

St George's College Evening

Thursday 12 May 2016

The 2016 gathering at St George's College was the fourth time that the Winthrop Singers and CCJWA have collaborated in this way with the support of College staff. As before, members and friends of the Council were specially invited to attend. The guest of honour, and interviewee for the Fireside Chat, was Reverend Emeritus Professor William R. G. Loader, a specialist in early Jewish and Christian literature, and longstanding CCJWA supporter.

The event began at 6:00pm with evening worship in the Chapel, led by Reverend Rose Guok, the College Chaplain, utilising liturgy specifically designed for both Jews and Christians. Prior to the service, the first part of the *Passacaglia for Viola* by Heinrich Biber was played by Elyse Williams as the Voluntary. For the Introit, the Winthrop Singers, directed by Dr Nicholas Bannan, sang *Hine Ma Tov* (Ps 133:1: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.") These words were repeated in the Introduction, and the opening prayer asked the blessing of the Eternal One on our worship, and that we would be drawn closer to each other.

Following a reading from Isaiah (55:6–13), the choir sang Psalm 150, set to a new arrangement by Nicholas Bannan, which featured versions of the instruments mentioned in the text, played by members of the Winthrop Singers. The reading from the New Testament was 1 Corinthians 13:1–13. As the anthem the choir then sang, in Hebrew, Franz Schubert's beautiful setting of Psalm 92, written in the last year of the composer's short life. The Canticle (Psalm 100) was recited antiphonally, and the congregation then sang the Isaac Watts hymn based on Psalm 90 (89): "O God, our help in ages past." Several prayers followed, including an Evening Collect asking for love and understanding, peace and friendship, to be among us. The liturgy closed with the Aaronic blessing, and for the Voluntary, Elyse Williams played the conclusion of Biber's *Passacaglia for Viola*.

After the service, CCJWA guests were invited to dine at the College, and enjoyed table fellowship with resident students. All were invited to gather in the Junior Common Room for the Fireside Chat commencing at 7:30pm.

Reverend Rose, as the interviewer, introduced Professor Loader (Bill) and his work by reading aloud one of the Reflections drawn from his comprehensive home page: "St Patrick and the Helicopter," a delightful piece which imparts in a few simple lines the reality of God's presence everywhere (see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/home.html>). Asked to share about his background and vocation, Bill spoke first of the freedom and joys of being retired, but then of his many current activities: local, national, and international. He was born in 1944 in Auckland, and had one older brother. For his BA in Classics he studied Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, and English; he was ordained in the Methodist Church (now the Uniting Church) and then gained a BD. Meanwhile he had met Gisela; they married when Bill was aged 22 and this year they have celebrated their Golden Anniversary. From 1970–1972 they lived in Mainz, Germany, where Bill was

awarded a doctorate in Theology for his dissertation (written in German) on the Epistle to the Hebrews. They returned to NZ following the birth of their daughter, and Bill served as the Minister of an Auckland parish, and was a part-time lecturer in New Testament at a theological college before the family moved to Perth in 1978.

Asked about his formative years, and his sense of awareness about his vocation, Bill spoke of encouragement given him by an eccentric minister, of having taken his first service at the age of 13, of being Head Prefect at his school, and being surrounded by conservative youth leaders. He learned that he could confidently trust God, and that one never need be afraid of truth.

Speaking of his research and writing, Bill mentioned that much of his recent work had centred on sexuality. By the 1990s, he had become aware of problems worldwide with regard to that topic, was dissatisfied with the quality of relevant research, and wanted to help people in the twenty-first century. As a result, he sought a grant from the Australian Research Council, and was successful. This enabled him to conduct research from 2005–2010, and to publish five books on the topic of gender issues in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman era, including one focusing on the New Testament. His latest book is *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, co-authored with Megan K. DeFranza, Wesley Hill, and Stephen R. Holmes (Counterpoints; ed. Preston Sprinkle; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

