

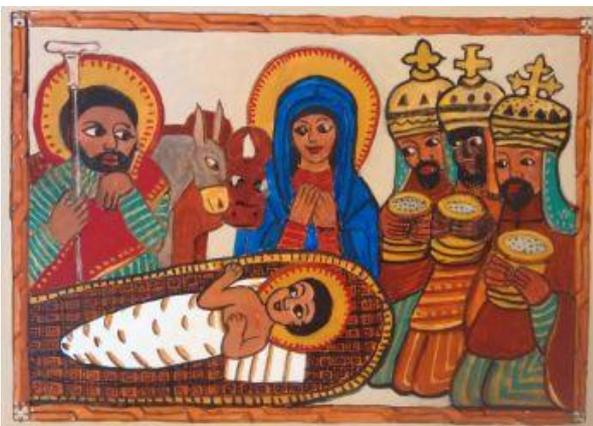


Summer 2017

## Introduction

Is Advent the most ignored season of the church year, those divisions which we honoured in primary school by faithful colouring in of vestments and altar cloths in green, purple and so on? Christmas of course gets white and gold, stars on top of foreign trees and packages piled high with all kinds of shiny wrapping.

My image for this newsletter which covers so many areas, is one of people of different ages gathering with their guests to celebrate Christmas, around a table soon to be laden with good things to try. The room looks beautiful and includes something like an ancient icon, (as interpreted by Wendy).



I painted this icon from an original Ethiopian one on Velum. In traditional style Joseph carries a prayer stick. In Ethiopian churches there are no chairs and the services are long so the prayer stick is to lean on. The Magi are wearing traditional Ethiopian crowns, and we saw several of these in the Treasuries of churches we visited. They are made of gold, silver or brass.

The conversation in this room ranges from housekeeping matters, like Tim's news from the Church Council to reflections on the significance of the day, so that as the children impatiently wait for their presents Craig offers a thought-provoking piece on the nature of giving.

As the guests sink lower into the chairs, they are entertained with a little vicarious travel thanks to the Blackwoods, their experiences enhanced by photographs of a little-known world, as rich as a pudding with all the trimmings. And yet this sentence stands out: "The décor of the churches focused on beauty rather than opulence."

Coffee or tea is needed to bring back a sense of the everyday and there's more talk ... although who would think Australians were still up for a discussion about the Census, or polls? Even if introduced by Bruce Barber with provocative questions like "Is Christianity a religion?"

Enter your editor, with the last word, and returning to the theme of gifting with a story that will lift your heart and make you proud to be sitting at this table. Make sure you read the whole newsletter this time as there may be something of interest to you personally, as indeed there will be throughout this Christmas edition of Mark the Word, again a surprisingly big issue, and again with huge thanks to the writers and our indefatigable Producer \*Rubik Memory, Esquire.

(Siri, the dictation tool, gave us the gift of laughter with this version of the far more recognisable \*Rod Mummery!)

Suzanne Yanko  
Editor

---

## **From the Church Council**

by Tim O'Connor

### All Saints

The Congregation commemorated All Saints' Day on 5 November in a service that featured several striking icons of saints of the Church, which were written by Peter Blackwood and displayed on the side walls. A fine congregational lunch of food to share followed, as is also our custom on Mark the Evangelist Day.

### Baptism

Gabriel Mancuso, son of Catherine and Norm and brother of Sam, was baptised on 12 November. Peter Blackwood, Gabriel's grandfather, was the beaming celebrant, and many friends and relatives of the Mancusos came to witness the occasion.

### Transfers of membership

David and Gonni Runia asked for their membership to be transferred to Ocean Grove, as they are spending less time in Melbourne after David's retirement as Master of Queen's College. Similarly Noel and Cynthia Schultz asked that their membership be transferred to St John's Essendon, where they have been attending for some time. We remember with appreciation their friendship and contributions to the Congregation.

### Mark the Evangelist Futures Project

We are very aware of the disappointingly slow progress this year in advancing the Mark the Evangelist property plans. After approval of the Project Business Case by the Property Board earlier in the year, planning was delayed, among other things, by changes in key staff of Property Services, who decided that the option of a ground lease should be investigated, an option that had previously been off the table. The results will be presented in the New Year.

### Keeping Children Safe

Like other Church Councils throughout the Uniting Church, we received and considered a suite of documents under the title of Keeping Children Safe. We endorsed the Keeping Children Safe Policy and signed a Code of Conduct and a Statement of Commitment. We also notified Synod of a few amendments which we thought proper, where the wording of policies made reference to social values extraneous to keeping children safe and to the Church. It was good to have Ann Wilkinson assist us in these deliberations, as the Congregation's Culture of Safety Contact Person.

