to gather in hope and joy as God`s faithful people.

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who promised is faithful.*

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.`
Hebrews 10: 23-25*

Grace and peace.

Fiona

From the Editors

Life in recent times has been challenging but the Armadale Uniting Church community has proved to be resilient, and tribute must be paid to Fiona for her hard work and effective leadership during these times.

In this issue of *The Mustard Seed*, we read about Fiona's thoughts on "Doctrine" and learn a little about the career of one of our number – and about Sparky, who is known to us through "Zoom". And there are a number of other contributions, including some relevant to the season of Advent.

– Bill and Graeme

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Doctrine is not a dirty word...

'Watch your life and doctrine closely.' 1 Timothy 4: 16

What is it about the word 'doctrine'? Why does it have such a bad press?
If the word was 'doctrinaire' I would understand – but 'doctrine'?

In its simplest form, doctrine means 'teaching' and therefore Christian doctrines are teachings about the Christian faith. And these teachings, contested and considered over long periods of time, have been found to be the best way to describe God and the work of God in Jesus Christ in and for the world and for all creation.

We may not understand all the finer points of the significant Christian doctrines, but it is important we learn to agree – and disagree; to accept – and to question.

To be 'doctrinaire' is to seek to impose particular teachings, or particular doctrines.

Doctrine itself does not do that. It may be used to that end...

Doctrine simply offers a way to think, discuss, explore and imagine what is or may be true when it comes to the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as expressed in the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament writings - texts which the Church, throughout the world and down through the ages, has attested as expressing, encouraging and enabling the best way for all life to flourish.

Doctrine offers the possibility to re-imagine what we understand about truth.

So the end of doctrine is not to close off ideas but rather, in each generation, to open them up.

For a Christian, doctrine is not remote or far removed from everyday life, your life and mine.

Quite the opposite. Doctrine is concerned with life and its living, death and its dying.

As Alistair McGrath writes 'Doctrine is the expression of Christian truth, a framework for dynamic Christian living and a safeguard against heresy'¹.

You know, I know, in this day and age, we might say 'the age of Trump',
un-truths – lies? 'alternative facts'? - proliferate as incontrovertible fact.

We know there are misleading teachings, fake news, false prophets, outright lies and brazen liars.

The work of Christian doctrine is to enable the Church, enable Christians, to be alert to and give an account of what is and what is not true for those who follow Christ; what can and what cannot be said by those who name Jesus as Lord.

We hear Pilate's question echo down through the millennia 'What is truth?'

Living in tempestuous times, the need for considered thought and cogent argument in matters of faith could not be more evident – or more important.

Who is God? Why hold to scripture? Who is Jesus? What about the Spirit?

Who am I? Who are you? Why the Church? What's the point of meeting together for worship?

Such questions require thought, require work.

They merit our attention and best effort. (Better effort?)

The work of doctrine is to shape, form and formulate our thinking so we might live life fully and, with confidence and humility, encourage and invite others into this way of life too.

Ultimately the end of doctrine is the re-creation of all things, the beginning of the new...

'See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy...'
Colossians 2: 8

¹ Alistair McGrath 'Understanding Doctrine' Hodder and Stoughton

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SPARKY THE CAT



It is morning and the Sun King, Louis XIV, otherwise known as Hugh Luxford of Armadale, begins his daily traverse of the heavens. He does not do this alone and unaided for there is always his retinue of which I, Sparky, am a major part. Without me he could do nothing.

On days when he is not otherwise at Coles, he relies on me to wake him around eleven which I do by biting his feet that are exposed under the doona. Or he will wake himself up, and it is up to me to rush to his face and touch his nose with mine. This I do whether I have had to bite his feet or not.

Then it is up to me to rush into the kitchen, only just getting under his feet as he stumbles through the bedroom, doorways and hall. There he has left plenty of kibble – but it is my duty to yowl for more which he always provides. Sometimes – if needed – I will generously agree to go into the cupboard where the kibble is kept. There I walk through the jumble of pots and pans under the sink, the rice and potatoes, and appear as innocently as I can through the door on the other end. This always amuses.

