That we are living in dark times is scarcely contestable, though questions about what constitutes the darkness and about its causes will readily bring disagreement. The surface phenomena, however, are there for all to see. Globally, the world has been transfixed by terrorism, which came to attention on 11 September 2001 though it had begun earlier, by its effects and by responses to it. Nationally, the Tampa crisis, the 2001 Federal election and the war in Iraq have left us a nation divided. Religiously, fundamentalism is on the rise across the globe, while controversies and scandals have weakened the Church. Many of the institutions to which we would normally turn for guidance are themselves in disarray.

Below the surface lie complex and multiple relationships of persons, actions, events, memories, feelings, ideas and opinions. These are too diverse for us to completely understand, and, in time, even historians will puzzle about the gaps in their understanding of the period. Often the connections are accidental, and events can move in new directions solely because someone has taken advantage of the moment. We have not, however, been simply at the mercy of random and therefore disconnected events. Mind, which finds its expression in ideas and opinions has been at work. Osama Bin Laden, for instance, is not just a vicious and evil plotter of great harm. He has a vision and has acted with wicked cleverness in his choice of targets and timing. The international response, though happily effective in some respects, has in other respects been confused and distorted by different ideas of the world and of the place of individual nations within it. So, on the deeper level, it may not be so much catastrophic events that trouble us as changes in the way in which the world thinks. The change is carried in a mood, which we might call closed, and related to feelings like fear and exasperation.

What makes all of this very difficult is that for some time we had thought that we were doing very well. In the Church, the Second Vatican Council breathed new life and energy into a community that began to examine afresh its fundamental beliefs and to adapt its practices both to these beliefs and to the culture of the day. We came to hold that there was much that is good in the world and that the Church could be in dialogue with it. At the same time as high school students in New South Wales were following reports of the Council, they were also pioneering a new science curriculum that promised greater understanding of the world and better lives all around. The revolution of the sixties proclaimed that all men and women could love one another and that it was good to experience the culture of others. The gloom of two world wars seemed to be behind us. It was a mood of openness and carried with it feelings of hope and excitement.

Even when one recognises that much about the sixties, seventies and eighties was unrealistic and that the kinds of change instituted internationally, nationally and in the Church had to bring pain, coming to terms with the conditions of the present moment is still difficult. My personal experience was that by 2000 I had become quite depressed about the state of affairs in the world. In 1996, Pauline Hanson had made her maiden speech in parliament. While it is true that she had a gift for articulating irritation felt in the Australian electorate, I felt that ensuing political discussion had lost [32] its attachment to principle. In 1998, Vatican officials delivered the Statement of Conclusions to the Australian bishops at the end of the Synod of Oceania. While the content of the document was unremarkable in itself, the contrast between the collegial action of the bishops gathered in the Synod in open dialogue about the problems of the Church in our region and abrupt action by curial officials shocked me deeply. During 1998-2000 through visits to an Immigration Detention Centre, I experienced first hand the effects of punitive Government policy, at the time unreported, which directed daily disruption to the lives of detainees so that their discomfort would discourage others from fleeing to Australia. Since 2000, much has come out into the open and the major events of 2001 – 2003 have been there for all to see, so that it is not surprising that thoughtful and sensitive people have become depressed or dismayed. A more general reaction has been one of cynicism towards governments and churches.

In times like this, it can be helpful to tap back into our tradition and to find there clues to what is going on and pointers to how we might sustain ourselves. There are many sources in our religious,
philosophical and spiritual traditions. It would be timely, for instance, to look carefully again at the Beatitudes. I will start with Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in The Republic VII (514a – 521b).

The Cave

The Allegory of the Cave is, at first sight, about light, but it begins in darkness. Imagine, invites Socrates, that human beings are living at the back of an underground cave, shackled so that they can see only the rear wall, on which are cast shadows thrown by artificial shapes carried by other human beings in front of a fire higher up the cave. The prisoners, of course, treat the shadows as if they are beings in front of a fire higher up the cave. The philosophers and spiritual traditions. It would be beyond being merely a family or clan engaged in because human beings cannot do other than live in groups; it is artificial because it is constructed through the laws, customs and myths that take it beyond being merely a family or clan engaged in some form of subsistence living. The opinions, which bind it together, are formed through the lens of law and story just as the shadows on the back of the cave are formed by unseen shapes held in the light. Although in coming together the city has sought conveniences beyond mere family subsistence, it is still somewhat tribal, remaining both largely unaware of the inconsistencies in its own positions and unaccepting of the opinions of outsiders.

