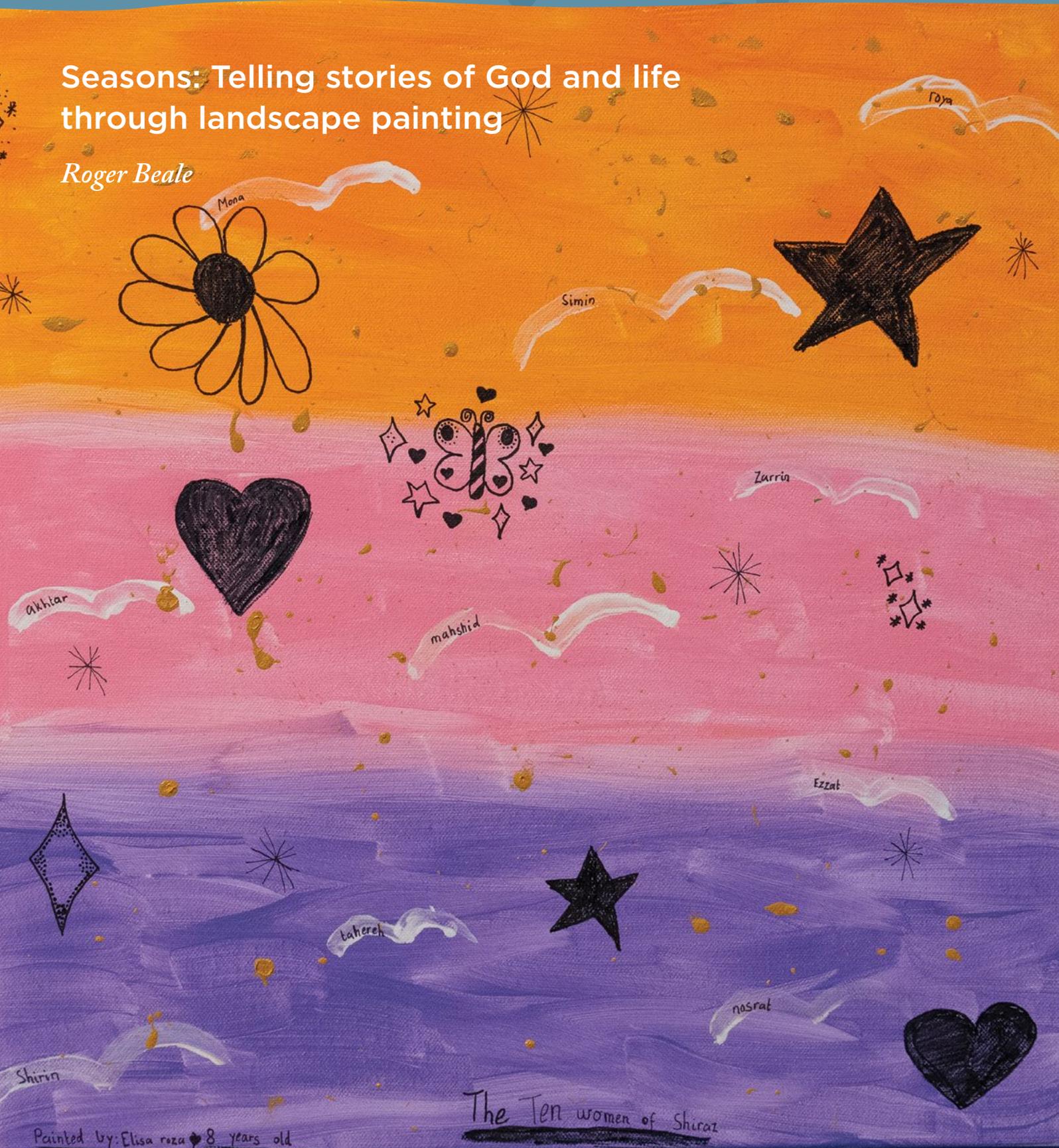


ENGAGE

December 2024 Issue 17

Seasons: Telling stories of God and life through landscape painting

Roger Beale



Painted by: Elisa reza 8 years old

The Ten women of Shiraz



Great Cross, photo by Liz Jakimow. Cover image: Painting by Elisa Zarei (aged 8), part of the "Our Journey is One" exhibition, held at the Chapel.