He will put the coffee pot on the stove and mutter “It is good to be King” – which puzzles me as I cannot stand his coffee. He actually drinks the stuff.

It is also my duty to stand at the flat door and yowl. I will lead him into the hallway where hopefully lesser personages (rank is a funny thing among humans, but he feeds me) will find me and also offer me something to eat. Whether or not this happens, the important task is to be led into the hallway (the more times the better) where I can sniff at doorways in the corridor. This agitates him, but there are duties of being a King. There is a rule by which no cats are allowed into the hallway, which I do not observe. I leave that to the diplomatic corps.

The King likes to play the guitar. Whether he is any good or not I cannot tell but this is always a good time to do the above. If this is not effective, then sitting further into the hallway with outrage clearly displayed on the mien is totally appropriate. If this is not forthcoming, then it is only fair that I be allowed my spot on the royal bed. When the kitty litter has not been replaced recently, this is also appropriate. Lying on the bed or under the couches is regarded as ‘cute’, whereas yowling is specifically designed to get his attention.

And of course, with every sunrise is a sunset. After dark, instead of chasing small animals and birds, the King will frequently drink and watch television. Although it would be impolitic for me to do the same (although it is tempting), it behoves me to nap on him as he lies on the couch – or sit on the armrest and lick his hair. He doesn’t groom himself very often and it is up to me to redress that.

He will put on music before retiring. During the night he sleeps away the most exciting hours when the hunting is good, but it is my calling to follow him. I jump on to the bed to accompany him, where I sleep until a new day begins.

MARK THE EVANGELIST

The Gospel of Mark will play a prominent part in the Lectionary during 2021.

Mark is often identified with John Mark whose mother's house in Jerusalem was a meeting place for the apostles. There is a strong tradition that Mark was the young man wearing a linen sheet who followed Christ after the disciples fled and avoided capture by shedding his clothes.

Mark was a friend of Peter and Paul and a cousin of Barnabas. He set out with Paul on the first missionary journey but, after conflict with Paul, left him and later joined Barnabas to preach the gospel in Cyprus. The rift was healed later as there is mention of him as Paul's companion in Rome. Papias, a bishop from Asia Minor and Clement of Alexandria both write that Mark set down accurately, though not in order, all he remembered of the words and actions of Jesus, as he learned them from Peter.

Mark is said to have founded a church in Alexandria, an important Greek speaking city on the Egyptian coast. His symbol is the lion because his gospel begins with the words 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness'. Later his remains were removed to Venice and visitors today can see several representations of a lion on and around St Mark's Cathedral in the main square. Lions in the Judean wilderness are no more but in Mark's day their roaring would have disturbed the peace of the hills. The lion is also a symbol of the resurrection.

His gospel is the briefest of the four and thought to be the earliest, providing source material for both Matthew and Luke.

From Oxford Dictionary of Saints, Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church, Wikipedia..



(Left) Fresco depicting St Mark, at St Mark's Church, Belgrade. Notice the lion!

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses." When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

Lockdown at Armadale

During the past months the leaking church roof was repaired and internal damage rectified. Many thanks to Adobe constructions and to David Fallick who liased with them.

The Sunday services and weekly zoom meetings have been well attended. Karel has led a number of rich discussions on Thursday mornings. Some of the topics have included Material Christianity, Beauty, and Words of Faith.

Congratulations to Fiona who recently completed her Master of Theology studies. She has also become expert in Zoom oversight and connection!