### *Elders' pastoral lists*

The pastoral lists of elders have been reviewed and updated. It is our intention in this that elders will be more consistently linked to the members on their lists. Eldership and pastoral care will be major topics of study and discussion at meetings early next year.

Comments, queries and suggestions are invited by the Church Council: Gaye Champion (Chair, UnitingCare Hotham Mission), Michael Champion (Elder), Belinda Hopper (Elder and Secretary), Gus MacAulay (Elder), Rod Mummery (Elder and Treasurer), *Tim O'Connor* (Elder and Chair), Maureen Postma (Elder), Craig Thompson (Minister) and Alan Wilkinson (MTEFP Coordinator).

---

## Given

by Craig Thompson

Despite the fact that as Christmas fast approaches, it is very hard to give a gift these days. It is easy, of course, to buy and give something to someone and it is easy enough simply to receive what we might be given. But it is difficult for it truly to be a gift, a giving. In fact, this is probably because Christmas fast approaches.

Recall what it feels like at this time of the year to receive an unexpected present. By “unexpected” I mean a present for which you have no present to offer in return. Any sense of embarrassment at not having something to swap for what we have received is the sign that in fact we’ve not received a gift at all, or received it as a gift. We are forced into a situation in which we have not earned what we have received by having something of similar value to offer back. This places us in the debt of another person, which is where none of us really wants to be. And so we will make sure we won’t be caught without something to exchange with that person next year, just in case she pulls a stunt like that again!

But this is not gift-giving. Giving you something of similar value to what you’ve given me is what we do at the supermarket checkout and is not called “giving” but “buying”. A gift is not a wage or an exchange but something for which no return is necessary or perhaps even possible; a proper gift is sheer grace. If there is a sense in which gifts do place us in some kind of debt to the giver, it is a debt which does not demand to be paid – otherwise it would not be a gift.

But even if it doesn’t expect something in return, a true gift does effect something: it joins the giver and the recipient and becomes a kind of focal point of their relationship. As such, a gift is both more than just the thing which has been given; it becomes a sign of the relationship, of its character.

The humanity given to us in Jesus is just such a gift. It is not something which we could have given ourselves, and not something to which we can adequately respond. Yet it is exactly what we need – our own humanity, got right.

And this gift – our perfected humanity in Jesus – stands between us and God as the thing which joins us – the gifted-ness which Jesus is becomes a sign of the way in which we and God are bound together. Between God and all humankind lies the child in the manger – a sign that we are ourselves, or have ourselves, as sheer gift.

To be what we are – gift – is to live differently from the dominant way of mere exchange. A gift giver is free. Nothing is lost if the gift is not recognised, because no return was required and the “failure” of the gift does not diminish that it was a gift. And everything can be gained is the gift is gratefully received.

May this Christmas be a time of such free giving and grateful receiving for us all.

NB: Suzanne has received a number of classical music CDs which she would like to pass on *to anyone who is interested. These are available today (Dec 17) and “as long as stocks last”*; please feel free to take one today.

---

## Time travel

by Peter Blackwood



Church on the Spilled Blood,  
St Petersburg

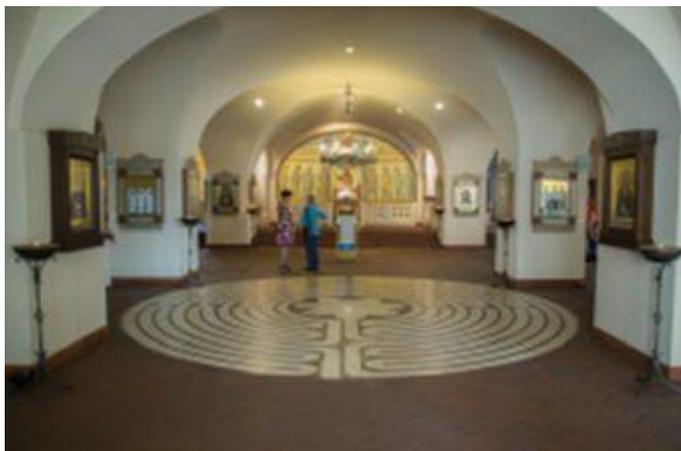
Those who visit world class art galleries here and overseas often experience that “Oh, that’s were that painting lives!” moment. There across the gallery room is a famous painting by a famous artist and it is like greeting an old friend.

This happened in St Petersburg and Moscow when Sue and I were in Russia for two weeks in August. Working in and with the Uniting Church Icon Schools has made me familiar with many of the best-known icons. As soon as we arrived in St Petersburg we headed straight for the Russian Gallery and went in search of the icon section. Many old friends reached out to greet me; ‘The Angel with the Golden Hair’ (photos don’t show that he has gold in his hair), ‘St George’ from the Novgorod school (much smaller than expected), and ‘John the Baptist’ all there in the same room.