Contents

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Associate Editor: Liz Jakimow

Assistant Editor: Sarah Stitt

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For enquiries contact acc-c@csu.edu.au



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD



Bible Garden, photo by Liz Jakimow



Editorial

There's a gum tree

Just down the hill from the grounds, towards the big water

It is old – its trunk twisted and marked, limbs missing.

But it is wide and strong, its dappling shade

Gifting relief from the sun and wind

To new growth, new life

It's a remarkable but unremarked tree that

Hugs a lightpole, which shares its light

Across the tree, across the space, out to the big water.

Being or finding light in dark times can be hard, especially when our own spirit may be overwhelmed by events around us. Like the tree, we may feel damaged or unremarked, sometimes forgetting the light that shines over us. Right now, parts of our world are dark with war and suffering, disease and the dreadful impacts of climate change. In the face of that, it is reasonable to ask searching questions about hope, peace and love: to look to the future and find a way to welcome it. Such questions are challenging; they can require us to express ourselves in ways that go beyond words. One way is through the arts. As Liz Jakimow notes in her book review (p. 29) imagery is important. It speaks across the boundaries of literacy, language, loss and love and provides a stimulus to our thoughts, helps to guide or develop our understanding and broaden our view.

This edition of *Engage* focuses on creativity and the arts, one of the key themes of work for the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture since its inception 26 years ago. We recognise and value the important contribution of creativity and imagination to our wellbeing.

The arts give us a range of expressive languages and a way to process emotions and ideas. They help to build pathways that cross boundaries; to converse with each other about the things we have in common. In that spirit this year, we held a Baha'i art exhibition, a combination of "Made with Love" and "Our Journey is One." Our cover for this edition is taken from a piece of art in that exhibition by eight year old Elisa Zarei. We've also recently seen the prize giving for the *Spiritus* Short Film Prize, in which the Open award went to *The Last Time I Saw You*, a short film by Damien McLindon about a Hazara Muslim refugee

and her experiences in an Australian high school. Finally, Toni Hassan, an adjunct of the Centre, ran a series on Drawing in the Landscape – you can read more about that in Peter Yuille's article on page 6. Each of these activities has provided a chance to process the events and experiences around us, to express our reactions to them, to converse without words and to build bridges between people.

Creativity is a broad space. Beyond the fine arts, the Centre looks towards new ways of understanding worship and liturgy. There's a group of articles that speak to that in this edition; see Jeanette Matthews article on Psalms as Performance and the articles by Jason Hetherington, Susanna Pain and Sally Shaw for ideas and inspiration for creative ways to worship.

I do hope you enjoy this edition of *Engage*, that it inspires you in some small way, and that in doing so, it helps you to find a hopeful, positive light to shine towards the future. Hope breeds energy and we will need that in the face of the ongoing ecological, economic and political changes that affect us all. Art, creativity, expression, light, hope, energy: perhaps these are building blocks for a more positive future, one in which we, and all of creation, can flourish.

All the very best for Christmas and the New Year.

Meg Richens

Interim Executive Director



Drawing in the landscape with ACC&C Fellow Toni Hassan

Peter Yuille

Member, Benedict Contemplative Church, Canberra

American author Mirabai Starr writes “When we make a pact with ourselves to show up for reality just as it is, reality rewards us by revealing its hidden holiness, its ordinary wonder, its fruitful shadows and radiant wounds. Not always, not everywhere, but more and more often and in the places we least expect... This is what it means to be a mystic. To show up for what is, to be present to all that is, to take refuge in the boundless intimacy of exactly what is.” (Mirabai Starr, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life As Sacred Ground*)

Putting to one side what a mystic may or may not be, Starr’s observation put me in mind of how, in the Gospels, Jesus “showed up for reality” wherever he may have been – at a seaside village; at a meal with friends; in a chance encounter with a woman at a well; in debate in the temple with religious authorities. Wherever He was; He was there.

