

UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

DISCOVERING AN AUSTRALIAN SPIRITUALITY



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Designed and produced by Patrick Lim

THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

DISCOVERING AN AUSTRALIAN SPIRITUALITY

SESSION 1

Introductory reading

John Monash, *A Biography* (p.220) by Geoffrey Serle

A passage from a letter written to his wife (a few days after the landing at Gallipoli) by John Monash, commander of the Australian forces, describing the attitudes of the young Australian troops:

(The men) are as docile and patient and obedient and manageable as children, yet they are full of the finest spirit ... For the most perilous enterprises, whenever volunteers are called for, every man in sight offers instantly, although often it means certain death ... They are always cheerful, cracking jokes, always laughing and joking and singing; and as I move among them and ask 'Well lads, how are you getting on', the invariable answer is 'First rate Sir' ... or 'We're ready for another go'. There have been scenes of awful slaughter, with heaps of dead and wounded and ghastly wounds and long lines of stretcher bearers with their gory burdens, but men march cheerily past and take up their positions for attack and defence ... I am convinced that there are no troops in the world to equal the Australians in cool daring, courage and endurance ... our boys capably led, can give the British regulars points and a beating at *any* part of the game, whether it be digging a trench, or in a bayonet assault, or in steadiness under fire, or in boiling the billy or in ambulance work, or in cheerfully suffering fatigue and privations, or in marching, or personal bravery. Our wounded are most amazing: they sing, they cheer, they smoke their cigarettes, even when so badly hit as to have to be carried on a stretcher. ◇

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the Booklet 'Getting Started' pp .14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ Do you think Australians have a distinctive outlook and qualities? Can you suggest some of them?

- ◆ Do you think we are in danger of losing our distinctive tradition?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 1:
Our Unique Australian Culture
- ◆ Chapter 2:
The 'Battler' Spirit of our True Self
- ◆ Chapter 3:
A 'Fair Go' for Everyone Expresses our True Self

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet, 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

Reading related to the theme

The Quality of Sprawl, a poem by Les Murray

Sprawl is the quality
of a man who cut down his Rolls-Royce
into a farm utility truck, and sprawl
is what the company lacked when it made repeated efforts
to buy the vehicle back and repair its image.

Sprawl is doing your farming by aeroplane, roughly,
or driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home ...

Sprawl is Hank Stamper in Never Give an Inch
bisecting an obstructive official's desk with a chain saw.
Not harming the official. Sprawl is never brutal
though it is often intransigent ...

Sprawl leans on things. It is loose limbed in its mind.
Reprimanded and dismissed
it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail
of possibility. It may have to leave the Earth.
Being roughly Christian, it scratches the other cheek
and thinks it unlikely. Though people have been shot for sprawl. □

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ Do the explanations given of 'culture' and 'spirituality', and the ideal of 'our best self' help you to relate your faith journey to your experience as an Australian? Can you share something of this with the group?
- ◆ Would you care to comment on matters discussed in this session that were new to you, or things that moved you?

DISCOVERING AN AUSTRALIAN SPIRITUALITY

SESSION 2

Introductory reading

Spirit and Place by David Tacey
An article in Earthsong Journal, Spring 2004
An abridged excerpt

In Western cultures, religion has become a remarkably heady experience. It is a way of the mind, and a way of moral understanding, and if we are very fortunate, it reaches down into the heart as well, and ignites a life of true faith. In the West, religion is intimately tied up with language, words, verbal expressions, sermons, creeds, catechism, theology. As Veronica Brady has said, there is a lot of chattering about religion, a great deal of God-language, but not much God-presence ...

Writing of divine presence in Australia, the poet Les Murray has said that this presence is almost beneath notice, as attainable as gravity, it is a continuing recovering moment ... A reality larger than ourselves beckons us in this country, a reality born of silence and not readily translated into concepts of language ...

Australian spirituality is and will continue to be, grounded in the ordinary events and experiences of daily existence. The sacred here will be ordinarily sacred; we will receive what Les Murray calls the 'ordinary mail of the other world, wholly common, not postmarked divine' ...

The sacred may be, paradoxically, beneath official religious notice. This would not be the first time ...

In Australian society, we find a certain preoccupation with the ordinary and the everyday, a down-to-earth sensibility which, in spite of its name, often reaches mystical intensity in its focus on the depth and goodness of ordinary things. We sometimes find, especially in outback settlements and country areas, a reverence for things, objects, places, landmarks, that exceeds the bounds of materiality and becomes a kind of spiritual reverence. ◇

Question opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following question:

Question

- ◆ We discussed many matters in our first session on Australian spirituality; would you care to share with the group things that stayed with you after the session?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 4:
The Testing of our Best Self – Our Relationship with Indigenous Australians
- ◆ Chapter 5:
The Land, the Unique Symbol of our True Self
- ◆ Chapter 6:
Australian Spirituality and Christian Faith

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

An alternative reading in pages 26-27

In Search of Henry Lawson (p.97)

by Manning Clark's

He describes Lawson's 'bush preacher'.

