



Mandorla Art Award Launch 2015 – *The Resurrection*

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Church of the Resurrection, 105 Shenton Road, Swanbourne
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Fr Chris Ross and Dr Angela McCarthy have already introduced this evening's event to us all and have helped us understand something of the inspiration and the history of this very important award. It is, as we have heard, Australia's most significant thematic Christian art prize, attracting some of the country's finest artists since its inception in 1985, 30 years ago. I think we are all conscious of the importance of this award, and of the way in which it continues the ancient heritage of the Christian Church in expressing its faith not just in dogmatic formulations and in liturgical celebrations, but also, and I would say equally importantly, in a wide variety of artistic forms.

Tonight, rather than rehearse all of this history, I have been asked to speak about this year's theme, which is of course at the very heart of our faith as Christians, as disciples of Jesus. I have been asked to speak about the Resurrection.

Where do we begin? Why not with the words of St Paul who says to us in his very straightforward way, *"If Christ is not risen from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is also in vain"* (1 Cor 15:14-18). Perhaps we might more colloquially say, *"If Christ is not risen from the dead, then we might as well shut up shop and all go home"*.

Paul's blunt and direct language points us to a very important dimension of our Christian faith and it is this: that Christianity is much more than a code of ethics, or a spelling out of the implications of the so-called Golden Rule, or a guide to a healthier, more just and more equitable society. It might be all of these of course and much more besides. But in the end Christianity is not so much about what we can do or should do: it is about who God is and what God has done and continues to do for us. As the First letter of St John would remind us, *"in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:9-11).

The first and central key, then, to at least beginning to understand the mystery of the resurrection of Christ is love – and specifically God's love for us. John's gospel makes this

very clear when, in chapter 3, the evangelist writes that *“God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* (Jn 3:16).

This is an invitation to us to hold together in unity the two themes of love and life as the most foundational gifts of God to us. I am not an artist myself but I will be fascinated to see whether and how any of the artists who take part in the award capture this unbreakable link: life and love.

To state the obvious – that the resurrection of Jesus is about life – and specifically life that springs from death, is to point us in the direction of all the ways in which death seems to hold sway in our contemporary world. We don’t have to look too far for this: we see it on our TV screens, on our computers, in our newspapers every day, whether it be in the tragic stories of young people being killed in violent and cowardly attacks on our city streets, the terrible scourge of plagues like Ebola, or in the horrific and unspeakable brutality of the self-styled Islamic State. One of the great challenges for people of Christian faith is to find ways of holding together the terrifying and seemingly invincible power of death with the unshakeable Christian conviction that life is stronger than death and love is stronger than hate. I look forward to the participants in this year’s Mandorla award opening up new insights into this complex mystery at the heart of our Christian faith. So – life and love; and life in and through death.

Another dimension of the vast mystery of the Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus which has always intrigued me and captured my imagination is what I would call the paradox of presence and absence. You can only hope to have any understanding of the meaning of the resurrection if you contemplate it by looking back at the crucifixion and death of Jesus. There could be no resurrection had there been no death. At the same time the resurrection is, in a strange way, the prelude to the ascension of Jesus, his return to his Father in heaven. With the death of Jesus there came into the lives of his disciples the horror and despair of the absence of the one they had loved, believed in and committed themselves too. His death must have been for them the death of their own hopes and dreams, in a sense the death of their faith. When the inconceivable and unthinkable happens, and they experience this dead Lord as alive again and present with them in a new, strange but very real way, there must have been not just a rebirth of faith but an incredible deepening of faith. Jesus, they would have begun to realize, was so much more than they had hoped and believed him to be. They had to get used to a new presence of Jesus, a deeper presence of Jesus, in every sense a much more real presence of Jesus. All of this is captured in the resurrection stories where Mary Magdalene, and the disciples, on the road to Emmaus for example, at first fail to recognize Jesus. But this new presence points towards a new absence and yet another new presence. *“Do not cling to me”,* Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, *“noli mi tangere – because I have not yet ascended to my Father”*. The Acts of the Apostles will tell the story of the return of Jesus to his Father and conclude with the words, *“As they were looking on, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight”* (Acts 1:9). The disciples would return to Jerusalem and soon experience a new and ever real presence of Jesus through the gift of his Spirit whom he had promised to send them. Presence flows over into absence which in turn gives rise to presence again, which is at the

same time the same and different – continuity in discontinuity, familiarity in the unfamiliar. For it is the one Christ, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, walking the streets and hills of his native land, crucified and buried, risen from the dead, ascended to his Father, and now with his community through the gift of his Spirit. It is the one seamless story, not a series of isolated and disjointed events – and the resurrection is at the very heart and centre of it all. I don't know how an artist might capture this mystery of presence and absence, and the seamless unity between all the events of the story of Jesus – and yet I wonder if perhaps such a profound mystery might be better captured in artistic form than in any other way.

I look forward to seeing what artists, in their creativity, skill and insight, might do with this great mystery of our faith. And I hope, and expect, that their work will bring joy and deeper faith to them, and joy and deeper faith to all those with whom they share their work.

Thank you.