The seeker of wisdom is dependent on the city in two ways. Most obviously, light and sustenance are dependent on the co-operative activities of human beings in the city, especially in so far as the ascent to the light requires leisure unhampered by the demands of daily survival. Just as importantly, however, the seeker of wisdom is dependent on the opinions of the city, not so much for what they hold individually in themselves but for the inconsistencies among them that drive the seeker of wisdom to ask what really is real. The traveller must, therefore, return to the city, where he will at first be ridiculed and made to look foolish. In Plato’s story, this means that a perfect city cannot be constructed, although cities can be improved. Cities live on opinion, and the best that the philosopher, once reaccustomed to the darkness, can do is to tether opinion when it tries to wander too far from the truth. (Meno 97d)

Our Current Situation

Whether we have in recent decades passed collectively through a period of light may well be debatable. It is certainly illusory to think that we could forever live in the light. I do want to hold, however, that there were points of great illumination in this period. The Second Vatican Council stands out as a moment bringing together the work of many men and women under the guidance of the Spirit before, during and after the Council, to enable fresh understanding of Catholic faith and practice. Internationally, the movement to recognise and enforce universal human rights, so that the dignity of all human beings rather than just that of particular groups would be asserted, has been a great good. Significant claims can also be made about the advancement of science and about the invention of new technologies. Now, however, the dynamics of the cave seem to have reasserted themselves.

Of most concern at this time is the collapse of tolerance. It is easy and right to be critical of the behaviour of the Howard Government during 2001. Dark Victory by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson reveals the deception, lying, cruelty and impropriety that marked the Government’s action from the Tampa incident until the election. It remains true, however, that the Government could
not have acted in this way had they not tapped a vein of intolerance that runs through our nation. Despite the difficulties of the whole immigration question, why were we so slow to see through the claims that these were the kind of people who would throw their children into the sea and that terrorists were arriving on leaky boats along with the asylum seekers? We had somehow descended to the bottom of the cave.

Tolerance is often misunderstood. It is often taken to mean lack of concern for what someone else might think, say or do, a kind of relativistic attitude that suggests that everything is alright or that anything goes. Rather, it implies disagreement or difference and entails the ability to allow other people to be different and yet to live peacefully and respectfully within one political society. It was greatly explored in the 17th and 18th Centuries in relation to religious difference following the Reformation, but has been expanded to difference of opinion, culture, manners, political aspiration and to some extent moral belief. [34]

The danger that we face in losing the quality of tolerance is that, without it, the kind of society to which we belong would collapse. When John Locke argued for religious tolerance or toleration, he argued that the role of the state was to secure the civil interests of its citizens – life, liberty, health and property – and that, while it could act with force in matters that concerned these, since it was incompetent to decide which religion would best lead people to God, it could not act to determine people’s religious beliefs and practices, so long as they did not act in ways to disturb the peace. Like it or not, this is the kind of civil society we have inherited: one in which a vast amount of difference is allowed, so long as it does not infringe the rights of others or disrupt the state itself. The state is significantly limited in respect of the ways in which it can enter into people’s lives. In fact, extraordinary difference does exist in our society, so that loss of the capacity for tolerance would put our society at great risk.

If we turn to the Church, it is intriguing that the moral issues to do with the beginning and end of life have become so central for many Catholics. These are, in fact, very important issues, and John Paul II has provided significant leadership in addressing them, so that one would expect that we would work together to get the best possible laws in our country. When, however, one listens to people who are at once impassioned about these issues and little concerned about other matters, such as truthfulness in government, honesty and justice in business, poverty and exploitation, and children spending years in desert detention centres, one has to wonder what is really going on. Why is it that this area of morality is made so singular an issue, as if almost defining of what it is to be a Catholic?