Over two days in St Petersburg we followed our guide through palaces and galleries. Rooms and corridors and churches festooned in extravagant finery – so much gold. The treasures of the Hermitage became of blur of bling until we arrived in front of Rembrandt’s ‘Prodigal Son’ – the boy’s clothes so

tattered, the father’s face so serene and his hands spread so lovingly across his son’s shoulders.

A highlight of St Petersburg was meeting up with Philip Davydov and Olga Shalamova. They are my icon teachers. They took us to see their church and their art studio. They do not apply gold to their icons. Philip has explained that for him the power and privilege that gold symbolises is not an appropriate message for the church today. In his city I understood what he meant. The decorations in the preserved and restored palaces of Tsarist Russia is imitated by the icons and screens dripping with gold in the churches.



Imperial power and ecclesiastical power look the same. In the Feodorovsky Cathedral where Philip and Olga worship gold does not dominate. The lower church has no iconostasis (icon screen), it has a labyrinth tiled in the floor and a baptistery in the side aisle. Young adults were gathered round the baptistery attending classes in preparation for their baptisms next Easter. The church had been a milk factory during the Soviet era. The intricately carved iconostasis of the upper church had nearly one hundred icons but the structure had no gold.



During a six-day cruise on the waterways to Moscow we visited villages and towns and small cities. In these places the icons were at their best. They did not strive for realistic looking faces that so many modern icons have. The décor of the churches focused on beauty rather than opulence.

One of our final tours was to the Tetryakov Gallery in Moscow. The Trinity icon by Andrea Rublev was the focus for this visit. It is such a famous painting that I expected it to be crowded, a bit like trying to see the Mona Lisa in Paris. Not so. Sue and I walked into an empty icon section of the gallery and spent time on our own with the Rublev gazing and taking detailed photos.

*Detail of Rublev's 'Trinity'*

---

## **On Ticking Boxes – Religion and the 2016 Census**

by Bruce Barber

Western society is increasingly of a mind to have nothing to do with religion. Australia is no exception. To the question of religious belief, the 2016 census for the first time placed the option No Religion at the top of the list of possible answers. Furthermore, for the first time one third of the population ticked this first box. “Religion” as a generic category is arguably in crisis. Consequently, the question of the status of Christianity as a “religion” in an increasingly hostile or apathetic climate is worth some exploration.

This question is far from being novel. More than seventy years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred German Lutheran theologian, brought the issue of the problematic nature of religion to world-wide public attention in the posthumous publication of his Letters and Papers from Prison. It is of more than an antiquarian interest to engage again his critique of religion seventy years later.

To this end, it is useful to read an extended passage in a letter dated April 30, 1944:

What is the significance of a Church (church, parish, preaching, and Christian life) in a religionless world? How do we speak of God without religion, that is, without the temporally influenced presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? In what way are we in a religionless and secular sense Christians, in what way are we the *Ecclesia*, “those who are called forth”, not conceiving of ourselves religiously as specially favoured, but as wholly belonging to the world? Then Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite *different* ... *What is the place of worship and prayer in an entire absence of religion?* ... *The Pauline question whether circumcision is a condition of justification is today, I consider, whether religion is a condition of salvation.*

To this last question, Bonhoeffer’s implicit answer is categorically: No.

Important here is what religion has meant historically or, more importantly, what it has come to mean, at least in the popular mind. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s friend and the original recipient of his letters, offered four summary descriptions of how Bonhoeffer understood religion.

First, religion cultivates individualistic forms of inwardness. By so doing, the world is essentially abandoned to itself.

Second, religion is metaphysics, the transcendence that is sought for the completion necessary for this world: God as the superstructure for being, which inescapably leads into thinking in two spheres, that is to say, that reality – the natural – must be supplemented by the supernatural.

A third manifestation of religion is that thinking which regards religion merely as having to do with a province of life, a sector of the whole, more or less interesting and, arguably, socially and psychologically valuable.

The fourth characteristic of religion is the concept of the *deus ex machina*, the “god of the machine”, wheeled in at the end of Greek tragedies to provide answers: whether solutions, protection or help when or where human powers fail. On this view, God is finally reduced to becoming a fulfiller of human needs as “a problem solver”, or “a gap filler”.

Taken together, these characteristics of religion assume, or require, a supplementing of worldly reality by God, the desire to cope with reality by postulating a deity to help. Such religion sits uneasily with the autonomous spirit of modernity, which understands the world as whole in itself, and without a need for supernatural addition. Not surprisingly, the increasingly hostile repudiation of religion in contemporary society is inevitably aimed at religionist readings of Christian faith, because in a multi-faith culture Christianity is thought to be merely one embodiment of “religion”.