How do we practice “showing up for what is” amidst our intensely busy and distracted lives? How do we build that capability to engage with what is – to be present? Setting time aside regularly for stillness and silence, for meditation and prayer, is one way to practice. Tai chi and yoga can build contemplative capacity; and, as I have come to see, the arts such as drawing and painting can do the same.

Henry David Thoreau said “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”

For one hour on a Wednesday afternoon, over three weeks, in the grounds of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, artist and writer Toni Hassan gave anyone who showed up the spaciousness, through drawing, to “look” and then to “see.”

“But there was no judgement here; no prize to be won. Just experiencing something fresh and different. We were being released, to the extent that we could release ourselves; given permission to give ourselves permission. To let go.”

The participants, mostly Benedictus Contemplative Church members, were not trained artists. They protested their creative inability - “stick figures are my limit!” But gently, initially with paper and a pencil or crayon, Toni encouraged us to sit a while. “Just attend to what is before you.” It could have been ants busy on a stony path; gum veins rich on a eucalypt trunk; white caps on a windy lake; or the powerful contours of a Harry Seidler building. No matter, let your eyes take in the scene. And without worrying about precision and what might look acceptable, Toni’s first exercise involved us not looking at the page but letting our markers meander across the paper - reflecting what our head and heart were “seeing.” Just stay open and stay loose were our instructions. Here was an offer of freedom to be in the landscape, and not worry about what might be “produced.”

And what a surprise. Things emerged on the page which did bear some resemblance to what was before us. Some essences were captured which weren’t expected. Of course, it was really hard not to look down; not to “touch up” what was on the page. But there was no judgement here; no prize to be won. Just experiencing something fresh and different. We were being released, to the extent that we could release ourselves; given permission to give ourselves permission. To let go.

Toni urged us to see ourselves as creative and use the exercises as entry points to develop our practice for ourselves, and no one else. Drawing she said, is primal and a birthright.



Photo by Peter Yuille

On one Wednesday we used charcoal which was a medium I hadn't experienced since primary school – how beautiful and rich it is. Visceral. On another Wednesday, some of us took pastels; filling in the gaps and trying to capture some of the rich hues of the afternoon. In my case, it was a pale reflection really, just reinforcing the depth and beauty of what is there every day – if we have eyes to “see.”

Reflecting on our time together, I wanted to close offering these words from Meister Eckhart – “Tasting Freedom”:

Only when I let go of myself do I start to become empty
Enough so that God has
Room to work in me;
So try going out of your
Self and letting go of what
You think is your own,
And taste the freedom of
Being without wanting.

(From Meister Eckhart's *Book of Darkness and Light*.)

Benedictus is a contemplative church seeking an authentic, open-hearted and thoughtful encounter with God. Meeting in Canberra - silent meditation, reflection on Scripture, and celebration are features of our shared life and worship. <https://benedictus.com.au>)



Photo by Peter Yuile



Photo by Toni Hassan



Celebrating 10 years of the *Spiritus* Short Film Prize

Sarah Stitt

Corporate Services and Events, ACC&C

In a world in flux, the power of film has perhaps never been more important to capture local and global moments and trends in our society and culture.

This year's *Spiritus* Short Film Prize provided us with a glimpse into contemporary issues and transitions, both harsh and tender across the world - from conflict in Africa to Indigenous identity and how we are connected and damaged by ubiquitous and addictive digital screens.

On Sunday 10 November, 10 finalists were shown as part of the Canberra Short Film Festival at the Dendy Cinema .

They were:

- To Be Silent* – directed by Tace Stevens
- Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* – Hattie Archibald
- Inner Depths* – Mark Russel Bernard
- Tomorrow's Trees* – Adam Lichoudaris
- Screentime* – Alexandrena Parker
- Bernice* – Madeleine Wighton and Tony Gardiner
- To Paint a Face* – Matt Stuart Carson-Drever
- The Last Time I Saw You* – Damian McLindon
- We Are Flying Stars* – Todd Antony
- Quiet Night Thought* – Yuxin Cao

The Open award was presented to Damian McLindon for his film *The Last Time I Saw You*. It's a film about a 16-year-old Hazara Muslim refugee who confronts a trio of "mean" girls in her Australian high school. *Spiritus* judge, Maximo Gowland, noted it was "a powerful film with an important message on cultural differences" and overcoming racism.