In fact, our society does not deal well with these issues because it understands itself to be constituted in terms of contracts between individuals and because this kind of thinking breaks down at the beginning and end of life. Contracts can be formed only with the living and the conscious. The Church, on the other hand, finds no great difficulty in affirming clear positions, when it thinks within its natural law tradition and with a view of human life that begins before birth and extends into eternal life. There is, therefore, a real divide in thinking.

The concern that I am raising is that this area of morality may well be being used at this time as a boundary issue, attempting to define who is a member of the Church and who is an outsider, and establishing an impermeable barrier between the two. Anthropologists tell us that particularly when a group is under threat, it will accentuate certain of its differences with the groups around it so as to affirm its own identity. Such differences function in the same way that some of the purity laws in the Old Testament functioned. Unclean foods were the kinds of food that other people ate, even if the origin of the difference was only a matter of geography or economy.

If it is true that the moral issues surrounding the beginning and end of life are being used to establish boundaries between the Church and the world, it is a pity for two reasons. Firstly, there are other areas of Gospel life that should also publicly define us. Secondly, this kind of instrumental use of the issues is likely to ensure that we do not get the best laws possible. If we call upon these issues to constitute a solid boundary between the Church and the world, we will be inclined to choose arguments that repel and divide rather than arguments that are capable of effecting some degree of change in the public mind. One would hope, rather, that we could be as effective as possible.

There is reason to believe that divisions are also being formed within the Church. It is, for instance, becoming more common to hear people asserting their orthodoxy, even when no claims of heterodoxy have been made. Orthodox Catholic teaching is a beautiful thing, and there are few experiences more thrilling than hearing an able and subtle theologian explain the central tenets of Catholic Faith, while exploring the origin and meaning of teaching articulated over two thousand years [35] of Church life. When, however, one probes the minds of some of those who insist on calling themselves orthodox today, one often finds a mishmash of doctrines, confusion about what orthodoxy is and at times lack of education to the subtleties of Catholic belief and history. Again, one
suspects that what is happening is not so much the opening out of Catholic tradition as the formation of closed groups within the Church.

Lessons

What then might we learn about living in these times? Firstly, it is necessary to admit to ourselves that we are living in dark times and to understand what this means. There is little point in naively pursuing open dialogue, when, in fact, minds are closed. Not only is it ineffective, but the speaker though speaking is rendered mute by the absence of hearers. One suspects that Tony Blair learnt this to his cost in trying to influence George Bush prior to the Iraq war.

Secondly, we need to preserve the integrity of our lives by what we say and do, even if, as is likely to be the case, this happens outside the public gaze and, so to speak, among friends. Scholarship and truth-seeking can go on even in hostile environments. Acts of care and kindness can sustain a sense of common humanity. The little-known work of many women religious among the marginalised in gaols, detention centres and poorer housing areas will one day be recognised as one of the saving features of our time.

Thirdly, some of us need to speak up, not so much because we are sure that we can change things, though it is necessary that we try, but because it will be important that when future generations look back on the errors of this time they will know that there were contrary voices, and should some future commentators attempt to deny what happened, a written record will be available. One suspects that many public servants are grateful that Andrew Wilkie spoke out against the misuse of intelligence data prior to the Iraq war, even if they were not able to pay the cost themselves. Similarly, Peter Mares’ Borderline stands as a tribute to the first class journalism that finally broke the silence around the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia.

Finally, the bottom of the cave is not in complete darkness. Light from the fire, which casts the shadows on the rear wall, reflects dimly around the chamber. Although overwhelmed by accepted opinion, thought can go on. As well, the masters of the shadows, who move figures in front of the fire to make shadows, also make noises. Although the prisoners attach the sounds to the shadows, inconsistencies must arise, giving opening to fresh inquiry. The human race renews itself by birth and death, and that should be a great consolation. Although we should not burden younger generations with the responsibility of solving the problems created by our generations, they will, in time, come to their own understanding of how things are and what should be done, and we can hope that not a few of them will take the ascent to the light.

Bibliography


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