A pilgrimage of listening

Robin J. Pryor

Introduction

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS RETREAT WAS CONCEIVED on a Wednesday pilgrimage around the island of Iona in 1991,[1] about as far as is possible from the Tasmanian islands which I have enjoyed exploring since the early 1960s, and a half a world away from the Celtic roots of the modern Iona community. But the inspiration was in the special coalescence of place and history, of prayer and exposure to creation, of contemplation in community, of deep reflection in the context of outward journeying. 'A pilgrimage of listening' was born as an annual six-day retreat. My wife Bronwyn and I take a group of ten others to two islands in Bass Strait between the southern Australian states of Victoria and Tasmania. Flinders Island and Cape Barren Island are set in the turbulent currents and 'Roaring Forties' winds.

The purpose is to provide a meditative introduction to the natural wilderness and beauty of these isolated islands, and to the experience of dispossession and survival of Tasmanian Aboriginals who were taken to these islands in the early nineteenth century. We clamber along the rocky granite coastlines, swim in the little bays (if it is warm enough), sit on the dunes, climb in Mt Strzelecki National Park and stroll across sheep-grazed paddocks. We sit on the beach, walk the gravel tracks, or sit around the camp fire with people said no longer to exist – after all, colonial government policy wiped them out in the middle of last century. And we listen for what the Spirit will say to us through these places and peoples of today as we gather for prayer, reflection and learning together.

The emphasis of the retreat experience is on *listening*: listening to God incarnated for us in this place and time; listening to the stories, fears and hopes of a few members of the small Aboriginal population; and listening to each other as we enter into this low-key experience of exposure, reflection and reconciliation.

The historical context of the islands

Sealing and whaling were the source of livelihood for European and American seamen in Bass Strait from the late 1790s and into the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Some of the islands became

bases for boiling down the catch, for fresh water supplies, and a refuge from the storms, but there were no Aboriginal inhabitants at that time (though archaeological evidence indicates their presence from five to ten thousand years earlier).

Meanwhile in Van Diemen's Land (then the name for Tasmania), the colonial government set in train a series of significant events from late 1830[2] because of the conflict between newly arrived European settlers and tribal Aboriginals into whose territories the farmers and road surveyors were moving; and also because of the desire to 'civilize and christianize' the indigenous inhabitants. When Governor Arthur's infamous 'black line' failed to round up the Aboriginal people, George Augustus Robinson was commissioned as Conciliator of Aborigines. With the help of several Aboriginals whom he had genuinely befriended, a start was made in 'persuading' them to come out of the forests and hills and submit to the beneficence of the government. Freedom fighters and truly charismatic leaders among them notwithstanding, several hundred Aboriginals were sent by ship in 1830–1831 to a series of inadequate camps on Bass Strait islands. This great unsettling of a people culminated in the settlement at Wybalenna on Flinders Island from January 1833 till October 1847; then the forty-six who had not died of heart-break and European diseases were shipped to Oyster Cove in Tasmania and left to die out.

Despite near genocide, and intermarriage with sealers and others, there is an Aboriginal population of 7,000 in Tasmania and the Bass Strait islands today, plus their diaspora in other places.[3] Their survival is a credit to their resilience and pride as a people, but they are still a dispossessed and grieving people, struggling to make their way in a rapidly changing world. It is with some of these scattered and gentle people that we share a walk in the bush or a camp-fire meal during the retreat.

The traditional elements of the retreat

Each of the six days is framed by retreatants sharing in morning and evening prayer, with Holy Communion on the beach on the first and last days. Within this frame, there is the traditional retreat rhythm of work (meal preparation, domestic tasks, and travel to places of historic significance), study (brief input sessions, deep listening to others, reading), and prayer (both corporately and alone, as we walk or sit on the beach or in the bush).

Participants are encouraged consciously to live at a slower and quieter pace than usual, to walk more slowly, to listen longer and speak

less; and to listen, not only to each other and to our islander companions, but to God's presence in these starkly beautiful and windswept islands. Retreatants are invited to come prepared to hear the whispers of the Spirit, gentle or maybe not so gentle; to move into a place of healing and reconciliation with themselves, with God, with others and with creation; and perhaps to respond creatively in writing, sketching, in song, in still silence or in movement.