There was something, the reader is told, in his big dark-brown eyes that was scarcely misery, nor yet sadness – a sort of haunting sympathy. When he preached to the bush people McLaughlan did not preach much about hope in this world. Like Lawson ... McLaughlan had long since abandoned hope that either man or place could ever be any different. He did not promise 'better times' to a people whose crops were ruined by drought, to a people who had slaved for twenty, thirty, or forty years, only to end by being starved off their selections and forced to work as hirelings for wages, leaving behind them a dusty patch in the scrub. He spoke to them of life as they knew it, about their secret longings for something better, and of how they would have to suffer much before they could achieve anything in Australia. He told them there was beauty in their lives, yes and even in their harsh uncouth land, if only they would look for it. He spoke to them about the evils of self-pity and not forgiving men their trespasses, and remaining hard of heart. At the end of the sermon they all sang together a hymn, the words of which referred to that river for which they longed ... 'Shall we gather at the River' ... The irony was, as Lawson pointed out, that the 'only "rivers" round there were barren creeks ... perhaps a mudhole every mile or so, and dead beasts rotting and stinking every few yards. □

Alternative reading

Bullocky, a poem by Judith Wright

This poem gives expression to the tragic realism so important in our cultural tradition. The old man's madness – bringing to mind the challenges Australians have often had to face – becomes 'a divine frenzy which possesses and also blesses the land'. Somehow, it is the humble bullock driver, rather than the brave squatter or heroic explorer who most fittingly embodies our Australian experience.

Beside the heavy-shouldered team
thirsty with drought and chilled with rain,
he weathered all the striding years
till they ran widdershins in his brain.

...

All the long straining journey grew
a mad apocalyptic dream,
and he old Moses, and the slaves
his suffering and stubborn team.

Then in his evening camp beneath
the half-light pillars of the trees
he filled the steepled cone of night
with shouted prayers and prophecies.

While past the campfire's crimson ring
the star struck darkness cupped him round;
and centuries of cattle-bells
rang with their sweet uneasy sound.

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,
and plough strikes bone across the grass,
and vineyards cover all the slopes
where the dead teams were used to pass.

O vine, grow close upon that bone
And hold it with your rooted hand.
The prophet Moses feeds the grape,
and fruitful is the Promised Land. ◆

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*

2. *The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ You could say, with Les Murray, that the characteristics displayed by our 'best self' have a 'vernacular' character – as an expression of the common sense and good nature of rank and file human beings at their best. Can you share with the group some of these qualities as you recognise them in people you admire?

- ◆ Does what we have seen concerning the meeting between Christian faith and Australian experience help you understand the history of our Catholic Church in Australia?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

A "spirituality" is an approach to life that is in touch with the yearnings, hopes and commitments that are the measure of our human existence. As Australians, we share a distinctive culture, derived in part from the old world, and shaped as well by the experience of sharing life in this unique continent. Australian spirituality can be defined as the "best self" of our distinctive culture.

Life in this continent has not been easy – with its unexpected "dead heart", and its extremes of drought and flood, always at the mercy of the fluctuations of world markets. But this experience has made the "battler" spirit an important component of our best self – making Australians remarkable for their resourcefulness and inventiveness, and for the courage they have shown on the battle field. Adversity has given our best self the wisdom we needed to cope with the set-backs of life. Even though, in the 19th century, Australia was – surprisingly! – one of the most urbanized countries in the world, the "battler" spirit has been associated especially with life in "the bush". Australians have an extraordinary affinity with "the bush" and all that it symbolizes – perhaps it has been seen as what is most distinctively ours as we owned an approach to life very different from much that was taken for granted in the old world. Reflecting this spirit, our Australian humour gives expression to our "best self" – dry, not letting impossible situations get us down, and levelling in a good-natured way.

Our convict origins have not only kept us humble, but they have had a lasting effect on our "best self" - wanting a "fair go" for all. We must acknowledge, however, that this unusual origin, and the influx of diggers during the early gold rushes (so that for a long period males far outnumbered females in the population) has given rise to an exclusive male culture ("mateship"). We are coming to recognize that this distinctively Australian culture has an unfortunate shadow side. On the other hand, the living of the Australian egalitarian spirit had, by the beginning of the 20th century, made our country a "social laboratory", pioneering measures of social justice that were admired by the social reformers of Europe.

A people's culture has been described as "a struggle to be human and to remain human" (Bernard Smith). The relationship of white Australians to indigenous Australians has severely tested our "best self" in a way we are still coming to terms with. In the end, it is in our relationship with this strange continent that the cultures of both Aboriginal Australians and other Australians have developed their distinctive characteristics. For both groups this continent has become a beloved symbol of what we hold in common.

The Christian faith has not had an easy relationship with the Australian outlook. In the beginning, the convicts looked upon the official chaplains as tools of a hateful establishment. Later, the Christian denominations - carrying on their sectarian squabbles - seemed to be out of step with an outlook that wanted to leave the problems of the old world behind. But the wisdom brought by our "battler" spirit, and our commitment to a "fair go" for all, are not far from the message of the Christian gospel – as some of the visionaries who have attempted to point the way forward for us have recognized. □

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