

Easter Sermon 4 Year C 2016

Acts 16:9-15

Revelation 21:10, 22 to 22:5

John 5:1-9

What is to be done about the church? In the light of what the Royal Commission has uncovered this is perhaps a question that is being asked by a variety of individuals and groups in the society. Without denying the legitimacy of the question from that perspective, I want to ask what is to be done about the church from another perspective. This perspective starts from what is said about the church in the Christian scriptures, and particularly in Revelation.

Before I explore one aspect of what is said about the church in the scriptures I will briefly reflect on my experience of the Uniting Church. I don't do this in criticism of that church, but simply because it is the only church whose workings I know from the inside. As I reflect on my experience of the Uniting Church, experience that coterminous with the existence of that church, I become aware that I have spent an enormous amount of time and energy thinking and talking about the church. I have spent a huge amount of time being involved in the management of the church at its various levels. I have seen the church spend large amounts of money and time in trialling new techniques to manage the church. A constant activity since the Uniting Church came into being has been the attempt to discover *the* technique that will fill the churches with people again as briefly occurred from the mid fifties to the sixties of the last century. In retrospect my experience is that for most of its short existence the Uniting Church has been 'circulating' around itself. As I have said is not an attack on the Uniting Church because I think other churches tend to do the same thing. For all flavours of church the desire to survive and get stronger is a powerful spur. My question in view of all this, and it really is *my* question and not just a rhetorical device, is this: what could it mean, if anything, for a church active *today* that its scriptures conclude with an account of a social reality in which there is no church? For this is how the last book in the Bible ends. It ends with God and humanity present together in a social order located in a city that has no temple. That means no church buildings, no ordained ministers, and no places that are sacred because it means that

any distinction between the sacred and the secular has collapsed. In short there is no religion.

Now one answer that could be given to the question is that something that is promised in God's future does not have an effect on the world today. Such an answer, of course, would mean that we keep on doing what we have been doing for so long. This answer, however, will not do. It will not do because the Easter season tells us that in Jesus Christ the perfect unity between God and humanity has been achieved. This means that the new creation, the new city promised by God, is already a perfect reality in Jesus Christ. And the scriptures hold that Christ is alive and present to the world. If this is the case then the new creation, the social order of the new city is already in the process of impinging on the societies of humanity. What might life look like in such a transformed city?

I have already said that there will be no religion. By the word 'religion' I mean a way of seeing and understanding the world that is different to the understanding we encounter in the bible. To make clear what I mean it is helpful to list some of the characteristics of religion. First religion is episodic – it only appears at times of crisis. Thus, for example, the father of one of the miners trapped underground in Tasmania in 2006 admitted he went into a local church for the first time in his life. Second religion is seen as a *private* feeling that a person can have. Third religion spies out the weaknesses of people, those situations when people are anxious about their lives, in order to talk to 'win' them for Christ. All these characteristics point to the main point about religion: it divides the world up into private and public, sacred and secular spheres of life.

If there is no religion in the new city that the author of Revelation pictures coming down what is put in its place? What takes its place is a new reality – the reality of God and humanity together in Jesus Christ in the world. Because this is the case there is only one sphere of God's activity and the life of human beings. That sphere is God's creation – the world. There is no need of sacred places or sacred days because in Jesus Christ God is with his people in the world. The question can be put in another form: If the church as it awaits its extinction is, properly understood - and it rarely is *properly* understood - Christ himself taking form among human beings in the world then how

will that reality shape the church's worship and action? In posing the question in this way I am obviously rejecting the temptation – a temptation that the church usually fails to resist - of letting people tell the church how to be relevant to them.

I don't have the answer to this question but I will suggest some things that I think will be part of an answer. I think the reality of God and humanity being together in the world in Christ will lead us to participate in the sufferings of God in the world. We should plunge ourselves into the life of the world that Christ suffered and died to make new without trying to make without putting a religious veneer on things. Something of what this way of being in the world may mean is suggested by these evocative words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "We must form our estimate of men (and women) less from their achievements and failures, and more from their sufferings." Now that is something to reflect on because that estimation would involve all areas of public and private life.

Finally if the church is only a temporary, but nevertheless important, phenomenon in God's purpose for his creation and creatures then surely we must sit lightly to the church as institution with all its structures. If God allows himself to be edged out of the world on to a cross, if God is weak and powerless in the world, and if that is the way he is with humanity, then that must be what directs our view of the church.

These are not very clear answers about what is to be done about church in the light of the religion-less future of God with us in Christ. Hopefully they are evocative in some way as you reflect on them.

Rev Ross Carter
Easter 6