Screentime was awarded Highly Commended. The Director, Alexandrena Parker, and her family were in the audience having travelled from Melbourne. One of their highlights was to experience the film on the "big screen." Miriam Pickard, another of the *Spiritus* judges, noted that the film showed how screentime is making us feel "empty" and "disconnected." The film "offers a creative suggestion for how to reactivate more meaning and purpose in life once again."

The Regional *Spiritus* award was presented to Tace Stevens for her film *To Be Silent*. Again Gowland conveyed that this film gives "a powerful message of cultural differences, mistreatment and bullying which affect an Aboriginal girl, told through a very interesting approach including re-enactment and animation."

Three films received awards of Commendation: *Inner Depths*, *Tomorrow's Trees* and *We are Flying Stars*, which each, in their own way, offer stories about resilience, love and kindness and the depths of human spirit to provide insight and hope.



Photo by Sarah Stitt



Still from "The Last Time I Saw You" , directed by Damian McLindon



Alexandrena Parker, winner of the commended award, with *Spiritus* sponsors, Clive and Lynlea Rodger, photo by Sarah Stitt



Performing Scripture

Rev'd Dr Jeanette Matthews

Senior Lecturer in Old Testament, St Mark's National Theological Centre

This reflection is extracted from the article "Scripture as performance: Biblical Performance Criticism—what is it and how do I use it?" published in *St Mark's Review* No. 249 (2019). Jeanette is the author of [Performing Habakkuk](#), [Prophets as Performers](#), [Reading the Megillot](#).

[Sons of Korah](#) is an Australian based band that has been giving a fresh voice to the biblical Psalms for over 30 years. They were recently in Canberra to perform in concert and at the National Prayer Breakfast at Parliament House. Lead singer Matt Jacoby joined Jeanette Mathews from St Mark's NTC and Mark Beresford from Mosaic Baptist Church to lead a workshop on "Psalms as Performance".

There is a sense in which Scripture has always been "performed". This assertion is literally true for the Israelite community and the Early Church. Biblical traditions themselves speak of performance events where God's word was presented to audiences.

Great leaders, such as Moses and Joshua, retold the covenant traditions to their communities in order to re-ignite commitment to YHWH [Deuteronomy 30](#); [Joshua 23–2](#).

In the seventh century BCE, King Josiah gathered the inhabitants of Jerusalem and read aloud the book of the law of the covenant that was found in the temple ([2 Kings 23](#)).

Around two hundred years later the scribe Ezra read the book of the law again to the gathered community of returned exiles in Jerusalem, appointing Levites to translate and explain as it was being read ([Nehemiah 8](#)).

The story of the judge Deborah ([Judges 4](#)) sits beside the same story in the form of a song ([Judges 5](#)).

The song of Hannah ([1 Samuel 2:1-10](#)) was familiar to New Testament audiences and echoes of it are found in Mary's song, which is better known as "The Magnificat" ([Luke 1:46-56](#)).

Turning to the Psalms, nearly half of them include superscriptions that give instruction for performance, with information about tunes (Psalms [22](#), [56](#), [60](#)), instrumentation (Psalms [5](#), [55](#), [61](#)), and liturgical use (Psalms [0](#), [92](#), [100](#), [120–134](#)).

Luke records Jesus standing and reading from Scripture before an assembled congregation ([Luke 4:16-29](#)). In fact, all the Gospels preserve the traditions of Jesus teaching disciples and broader crowds in a variety of locations.

The New Testament epistles were recited publicly to congregations (as is attested in [1 Thessalonians 5.27](#)). As was the Revelation given to John for the churches, with the book itself beginning with the statement "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy..." ([Revelation 1.3](#)).