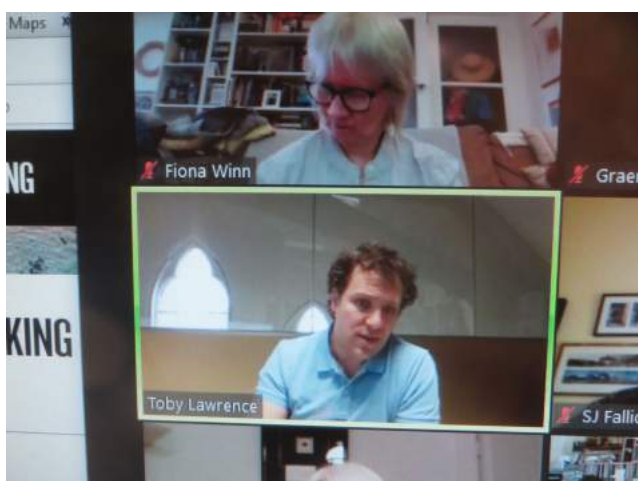
The Arrow Health folk have settled in well. Their work with various addictions makes an invaluable contribution to the community and we are glad to have them operating on our premises. In October, Toby Lawrence explained something of their work to us on zoom. More can be found on their excellent website.

We hope that Debtors Anonymous will return to our premises next year.

During winter we sent Coles food vouchers to Uniting Prahran. Government financial support has reduced so the need for such help continues. As we remember the homeless family at Bethlehem at Christmas time, donations of this kind are a simple way for us to remember others less fortunate than ourselves. Send vouchers to Uniting Prahran Emergency Relief (refer Rosa), 211 Chapel Street, Prahran. Vic. 3181.

Synod will take place via zoom meetings from Friday, Friday 26 -28. Congregational members interested in representing Armadale please contact Fiona.

Details about Christmas Eve & Christmas Day will be sent when more is known.



(left) Zooming with Toby Lawrence (Arrow Health) - a very interesting and enlightening session.

It strikes me that there is something greater than judgement. It is called mercy.
Sebastian Barry (novelist)

Chatting with Margo Anderson



What work were you doing when you retired?

At my retirement 6 years ago I had been working as a Case Manger to people in receipt of Community Aged Care Packages for around 13 years. The agencies mission was to prevent *Early or Inappropriate Placement in Residential Care*. This was not always possible as there were times when residential care was the safest or only option.

What did you like about/dislike about it?

The most important part of this work was the connections I made with people at a very deep and personal level, there needed to be a lot of trust for the services to be best used and when it worked well it was amazing. Some frustrations came via restrictions and limitations of the programme guidelines, funding constraints and miss-matched expectations.

If you were beginning a career now, what would you choose?

Taking me back 50 years with the experiences and “wisdom” I now have, I reckon I would have become a cheese maker- is that a bit Monty Python, *Blessed are The Cheese Makers!*

Actually I think I would have done what I have done.

What improvements did you see in your field of work?

Provider accountability and greater client directed service provision-there’s more to happen here. These changes also caused service provision to be tied up in red tape but a skilled Case Manager had the capacity to push through these restrictions.

What could governments/ society/ churches do to make your clients life better?

Develop policies that are flexible and client driven- not easy to do but worth the effort; listening more to clients, carers and families to start with would help.

Where did you grow up and go to school? What subject did you like best/worst?

I grew up on the land and went to church based boarding schools for my secondary education. I thrived in subjects that were taught by teachers who showed respect/enjoyment of the students; German- No, Wool classing-Yes, Commerce-No, Maths-Yes, Geography-No, Biology-Yes, Sport –No, English-Yes.

What is your faith background?

We were raised in the Presbyterian tradition of the 50's and 60's meaning mostly that it was unquestioned and quite literal and judgemental. However I was hooked on the mystery and something that connects us in our humanity. I had questions and I loved otherness in all forms- that was not easy and sometimes left me quite lonely at church. I do remember a sense of great love from the {very} older members of the congregation and this is has been so easy to recall over the years-even now.

What does being a member of this church mean to you today?

I need to belong, I need to participate, I need to hear and share understandings and I need to learn and expand my growing faith-AUC gives me this and I feel blessed. I see our differences as gloriously divine.

