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What would society look like without God?

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There is a mood abroad in contemporary society that the Christian notion of God is declining in importance.

In the Western world in the last half of the twentieth century we have witnessed declining Church attendances. We have also seen a calling into question of some of the most fundamental assumptions that formerly gave our lives and our communities their sense of coherence and meaning – and ultimately their sense of direction, happiness and hope.

Virtual Heaven

What is happening here in Western Australia reflects the pattern in the wider affluent, educated communities of the world.

The Year 2000 is the 2000th Anniversary of Christian culture. This Sunday the Christian Church celebrates the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. It is an appropriate time to reflect on where we are heading as a community.

If we look at life in a city like Perth today, we can marvel at our affluence and the almost fabulous standard of living that many quite ordinary people are able to enjoy. One no longer needs to be the proverbial “rocket scientist”, a financial or accounting genius, or a member of the professions of medicine or the law to aspire to and obtain affluence. Many of the most affluent people in Perth today began their working life without being academic high fliers at school. They were, and are, trades’ people.

Compared to the standard of living our grandparents and great grandparents enjoyed in places like Perth at the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of us could be forgiven for believing that we had found a virtual form of heaven on earth. It is understandable when people ask, who needs God when we have all this?

The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer...

For most of the twentieth century the economic statistics recorded that most Western communities were narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. As the general standard of living was improving, we were gradually making life better for the less well off and the poor. This is evidenced by the way in which all those who would have formerly been considered as part of the lower middle class or the working class have been able to move into very comfortable lifestyles in the last 40 or 50 years.

In the last decade and a half of the twentieth century that upward trend suddenly, and almost inexplicably, has started to move in the opposite direction. Today we have the situation where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer again. We have moved back into the more common economic pattern that has characterised most periods of human history.

There is another reading of human history beside the currently fashionable one that attributes our present success to our own increasing knowledge, cleverness and access to the secrets of science, technology and economic, business, marketing or political theories.

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Awesome beyond human imagination...

The alternative reading begins with the assumption that all life and each of our lives had a beginning – a creator or being of awesome intellect, power and love who formed the conditions and laws by which life and the universe could be created. Through science and philosophy, and through our exploration of economic, political and social theories we are still unlocking the true genius of this original creator.

It is difficult to describe this original creator. His power is awesome beyond human imagination. His influence and omnipresence is something the human mind cannot comprehend.

In the human dimensions of male and female we perceive God as presented in the Bible as male, although many passages of Scripture also reveal the female side of compassion, tenderness and motherly love. Of course, God is beyond gender, but we have no words to describe such a being.

In many respects this original creator is a mystery. We describe this “mystery” by the title, God. There is only one God. His existence and presence is manifested in many ways.

In our present era of human history the individual has been elevated to being autonomous. We believe we are completely in charge of our lives.

Along with our present success has come a belief that we are also equal, even superior, to our creator. God has become marginalised even irrelevant in many people’s lives. They seem to believe “we don’t need God any more. We are autonomous. We can work this all out on our own.”

I suggest that we will do ourselves the greatest disservice if we allow this thinking or philosophy to become dominant in our culture.

God remains a mystery. God remains the source of all human wisdom, knowledge and love. While we are all equal before him, none of us are equal to him.

“Give us this day, our daily bread”

The other reading of human history that might explain the incredible standards of living we enjoy today in any of the modern cities of Australia is not that we are radically more clever or knowledgeable than our parents, or any of those who went before us.

It just might be that our present good fortune is an outpouring of the beneficence of God for that incredible prayer that billions have offered up each day since it was first recited on a hillside in Galilee almost 2000 years ago, “give us this day, our daily bread”. He did, and in a quite extraordinary way.

The Christian person shares with people of many other faiths the belief that the action of God is manifest, dynamic and ongoing in our lives, our immediate environment and the universe about us today. Down through history and into today, God continues to communicate to us through the lives of spiritually gifted people and through events and people we come into contact with in our daily work and leisure.

The distinguishing belief of Christian faith is that at a singular period in human history, God personally entered into human history. He sent his son, Jesus Christ, to instruct us by way of word and example how to handle the challenges, dilemmas, joys and triumphs that are an inevitable part of all of our lives.

More than this though, Christian faith is grounded in the belief that it is of the essence of our “be-ing” that we are each given free will by our Creator. We can each choose pathways of love and harmony with our fellow human beings and the environment God gave us, or we can choose pathways that lead to disharmony within ourselves and with our neighbours and our environment.

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The widening gap between rich and poor is contrary to God's will. So is the cheapening of human life and the hostility between races and all members of the human community. Human action is always subject to error, we can choose, but as can be well demonstrated with a reflection on some aspects of twentieth century history, without God the choices we make can become, and often are, disastrous mistakes.

It is part of what is called the Salvation story, that God does not intervene in the choices we make in life. However, there is an expectation ever there that there will be an ongoing and a final accounting for the choices we did make in life and for the ways in which we exercised the gift of free will.

At the end of our journey in life, we are not going to be judged on how much money, power or assets we have acquired. We are going to be judged by how we have used the things we have been given and, above all, by how much love there is in us.

The particular challenges, dilemmas, joys and triumphs we come across in our lives today are different in form but not different in essence to the challenges, dilemmas, joys and triumphs that Christ encountered in his life. We learn how to face the challenges, dilemmas, joys and triumphs in our lives by forming a personal relationship with Christ.

By our continued study of his life, and his words in prayer, scripture and sacrament, we form this relationship. Through our relationship with Jesus we obtain the answers and graces that enable us to have peace and equilibrium in our lives no matter what the highs or lows we might be travelling through at any particular moment.

Jesus Christ was sent by God into the world as a role model, mentor and saviour to show each of us the pathways of love and harmony and to turn away from the often beguiling faces of disharmony and evil.

Imagine life without God?

It is fitting that we pause often and ask ourselves, for all the mistakes that we make as individuals and as the human family, what would our life be like if our situation was merely governed by chance? Can you imagine what life would be like if society was really able to take out of it the formative notion that life does have meaning and coherence because there was an ultimate creator and we are in a continuing relationship with that creator?

This Sunday we remember the body and blood of Christ. Through his living flesh God personally entered into our lives. Through Jesus, our Creator became fully human. His persecution, suffering and death provides the insight that it is an inevitable part of life that we all have to face challenges and pain in our lives. His triumph over death on a cross is the symbol of our redemption.

In the words of Scripture, Christ ascended "to the right hand of the Father". In this event we are to understand that humanity and divinity are now inextricably and irrevocably bound together. In Christ our own eternal destiny is mirrored. An understanding of this can fill lives with great hope.

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