While the communal and community-building aspect of the retreat is central and significant to all, participants are called to respect each other's need of space and focus. Times of silence each day are especially to be valued as a gift to each other as well as to God. At other times, people may choose to be silent, or at least quiet, in the company of one or two others, or to be solitary, but if they plan to walk some distance along the coast or into the bush, they are asked to inform the leaders and to note the expected time of re-gathering. Provision is also made for water-bottles and first-aid supplies, both essentials in the Australian bush.

Practical arrangements

Where possible, participants gather at our home in Melbourne a month or two before the retreat to receive a briefing and to meet each other. Where distance prevents participation contact is made to ensure there is a common basis of understanding as to the nature and logistics of the retreat.

For the first three nights we rent two self-catering houses or units. The relative comfort of the night-time accommodation allows people to settle in to the demands of the outdoor exposure during the daytime. On the following morning we travel by boat the hour-or-so journey from Flinders Island south to Cape Barren Island where we camp in two-person tents on the grassy foreshore for two nights. Here water-supply and toilets are courtesy of the nearby one-teacher (eight pupil) school. Food supplies are ordered in advance from local suppliers. Food preparation and cooking are shared and, apart from breakfasts, are all 'in the bush'. If the weather is windy (usually) or wet (sometimes) we usually keep to the programme, as this is part of the retreat experience.

The daily retreat programme

Although each day differs in location and detail, the general framework is as follows. After breakfast we drive to beach/bush location for the day. Morning prayer is followed by silence till noon with time for walking, beachcombing with God, meditation, creative

expression. Lunch leads on to quiet time, listening to the land, seeking the gentle breeze of the Spirit, walking the beach. Barbecue dinner in the early evening is followed by visiting a mutton bird rookery, kangaroo feeding ground etc. Returning to base we have silence for personal prayer, journalling; shared reflection; supper; evening prayer beginning at 8 p.m., then silence at 10 p.m.

A separate leaflet is prepared for each day's morning and evening prayer, the two eucharists, and for several specific locations during the retreat. The material used in these has been carefully chosen with two purposes in mind: first, to reflect older and contemporary prayers and poetry of direct relevance to the context, especially Aboriginal and other Australian authors, but also including prayers and songs from Iona, Taizé and the world Church, plus sketches and pictures from the islands and their history, flora and fauna; second, to encourage creative writing and drawing by participants. That the latter aim has been successful is found in the output from the past two retreats, adding up to nearly forty A4 pages of poetry and other creative efforts.

The particular features within this framework include: a visit to small museum on Aboriginal history and culture; Holy Communion on the beach; visiting an Aboriginal Community Centre, and most of a day at Wybalenna, the remnants of the 1833–1847 Aboriginal settlement, including an extant brick chapel; input by Aboriginal leaders; exploring the small settlement on Cape Barren island, meeting local Aboriginal people there at their initiative; visiting some local families at their invitation; yarning, meals and camp fire together on the beach. On the final day, after a morning for silent reflection within or beyond the camp, we celebrate holy communion on the beach before departing.

Where possible, a partial or full reunion is held for retreatants about four to six weeks after the retreat, when their collated writings, drawings, original songs and selected photos are distributed by the leaders under the title 'From the Spirit's wings'. These provide an opportunity for further sharing, reflection, the naming of significant experiences, and evaluative comments to aid the planning of future such retreats.

Reflection on the case study

In his book *Strategies for growth in religious life*,[4] Gerald Arbuckle outlines a process model of separation/transformation/incorporation which continues to inform our approach to the planning and leadership of retreats. A retreat is an invitation to liminality, to the crossing of emotional and spiritual thresholds: a going apart from the familiar, to

facilitate a contemplative stance from which to address a creative/demanding retreat theme, in order to return home with new or deepened insights out of encounter with the holy, in real time, and in specific places. An incarnational theology expects encounter with the Spirit, however painful or joyful the context in human terms.