What are your favourite hymns?

699 from TGS moves me especially and then it's the old ones, I'm a bit of a Wesleyan there. I do play Amazing Grace on the Ukulele and I think it goes well-however be well assured Rowan's place at AUC is safe.

Do you have a favourite charity?

For a long time, I have supported a group who places water wells in Ethiopian villages, it is called Wellwishers. It takes AU \$6,000.00 to sink a well and this will see the women and girls NOT walk all day to collect water-which is often polluted. The villages can then build schools and girls and boy can get an education- teachers like to go to villages that have clean water- who knew! www.wellwishersethiopia.com

What do you like to read?

I'm a bit of history buff-- ask me about the Tudors. Also I read Indigenous literature as often as I can; it's my *Sorry* Reading. I'm currently on a theological bender--blimey these books can be huge, heavy, dense and complex.

Are there any stories in the Gospels that especially strike a chord with you?

Over and over again it's The Good Samaritan; my faith always comes back to this and why is this so hard in our world.

Any thoughts about your experiences of life?

Leonard Cohen's song "The Anthem" says it all;- "*Forget your perfect offering, there's a crack in everything--that's how the light gets in.*"

We are in no way forbidden to laugh, or to be satisfied with food, or to be delighted with music, or to drink wine.

John Calvin

* * * * *

God is not satisfied with appearance. God wants the garment of justice. God wants Christians dressed in love.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

Three Musicians

Jeduthun, Asaph and Heman.

These names appear at the head of some individual psalms. These men were appointed by David, with other heads of the Levite families, to be responsible for the daily administration of the Temple, its worship and music. Possibly the heading of each name refers to a specific singer, choirmaster or tune. They may possibly have had a hand in the writing the psalm or in transposing it from one that David himself had written.

The name Jeduthun means ‘One who praises’ and his name appears above psalms 39, 62, and 77. He is also described as a prophet. Asaph is mentioned in 1 Chronicles as being appointed to sing songs of thanksgiving to the Lord and he is linked to psalms 50 and 73-80. Heman means ‘Faithful’ and he only gets a single mention with Psalm 88.

We get a sense of what music might have sounded like in the Temple in 2 Chronicles 5:13:

Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: He is good, his love endures forever.

These three men remind us that God takes music seriously and that his praise is joyful.

* * * * *

NATURE AT ITS BEST

I stand on the cliff
looking down at the sea –
waves thrash non-stop
honest, bare, and strong
I continue to move on
the path unfolds
rocky & rough
my feet stumble
I catch myself
but then fall all the way down
I’m up – this view up close
I try to inhale – breathless
no city hassle can compare
here nothing and everything
Nature holds keys
to answers I pursue.



Ocean view from Teddy's Lookout, Lorne (above). Photo by Graeme

SILVANA VAXELAIRE

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

Transcendence

KAREL REUS

I have been thinking about events in my life that were truly transcendent; events that were above and beyond the ordinary. Let me offer one. It was Christmas Day, 1975. I was a visiting lecturer at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, South India. On this Christmas Day I was invited to join the seminary staff in a visit to the local jail. It was to be, for me, the best Christmas ever! The jail was full of political prisoners, imprisoned because they disagreed in various ways with the policies of Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India.

The seminary took seriously Jesus' injunction to support the poor, which was one of the reasons I had sought the opportunity to teach there for a while. I learned much more than I taught, and that time at the jail was to be part of a steep learning curve in an understanding of what the Gospel is about. No preaching took place. There was no counselling. There were no speeches. There were simply expressions of solidarity. Nevertheless, it was a deeply religious time, transcending its squalid location, and it remains etched in my memory. I'm pretty sure that Jesus was in the Madurai jail that day, though travelling incognito, as he so often does.

