

We are nine months out from Christmas and the reading we heard earlier is one of the choices for today's feast of the Annunciation. Do you think, perhaps, that the author of the First Letter of John had theological education somehow in mind?

We've heard the opening:

Something which is known to have been from the beginning, this we have heard and seen with our own eyes, ... the Word who is Life, this we share with you...¹

Although we don't know exactly what prompted this letter, it's pretty clearly an intervention in a conflicted Johannine community where powerful voices are disputing the Incarnation. As it unfolds, the letter affirms the experience of Jesus that has been preached "since the beginning" and sets that heard, seen, touched revelation into the longer context of God who liberates and saves. If John's Gospel underlines the divinity of Jesus, this letter of John's emphasises the humanity of the Word of Life, Jesus experienced as the Christ.

So, here is a tussle about inculturation and about theological method.

It's a warning, perhaps, to remember that in Roman-occupied Judea, a young woman took an extraordinary risk, and the Word became flesh in that particular time and place. It's also a reminder that consequently, the familiar Greek categories that insisted on a strict separation between humanity and divinity had to be exploded in order to take account of the life that flowed from her experience.

There's the theological method: allowing experience to utterly upend categories in order to think something totally new. Not only to think otherwise but also to see and hear differently, to touch and act outside the norms, precisely because the core of life has been refracted and re-imagined.

It's probably too much to suggest there's been radical reimagination in every assignment our graduates tonight have undertaken but: Were there not times when the categories exploded? when previously disembodied information found its place in the fabric of your life? when you found yourself writing or speaking new truths? Knowing some of our graduates and knowing the enterprise we engage in together, I think we can hold on to this idea of theology as learning to see, learning to listen and hear and *become* something new.

It is no simple task.

The instrumental language of production and management is everywhere. The temptations to be useful, autonomous and spectacular are subtle and pervasive,² and like all the rest they are coded for race and gender, and a particular kind of White Western success.³ In our context, reeling from scandal and denial, with most of us benefiting from the structures of invasion, how do we do enable lives lived whole?

¹ This is the rendering of 1 John 1: 1-2 by the Monks of the Weston Priory from their 1978 folk hymn. It echoes the NRSV translation that we heard read. <https://www.westonpriory.org/esales/lyrics/Something%20Which%20Is%20Known.pdf>.

² These are identified as the temptations in the desert by Henri Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*, New York: Harper Collins, (1991) 2014.

³ See especially Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.



“Together” is the first word in the University’s strategic plan and we usually think of that as shared enterprise across distinct colleges. For me, it’s also become a keyword in the academic enterprise.

As some of you know, I’ve been involved for 30 years now in research projects that centred on the Benedictine mission town of New Norcia in Western Australia, and especially the Spanish missionary women whose lives were entwined with the Yued-Noongar families and members of the Stolen Generations. I’ve learnt again and again, in those visceral moments of collapsing categories, and radical re-imagination, and awkward mistakes, that understanding is forged together, in relationship and community.

Desmond Tutu once remarked that Western theology offers excellent answers to questions that no one in Africa is asking. He pointed to ritual especially as the way to ground experience and speak about the possibility of new creation.⁴ As I dare, as a Wadjela (a White-y from Noongar country), to say just a little more about our relationship to context I have in mind the generosity of the New Norcia women – Benedictine and Indigenous – and some key sacramental occasions I’ve shared with them.

In Australia First Nations authors have long held out a vision of theology in community, empowered by context and ritual. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* is adamant that the unceded sovereignty of this land is not simply political but spiritual, and surely offers an invitation to comparative theology, together. Across the country there are early memories of some Aboriginal women and men who have done that comparative work: Nathaniel Pepper, Moses Tjalkabota, Eliza Willaway, Esther Managku.⁵

But it was the upsurge of publications about Australia in 1988 that brought First Nations authors decisively to the fore. It is now 34 years since Ngangi-kurung-kurr elder and theologian, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann first published in English about the spiritual principle *dadirri*. She invited understanding of this “quiet still awareness, and deep, inner listening” as “something like contemplation”.⁶ Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson, a Jiman Bundjalung woman who works to heal transgenerational trauma, has given us other First Nations’ words for this connection of mind and heart, together.⁷ Noongar elder Elizabeth Pike describes the power of story to “awaken awareness and stir compassion” when it’s received and heard in the relationship of *dadirri*.⁸

Connected to country and context, and named by Ungunmerr-Bauman as an Aboriginal gift to Australia, can theology find here a method for healing, renewal and reconciliation? We, all of us, are being invited by these women elders into the honest, disciplined, sometimes painful reciprocity that involves responsibility for the relationships that are formed and transformed. It must be done together.

This is theological work that spins a bridge of relationship across division. It is not the explosion of categories so much as their expansion. Perhaps this is what Incarnation means. Perhaps this is how life flows out of the experience. Perhaps this is with whom and how theological education moves decisively towards wholeness, together.

⁴ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009, 118.

⁵ For Nathaniel Pepper, see Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathaniel Pepper and the Ruptured World*, Carlton: Scribe, 2007; for Moses Tjalkabota, see Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History*, Sydney: NewSouth, 2018; For Eliza Willaway, see Katharine Massam, *A Bridge Between: Spanish Benedictine Missionary Women in Australia*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2020; for Esther Managku, see Sally K. May, Laura Rademaker, Donna Nadjamerrek, Julie Narndal Gumurdul, *The Bible in Buffalo Country: Oenpelli Mission 1925- 1931*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2020.

⁶ Miriam Rose Ungunmerr- Baumann, “Dadirri”, *Compass Theology Review* 1988, vol. 22: 1-2, 9-11. Also now: <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>

⁷ For the Gamilaraay: *winangargurri*; in central Queensland: *yimbanyiara*. Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines. The Transgeneration Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Melbourne: Spinfex Press, (2002) 2017, 15-6.

⁸ Elizabeth Pike, ‘Reconciliation, or Conciliation through Restoration?’, in *Developing an Australian Theology*, ed. Peter Malone, Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 1999, 38.