The 'Pilgrimage of listening' lives out of these criteria, while holding together for participants the experience of the stark natural beauty of the islands with a deep psycho-spiritual lament for the fate of the dispossessed and dispersed Aboriginal peoples.[5] God is encountered both in presence (in creation, and occasional actions of humane good will), and in absence (in the seeming failure to intervene in the horrors of white–black interaction).

> Pilgrims go forth . . . to be one with God, with others, and with themselves. They visit 'sacred places' because they believe these places are locations which have experienced an irruption of the divine [and] they hold that they are also sites where one can recall and thus make present in one's own life the great interventions of God on earth and within human history.[6]

The islands of Bass Strait are not Lourdes, Iona or Jerusalem, but they *are* places where God has laughed and wept with human beings over the centuries; they are places where, maybe through novelty for city-dwellers, the granite tors speak of strong foundations and the whispering breezes and howling gales through the she-oaks speak of change and renewal and the challenge to 'grow where you are planted', whatever the circumstances.

'Physical journeys act out our experience of an inner journey. In the past, people expected to be changed by pilgrimage and even to be transformed . . . [and] it placed a vast psychological, social and even spiritual distance between the pilgrim and "home".'[7] Camp-fire reflections, simple jottings during quiet times on the beach, or a sketch made tearfully in an overgrown cemetery – these may not be the making of a new spirituality for the third millennium, but they are signposts of the Spirit's disturbing, compassionate and healing presence among us. The outward journeying facilitates and sensitizes the retreatant to a new and liminal inner journeying, and the two are held profoundly together in the prayers of the pilgrim people: *peregrinatio pro Christo*, in this corner of the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.

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NOTES

1 See Peter Millar, *An Iona prayer book* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998), pp 57–74; *The Iona Community worship book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1991), pp 60ff; participation in mid-1991 in a retreat on Celtic spirituality led by Esther and Victor de Waal on Bardsey Island, off the Lleyn peninsula of Wales, was also seminal in my appreciation of an island-based retreat: see Esther de Waal, *A world made whole* (London; Fount, 1991), p 42.

2 Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a free people: a radical re-examination of the Tasmanian wars* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1995); Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996, 2nd edition).

3 Josephine Flood, *Archaeology of the dreamtime* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1995), p 210.

4 Gerald Arbuckle, *Strategies for growth in religious life* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1987).

5 And see David Tacey, *The edge of the sacred: transformation in Australia* (North Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1995); Anne Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal spirituality: past, present, future* (Blackburn: HarperCollinsReligious, 1996).

6 Marie Nöel Keller, 'A road to Emmaus', *The Way* vol 39, no 1 (January 1999), p 40.

7 Philip Sheldrake, 'Travelling through life? subversive journeys', *The Way* vol 39, no 1 (January 1999), p 8.

Liturgy and ritual processes during the directed retreat

Janet K. Ruffing

LITURGY AND RITUAL PROCESSES DURING THE DIRECTED RETREAT are, in my view, an extremely important aspect of the directed retreat within a communal context.[1] Careful attention to ritual can profoundly enhance the experience of the retreatants within their individual retreat processes. Because retreatants and directors are gathered in a communal setting for the directed retreat, more flexible liturgical norms can apply to this kind of gathering than to public liturgies in parish contexts which attract a broader spectrum of participants.[2] However, this dimension can also be the most problematic to develop and negotiate within the retreat staff group, the sponsoring retreat centre, and, at times, with the retreatants themselves. In many instances, both retreatants and retreat directors operate from an impoverished understanding and experience of liturgy, and of the evocative potential of symbol and ritual enactment for the participants.

Ritual at the service of the retreat process

The central principle at work for teams of directors on the directed retreat is that everything is done in the service of the retreatants' retreat. That means directors supporting and resourcing one another so that they are at their best for each retreat interview. Rituals developed for the retreat should relate to the retreat process itself, both supporting and challenging the retreatants' experience of God within the retreat. Directors may need to rely on musicians and a liturgist to develop the liturgical events if their spiritual direction focus would suffer from their personal involvement in preparing homilies or liturgical planning. For directors who are able to work creatively with the liturgy, it is helpful to have their responsibilities for specific celebrations assigned to them prior to the retreat itself. This gives the time necessary to develop relevant aspects such as the form of liturgy, the music, and the choice of aesthetic objects to make the liturgical environments pleasing, helpful and evocative.