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ANNUNCIATION

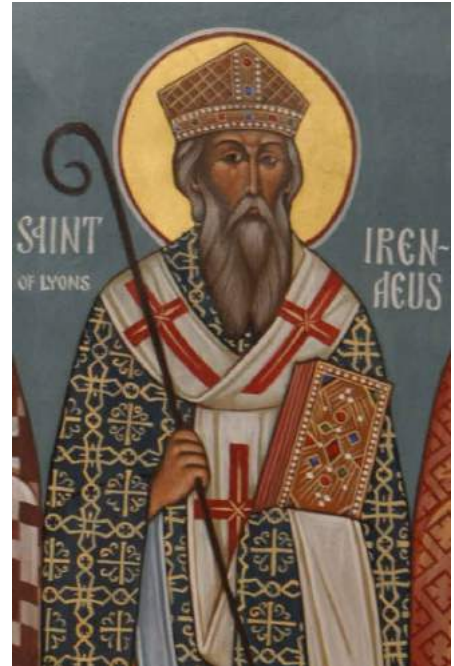
by Fra Angelico (c.1395 – 1455)



This early fresco by Fra Angelico was ordered by Cosimo de Medici when he rebuilt the Convent of San Marco in Florence Italy. This one is on a corridor wall. As with several other frescos in the individual cells of the monks, it was intended for prayer and reflection.

It depicts the presence of the Angel Gabriel as he announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son by miraculous means. The scene, though central to the Christian story, only appears in Luke's gospel. At the time, the subject was an immensely popular one with artists. Compared with earlier works, this one is rather austere. Something important is happening but the angel looks modest and confiding. The pair incline towards each other as if exchanging confidences. Unlike earlier representations of this event, there are no trumpet blasts and Mary sits on what looks like a rather plain milking stool. This painting marks a change from the earlier two - dimensional flat-figured Gothic art, to the Renaissance style, when perspective was introduced.

A SLICE OF CHURCH HISTORY



Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon (c130-200 AD), was a major figure in the development of early Christianity. He lived at a time when false interpretations of Jesus were everywhere. Many so-called secret teachings, myths and poems were attributed to Jesus or his disciples. In the second century there was an explosion of Gnostic sects which Irenaeus confronted in his famous theological work *Against Heresies*.

The Gnostics promoted an intellectual, elitist faith. They were very influential and a real threat to orthodox Christian belief. Some taught that they did not have to abide by the moral standards which lesser believers had to obey. They rejected the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross and the resurrection of the body. They believed that salvation was only to be achieved by secret knowledge.

Although Gnosticism varied greatly, it was marked by one basic belief: matter is evil and was created by a demi-god. Only the spiritual world, uncontaminated by matter, was good. The early church rejected this. For Christianity, resurrection means both body and soul.

For Irenaeus, Gnosticism was a rag bag of heathen speculations with bits taken from different philosophers to propagate a bogus, anti-rational mythology. A modern-day form of Gnosticism is Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* with its fictional conspiratorial theories about Jesus.

Irenaeus often used the image of God holding the world in the palm of his hand. He is very close to the world but fundamentally different to it.

Of the mystery of the Incarnation, Irenaeus wrote that though God is without limit, he humbly revealed himself as the Infant Jesus at Bethlehem, so that we might not be overwhelmed by his glory.

from Wikipedia and Reformed Reflections.



Website

Don't forget to keep an eye on our website. It's at
<https://armadale.ucavictas.org.au/>

We try and keep it up-to-date, but we always welcome any feedback (you can send this to Graeme). We would also welcome any items of interest that you think might be suitable to be posted.

It is a blessed relief to gaze into a shop window and see nothing we want.

Michael Oakenshott (philosopher)

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Regular service times: 9.30 am each Sunday, Holy Communion on the 1st Sunday of the month. However, all services at the Church are currently suspended.

Children's program: 1st Sunday of the month, during term time.

Usually on the 5th Sunday (where a month has 5 Sundays) we hold a combined service with other Uniting Churches in Stonnington, which are not always at Armadale. If the service is not at Armadale, no service at Armadale on that day. During January, the format of our services may vary.