The witness of the Scriptures themselves, therefore, remind us that the earliest transmission of Biblical material was in an oral/aural context because access to written materials was only available to a small section of the community. Those who did not have ready access to these materials or literacy skills were still able to hear God speaking through their traditions by hearing them performed.

The example of Deborah ([Judges 4–5](#)) suggests that the older tradition (the song) was preserved initially in oral form before being inscribed in text. In his commentary on Judges, American Old Testament theologian Professor Mark Biddle says of the poem: "... its structure, tone, and themes offer significant indications that the song once served a liturgical purpose and that, as a piece meant for public performance, it functioned to evoke a public response." ([Reading Judges](#), 2012, p.63).

Even when these traditions became preserved as scripts, they continued to be circulated in communal contexts where they were performed orally by lectors or orators. In an oral culture, the same tradition will naturally be transmitted with variations due to different transmitters and different audiences. Written traditions served the oral culture.

One of the major contributions that [Biblical Performance Criticism](#) has for Biblical Studies is to rediscover what has been lost with the domination of print and text culture. Rather than a focus on text alone, we emphasise performance, by which we mean a communication event comprising a communicator (speaker or writer), an audience, a biblical tradition, and a social situation. Each of these four aspects contribute to the meaning.

"The witness of the Scriptures themselves, therefore, remind us that the earliest transmission of Biblical material was in an oral/aural context because access to written materials was only available to a small section of the community. Those who did not have ready access to these materials or literacy skills were still able to hear God speaking through their traditions by hearing them performed."

For the interpretation of a message, therefore, the whole communication event is important. Communication is embodied: including emotional and rhetorical dimensions, tone of voice, gestures, pauses and silence; it expects audience participation and reaction; and it takes place in particular social settings which affect both performers and audience.

Biblical Performance Criticism, therefore, focuses not just on what is being said but how it is being said. In our modern text-based culture with readily available multiple-translation access to the Bible, we sometimes forget that Scripture in its original form was always communal and written for the ear rather than the eye. We can recapture some of what has been lost by hearing our traditions as performances.

At the Psalms as Performance workshop, we explored different ways to perform the psalms, including internalising psalms, praying through the psalms, walking together and talking about the psalms, and of course singing the psalms. We noticed the range of emotions within the psalms that can link to every part of life. As Matt Jacoby described it, the psalms are a handrail to hang onto as we go through life's journey, keeping us connected to the source of life.

Scripture was performed before communal audiences in its first iterations and continues to play to new audiences down through the centuries. Biblical Performance Criticism thus attempts both to establish the original performance event as accurately as possible and to analyse new performances of these ancient materials.



Psalms as Performance Workshop, photo by Lauren Pickering



Psalms as Performance Workshop, photo by Lauren Pickering



Joint exhibition – “Our Story is One” and “Made with Love”