It is a sad commentary on the contemporary Church that many retreatants, especially women, arrive on retreat from a situation of

liturgical famine. For the most part, women who make the directed retreat are either church professionals themselves, women religious, full-time lay ministers, or lay people who are deeply committed to the Church and participate in spiritual direction during the course of the rest of the year. For many of them, their experience of ritual is one of being rather passive. Silently they listen to readings and prayers rendered in deliberately exclusive language, speak minimal set responses, and participate from a distance in a ritual largely performed by clergy. Only if music is integral to the celebration – and that is usually restricted to Sundays – will the singing offer a more fully embodied role for the congregation. Yet the theology they espouse causes them to identify themselves with the Church as the people of God as it enacts itself in the works of mercy, continues to be Christ's presence in the world and offers the pastoral ministries these retreatants exercise in and for the community of faith. Too often this experience of the Christian mysteries of the non-ordained members of the community is not allowed to come to ritual expression, especially at eucharist. Mary Collins aptly raises this question in terms of current liturgical practice, which has become fixated at the socio-political level to the neglect of the theological core of liturgy.

> What is necessary for the eschatological mystery to break through in liturgical epiphany so that the Church realizes and recognizes itself? At a minimum, the Church must remember the story of Jesus and the relationships manifest there. There are various tellings; but, the narrative outline is firm. There is the created world that God loves in its woundedness and alienation; God's enfleshment in human history, especially in the history of suffering embraced by Jesus; God's resolute forgiveness of human blindness and obtuseness even in the face of love; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus on those who recognize God in Jesus; the enlistment of these Spirit-filled disciples who, with grateful hearts, continue Jesus' mission of showing God's face to the world.
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> When the spiritual compass of the Church's liturgy is directed to remembering its own participation in the relationships revealed in Christ, the liturgy has the power to transform the human spirit of those who participate. The power rises from the core Christian identity of the baptized, who press to understand more fully the meaning of their lives.[3]

Many retreatants long for ritual communal opportunities in which their desires and yearnings for such transformation are given image and

expression rather than negated and silenced by the manner of celebrating. This, I believe, is one of the possibilities of eucharistic liturgies in the retreat context. But even more than that, I believe the entire experience of a retreat is a larger ritual process. This process can be brought more fully into symbolic awareness broadly in two ways: by the creation of rituals other than eucharist which are enacted by the whole community, and by private rituals enacted by the individual retreatant within her or his unique process.

The retreat as a ritual process

The proposal that a directed retreat is a ritual process follows Victor Turner's analysis of the stages of a rite of passage: the retreat is a time of deliberately chosen liminality for the purpose of transformation. The retreatant separates from ordinary life and community and journeys to a special and sacred place, seeking an experience of solitude and intimacy with God. In the group retreat, this experience of deliberately sought solitude with God occurs within an alternative community which may become an experience of *communitas* – everyone on the retreat assuming roles different from those in ordinary life, more fully egalitarian and supportive of the transformative spiritual process of the retreat. When this happens, a profound spiritual connection may occur, even in the midst of silence.

The individual direction sessions are themselves a dyadic ritual involving the director and the retreatant. This ritual takes place in a sacred and private interview space where there is often a display of some kind of sacred or natural symbols – flowers, images, a candle, a Bible, arranged by the director. The retreatant enters the room and leaves it at a set time; directors and directees create their own rituals for beginning and ending sessions. The narrative of sacred experience is honoured by the director's responses and, one hopes, expert guidance or accompaniment of the retreatant. The daily schedule has set times for meals and may be punctuated by communal prayer – morning prayer or morning body praise, eucharist or an alternative ritual, and night prayer. The final stage of the retreat process is savouring or assimilating the particular graces of the retreat and anticipating or preparing for the return back to ordinary life. The communal prayer and ritual throughout the retreat needs to be integral in the service of each retreatant's process.