The gospel, however, casts Jesus as incarnate into the very heart of the world. If religion has come to be understood as outlined above, whether as a retreat from, or as an addition to, the world, then it deflects the intention and the power of the proclamation of Christian faith. Consequently, non-religious interpretation of the gospel is required. Such interpretation will be a re-orientation of our experience of God and the world to the new categories for life made possible by the witness of, and to, Jesus Christ. Their contrast to the characteristics of a religious interpretation of the gospel, outlined above, may be summarised as follows:

1. Over against a religious preoccupation with individualistic inwardness, Jesus Christ is the human being living for others and for God.
2. Without any transcendent escape to a God of “the gaps”, Jesus Christ is lonely and forsaken in obedience to his mission in the world.
3. There being no appeal to some special religious province, Jesus Christ worships God in the midst of real life.
4. Although longing for God, Jesus Christ does not experience the *deus ex machina*, wheeled in as solution to his particular human predicament. Rather, he goes to his end resolutely trusting the ultimate purpose of the One who has called him.

What is called for here on the part of the church is an embracing of the whole of human life lived in the world as we encounter it, and precisely as it is embodied by the incarnate Son. To this end, Jesus comes not for “religion” but for the world. The truly radical, and inherently iconoclastic intent of Christian faith is for the world as a whole, and not for a supposed religious realm.

Where the concept of religion intentionally divides the world into the spiritual and the secular, the gospel is impotent. All the more is the predicament made worse in our day when the adoption of any religion is commonly asserted to be merely a matter of personal and private choice.

Could the ultimate irony be that those who have grasped the revolutionary “in-the-worldness” of life advocated by Bonhoeffer, as that is embodied in the one the Church calls Lord, are better qualified to be without “religion” than those who ticked the first box of the census form.

---



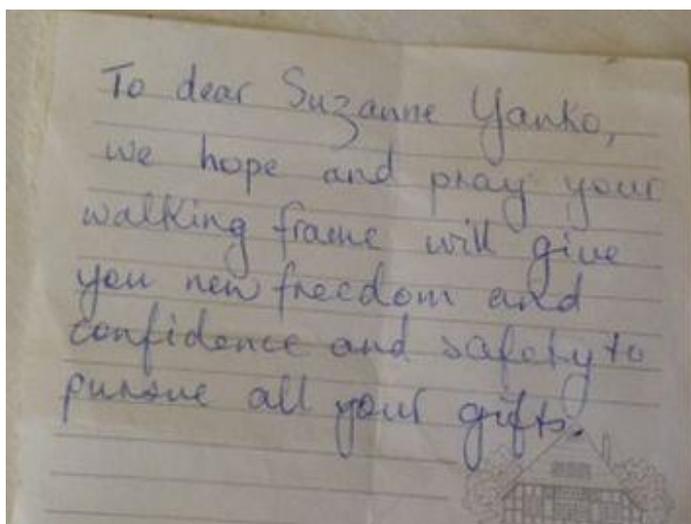
Celtic saints by Olga Shalamova

### Suzanne takes up the story

To end this newsletter on an unusually personal note ...

As far as gift-giving went, November got off to a good start. A neighbour of mine has put his vast collection of classical CDs onto his computer with a superior audio system, and turned up on my doorstep with two boxes of good quality CDs. However they could not be used for radio as the performance/production details were not as full as they should be for purposes of copyright and royalties. After giving some of the music to writers for [classicismelbourne.com.au](http://classicismelbourne.com.au) and replacing a few worn out CDs of my own I decided to "pay it forward" (and if you have been reading this newsletter carefully you'll know what I decided to do with the rest!). I hope you find something you like.

Things took a turn for the worse, thanks to a doctor's appointment which ran over time and saw my car towed away from what had become a clearway! (VicRoads and the City of Boroondara both decided to claim a "gift" from me for that mistake and it only made up for it little bit that a replacement hubcap cost me, not \$95 for one, but \$45 for four, thanks to another customer who had just traded them in for his new mag wheels. At last I felt I was getting ahead.



Then it was Craig's turn to play fairy godmother, or the messenger thereof. I was needing something more helpful than my walking stick (despite all its fancy bells and whistles) ... and to my shock and almost disbelief, Craig said some people at Mark the Evangelist had offered to pay for my snazzy red Walker with wheels. They wouldn't say who they were, but although I have my theories it strikes me that there are many people who worship with us on Sunday who would be capable of such kindness.

If this is one of the most thoughtful gifts I could ever imagine, and then the simple

words on a piece of paper in the envelope stuffed with money are the essence of grace:

Dear benefactors, I don't know for sure who you are but this is the most public thank you I can give you. Happy Christmas one and all, and may you encounter such thoughtfulness and kindness as you approach the end of a challenging year.