Bill then provided an example of translation issues and the type of insight that his study brought to light: in the Greek translation of Genesis 1, *humankind* is created in the image of *God*, but in Genesis 2, *woman* is created in the image of *man*. He also spoke of how in the Greco-Roman world, the average age for a man to marry was about 30, whereas girls were married as soon as they reached puberty. Consequently, women were less mature and experienced than their husbands, and totally dependent, though they worked domestically and on farms. This led to men concluding wrongly that women were by nature inferior. That topic generated some animated discussion from the floor. It was noted that there were strong women — both Jews and Christians — in that era, though Paul's opinion that women should be quiet was standard at the time. Bill also acknowledged that the apostle Paul viewed same-sex relations as blameworthy. However, he emphasised that while we should respect the views of Paul's day, it is now recognised that not all are heterosexual, and that all should be able to express their sexuality.

When asked about his involvement in Jewish–Christian dialogue, Bill said that this was hard for him to talk about, because in his NZ parish he had ministered to a Holocaust survivor who subsequently took her own life. In his engagement with Jewish and Christian colleagues internationally, and among scholars, he said denomination does not matter. His interest is particularly in the so-called “Parting of the Ways”. He explained that as the Jesus movement spread into the Roman Empire, many God-fearers joined, and there was a flood of proselytes. Problems arose in the 50s when Paul was in Antioch, as to whether circumcision should be demanded of converts to Christianity, and whether Jews and Gentile Christians might eat together. The issue was to what extent rules were to be kept, or relaxed. Further, Christians started to idolise Jesus, using terms traditionally reserved

for higher angels. Initially this was not a difficulty, but it became problematical when Christians began to *worship* Jesus. For Jews, Jesus' teaching, such as in the Sermon on the Mount, was acceptable, but this development was not.

When a member of the audience asked why Muslims were left out of such interfaith discussion, Bill explained that the focus for the topic (Parting of the Ways) was the first century CE. He pointed out that there are dialogue groups that include Islam, that it is important for people of different faiths to meet with each other, and that he has some involvement with Muslims.

Responding to a question about the Gospel of John's contribution to the Parting of the Ways, Bill noted that this book is clearly a creative piece of literature, in which "episodes" become "scenes". It represents what was thought about Jesus at the end of the first century. The Johannine community was faced with an identity crisis, and resolved it by saying that Jesus rather than Torah is central, and that while the old is good, the new is better. While Matthew's Gospel has Jesus come to *uphold* Torah, the Fourth Gospel has Jesus *replace* Torah. In early Christian thought, some were thinking transactionally, and that something was needed to save people from their sins. John uses the model of Jesus being like Torah was. Jesus is identified with Logos, not Torah, and is elevated so high that he represents God, and relationship with God is mediated through Jesus. Most of the tension reflected in John's Gospel is actually with fellow-Jews.

When Rose asked about questions close to his heart, Bill spoke of the historical Jesus and his emphasis on change, on a transformed society. Jesus had a vision of a place for everyone. This was good Judaism. He articulated this as good news for the poor, as in Isaiah 61, and declared: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who hunger now for you shall be fed" (Luke 6:20–21). This was a key theme for Jesus. What inspires Bill in this sense is Jesus the Jew and his priorities. Bill then went on to observe how odd it would be with the coming Olympic Games, if all we saw of them on TV was the award ceremonies, and nothing of the events themselves. Yet he pointed out that this is too often the case in our practice of the Christian faith — the resurrection is treated like an award ceremony. The race Jesus ran, and what he lived for, tend to be left out of the message.

To conclude the interview, Rose asked Bill what he would want to say to "the young Bill Loader". His response was: "A pursuit of truth. Don't just look at getting a job and getting money. Go for social justice. Let that inform you."

The audience warmly expressed their appreciation to Bill for what he had shared, and the conversation with him continued over refreshments. At the end of the gathering, it was particularly gratifying to see several of the students gathered around him, listening intently.

Mary J. Marshall
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