The beginning

It is important to support the beginning and ending of the retreat with a ritual appropriate to the particular retreat house and its schedule. In my experience, a ritual which opens the retreat best takes place after all the preliminaries of arrival, room assignments, assignment of directors, and orientation to the retreat and the centre have taken place. This opening service needs to help retreatants arrive, get some sense of who else is on retreat with them and help them shift into the quieter, slower rhythm of the retreat. This ritual, whether a eucharist, compline or another simple prayer service, helps the retreatants individually and as a group to settle into the retreat, entering into the silence of the sacred time and space of retreat. Some teams have adapted a Sunday eucharist for this purpose when a retreat has had to begin on a Sunday and most of the retreatants would have been travelling to reach the retreat centre. For instance, one Sunday the Elijah story of the miraculous feeding became the promise of 'food for the journey' for the entire retreat. Another eucharist opened the retreat on the Vigil of the Assumption. It focused on the contemplative mystery of Mary's total transformation as a promise of our own destiny, using rich visual icons from a Sienese painting of the life of Mary for environment, and meditative music in the service. Retreatants gathered around the altar in the chapel for a eucharist prayer punctuated with their sung acclamations. One of the directors gave a brief homily, ending with lines from a Rilke poem.

When neither a Sunday nor feastday made a eucharist necessary at the opening, we have often preferred a simpler mood-setting ritual. We have used a series of slide projections matched by reflective texts from Scripture; compline with a walking meditation on a labyrinth emphasizing the first phase of the retreat: the journeying to one's own centre. Another time the symbolic focus was on an arrangement of the shoes of the gathered community in the centre of the room. The shoes were contemplated and incensed, evoking the sense of holy ground which caused Moses to take off his shoes before the burning bush. The retreatants were then blessed as they began their retreat.

Such ritual, or one on the first full day of retreat, needs to set the tone for the entire retreat, inviting retreatants consciously to embrace the opportunity of the retreat, evoke their desire for God and for spiritual growth. Ritual can facilitate each aspect of this arrival and beginning process in both verbal and richly symbolic ways.

Sacramental liturgies

One reason retreatants choose to make a retreat in a group context may be not only the availability of a competent director but also the opportunity for a daily eucharist and a reconciliation service related to the retreat process. Some retreatants approach the sacrament of reconciliation only within the context of their annual retreat. The eucharistic liturgies are important to the retreat process for a number of reasons; they make present the reality of Church beyond this particular gathered community. The retreat liturgies can be an expression of the retreat group's intentional connection to the larger Church, a way to pray for its needs and those of the world, and a way for participants themselves to be more deeply nourished by the sacraments.

We usually follow the cycle of readings and feasts established by the universal Church. Whoever prepares the liturgy either chooses to keep the daily reading from the lectionary or selects from the options related to a particular feast day. The planners then focus the celebration through a particular thematic or symbolic lens appropriate to the dynamics of the retreat process. This focusing is celebrated through music, the preached reflections of the director on the readings, and the use of appropriate symbol in the liturgical environment. In the planning, it is important to remember that music, with or without words, touches into feelings among the participants of which they may not be entirely conscious. So, too, an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of the room, the table for celebration, colour and central symbol richly nourish the senses and evoke responses of delight and reverence.

The retreat reflections on the Word often support retreatants in their individual process and also challenge them. For instance, the eucharist itself, as well as the lectionary readings, presents the mystery of Christ, the gathered community, the dynamics of life in Christ such as conversion, call, repentance, suffering, gratitude, praise, discipleship, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is primarily through the liturgy that the Christian story is evoked and the individual retreatant powerfully encounters these mysteries which theologically form the larger context in which the individual retreat takes place. With its word and ritual the eucharistic liturgy can be an important input and voice from the tradition beyond the individualized experience of the retreatant. The eucharist makes present the larger story, mystery and community to which we belong and which inhabits us. Liturgy is one of the privileged loci of religious experience and should be deliberately cultivated through taking great care with liturgical celebration during the retreat.[4]