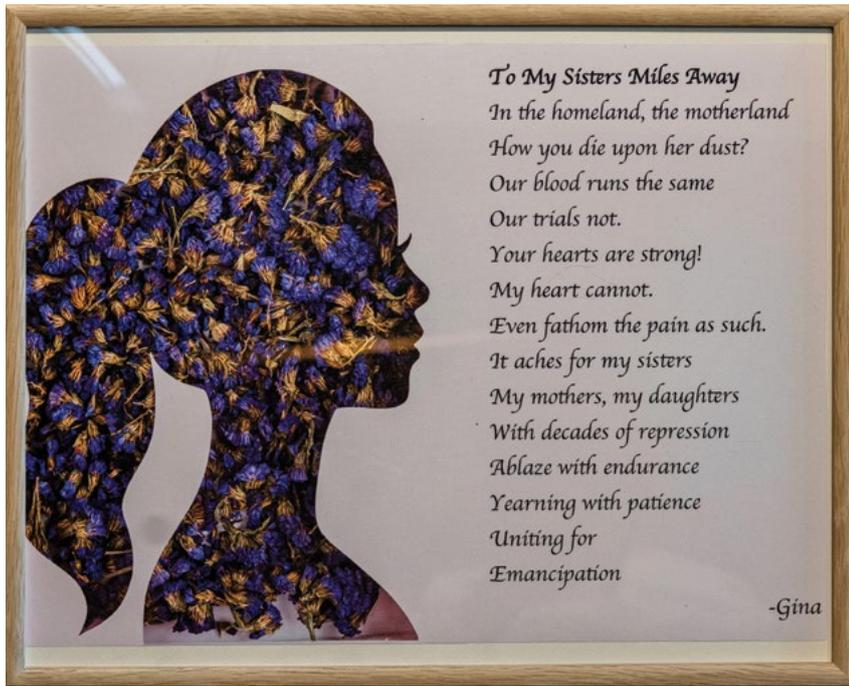
Liz Jakimow

Communications Officer, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

From 24 September to 8 October, the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture hosted the joint exhibition 'Made with Love' and 'Our Story is One' from the Baha'i community. The exhibition was held in the Chapel and was an amazing display of beauty, resilience and creativity in the face of persecution. The closing night on 8 October was opened by Ms Tessa Scrine and included moving speeches and performances.

“Our Story is One” paid tribute to 10 women who were executed in Shiraz, Iran, on 18 June 1983, for their belief in the Baha'i faith. The International Baha'i community received artistic expressions from across the world from all backgrounds and faiths. Contributions at this exhibition were from across the length and breadth of Australia, including artworks, crafts, poetry and multimedia presentations.





Many people sent in poetry for the “Our Story is One” exhibition, including by people who were not poets by profession. During the closing night, Saba Sinai, an academic in agriculture, recited his poem titled “Ten Flames”.

This painting, titled “Ten Flowers of Shiraz” by Khashyar Salmanzadeh, shows 10 flowers on the face of this women. The painting was a finalist for the Blake Prize.





This unique and touching artwork featured 10 strands of crocheted pieces, representing the 10 Baha'i women. The contributor for this piece, Hovieda Saberi, is the niece of one of the women executed. During the closing night, she spoke movingly about the memory and creative process behind the piece.



"Made with Love" featured a collection of objects and artworks made by people of the Baha'i Faith while they were imprisoned. Ranging from hand-crafted items to leatherwork to beautiful works of art, these items display the power of creativity and expressions of love in the face of injustice and persecution.



The closing night included beautiful performances from A Chorus of Women, Nava Revalk singing a song contributed by Nava Ghalili to the "Our Story is One" campaign and a performance of "Mother, Daughter", an original song composed by a Baha'i youth.





Ecumenical Multi-Cultural Nativity Festival

Keith Linard

Parishioner of Rosary Catholic Church

Over the years I have seen the Christmas period become so commercialised that the Gospel story of the Incarnation takes a backseat to presents, parties, baubles, and Santa Claus. With our children, we went against the current, but my wife and I had an urge to do more at a social level. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, with about 10 other families, we organised Christmas carols and nativity plays in our respective backyards, inviting friends and neighbours. Some years we had over 100 people present.

In 1994, while on sabbatical leave in Boston, I visited a Nativity Festival run by a local church. It was a weekday, yet bus-loads of people were attending. I was particularly struck by the number of grandparents explaining to their grandchildren not only the Christmas story but the basics of Christian theology. It was clear that the nativity displays provided a wonderful opportunity for gentle evangelisation. That was the catalyst to start collecting my own nativity sets.

I now have about 160 nativities from over 50 countries, ranging from the Inuits of the Canadian Arctic to indigenous Australian, African, and South American peoples, from 8th Century Turkey to modern-day Vietnam. Many of these I have purchased, but many are gifts from people who have been touched by the displays. My favourite nativity is by an indigenous artist from northern Argentina, purchased by my son, a devout atheist, but who acquires nativities for me whenever travelling overseas.

For the decade to 2016, I collaborated with others in presenting Nativity Exhibitions across country Victoria. On moving to Canberra in 2017, to the Catholic parish at Watson, I approached the Rev Tim Watson, rector of neighbouring Holy Cross Anglican Church, as well as elders of the nearby St Margaret's Uniting Church about running an ecumenical Advent festival. So, for the past five years, the Catholic, Anglican, and Uniting Churches of Watson/Hackett have hosted an Ecumenical Advent Festival, including the exhibition of nativity displays, Taize prayer, music festival, and a sausage sizzle followed by community Christmas carols.

At the heart of this festival is the Nativity Exhibition which typically draws around 1000 visitors, including classes of students from local schools. For some people, the exhibition is simply an opportunity to see beautiful artwork from diverse cultures. For many parents and grandparents, it is an opportunity to evangelise their children. For me, it is an opportunity to build relationships among the different Christian communities, to provide opportunities for evangelisation, and, of course, to put Christ back into Christmas. I also use the opportunity to challenge visitors about the theological implications of the incarnation of Christ

The nativity of Christ cannot be divorced from politics or social justice. Jesus was born into poverty. The Holy Family was forced to flee as refugees to a foreign land. That first nativity



Australian First Nation artist Santa Teresa
Yuendumu NT



Australian First Nation artist Santa Teresa
Yuendumu NT



Krakow Nativity

“Historically, the earliest representation of the nativity in art is from around 150–170 AD, in the Catacombs of Priscilla. “

provoked a bloody response from Herod. In addition to several figurines depicting the flight to Egypt, I have included a number of “politically challenging” nativities.

First, all nativities from Bethlehem are marked from the “Occupied Palestinian Territories.” One of these presents a traditional Mary, Joseph, and newborn Jesus scene in front of a representation of the 8-meter concrete wall & watch towers that divide modern Bethlehem from Israel. At the back of the wall are the Magi from the East (modern-day Iran) prevented from worshipping the son of God. This is a poignant commentary on the current political situation in the birthplace of Jesus.

I also highlight a nativity made from bullet casings from the bloody Liberian Civil War of 1989-97. Here we see an illustration of the prophecy of Isaiah 2:4, figuratively “beating swords into ploughshares”... the evils of war can be transformed into symbols of hope and mutual love.

Historically, the earliest representation of the nativity in art is from around 150-170 AD, in the Catacombs of Priscilla. The first carved representations are on the lid of a Roman sarcophagus from around 330-335 AD. I believe that their motivation was similar to mine: to contemplate with awe the central theme of Christmas: the Incarnation of the Son of God, who emptied Himself of His divine glory and accepted a human body for the salvation of the world.

For me, it is important to communicate the theology of the incarnation, that the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are three facets of the one salvation event. I highlight this message through both Orthodox iconography and through some first nations artwork.

I present an indigenous painting of the “Forgiveness Cross” on Memory Mountain juxtaposed against several first nations representations of the traditional nativity scene. This 20-metre cross, erected by the indigenous community of Haasts Bluff at the geographic center of Australia, is a profound symbol of reconciliation and unity, which is of course a key message of the Christmas event. Ikuntji elder, Douglas Multa, explained to me the community’s choice of the name – “Forgiveness Cross”: “We can’t have unity without forgiveness, and both white fellas and black fellas need forgiveness.”

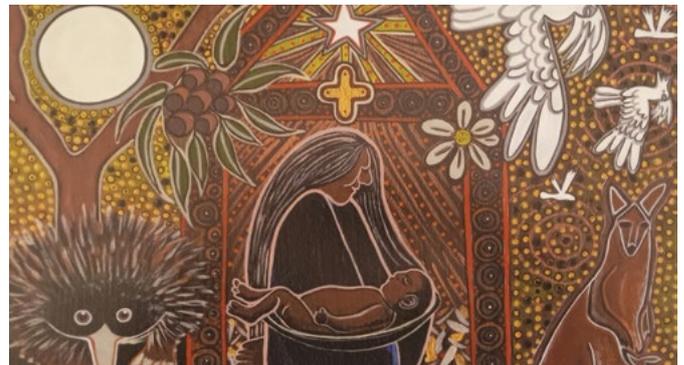
The cross is an invitation to let go of past wrongs and misunderstandings, to rebuild broken bridges, and step into the future with a heart open to loving our brothers and sisters, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs. Whether

one comes with ancestral memories or historical grievances, the Forgiveness Cross is a beacon of hope and reconciliation. It was for this reason that Christ came into the world, the reason we celebrate the Incarnation of Christ at Christmas.

The Nativity Exhibition ran from 1:00pm to 5:30pm Wed 4th Dec, then from 10:00am to 5:30pm Thurs 5th to Sunday 8th at the Rosary Parish Hall, Cnr Antill St & Phillip Ave.



Primary school students and their teacher at Nativity display



Bush Nativity First Nations art by Mirree



Nativity Russia - part of icon showing symbolism of Death & Resurrection



Seasons: Telling stories of God and life through landscape painting

Roger Beale

Artist and former ACC&C board member

Dedicated to the memory of Susie Menadue

“Beale’s art has always combined lyricism with a marked technical competence. There is a close observation of the moods of nature, the patterns of light and a celebration of the miracle of life that pervades against the forces of darkness. In these late works, a quiet spiritualism creeps into his art like a flickering candle that continues to shine despite the gusts of wind.

Posterity eventually sorts out the standing of artists, and I suspect that, in retrospect, Roger Beale will be remembered as an artist who possessed his own unique voice in his art, which differentiated him from many others of his generation”

Professor Sasha Grishin



Moonlight Deakin, painting by Roger Beale



Floriade Tulips, painting by Roger Beale



Bending not Breaking, painting by Roger Beale

My latest series of paintings is called "Seasons". It tracks two years in the lives of my wife and myself, and our relationship with faith, through landscape. You could think of it as an extended metaphor for human resilience, acceptance with the aid of God's grace of inevitable change, adaptation to new circumstances, the incredible boon of the hope born of faith and the joy of hope fulfilled. It tracks the essence of *Ecclesiastes 3* - in paint.

In many ways the painting *Bending not Breaking* is a summation of two years which were entered with my wife confined to a wheelchair having been told she would never walk, but ended with her walking two kilometres a day. Her clinicians have described her journey as incredibly rare. At the same time I have had to accept that the late effects of polio are changing the way I paint, as well as live. I am a long-term wheelchair user as a result of polio incurred in 1948.

Bending not Breaking shows trees above a seawall that have persisted and adapted to a harsh environment. But it also shows a remarkable burst of new life from between the concrete slabs. On the horizon the blue sky symbolises the hope in new beginnings, not always or necessarily physical, that God offers as an act of grace.

It might seem odd to see this as a religious painting. We are so accustomed to equating Christian art with icons, Renaissance paintings of the Madonna and Child, the lives (and particularly deaths) of the Saints or illustrations of stories from the Bible. In short figurative paintings. But there is another tradition in Western religious art. Toward the end of the 18th century Europe suddenly saw the landscape again. For almost the first time¹ it became the focus of major paintings.

And in many of those works, artists were seeking to describe their awesome wonder at the sublime and human insignificance compared to nature. For many this was an expression of religious faith - God revealed through and in the Creation. None more so than in the work of German artist, and a personal favourite of mine, Caspar David Friedrich.

There were of course many, many others right through to the current day. Often they are grouped together as Transcendental Artists – a sub-group of the broader Romantic Realist movement to which I suppose I belong.

Sasha Grishin, in his perceptive review of this series, picked up on these resonances and the meaning of my work. Consider what he said about my *Moonlight Deakin*:

"Moonlight Deakin, 2022 – a treescape executed within a restricted palette – shows a break in the clouds like a torn pathway for an escaping soul"

Sasha Grishin

There are 35 paintings in my current series and it would be impossible to reproduce them all. Together they form a meditation on *Ecclesiastes 3*:

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. . . . All are from dust, and turn to dust again."

So what to do? To paraphrase *Ecclesiastes* - enjoy our work for that is our lot; be aware of our impact on succeeding generations but don't dwell on what will be after us.

To see more of Roger's art go to www.humblehouse.com.au or to www.rogerbeale.com.au



Monk by the Shore, painting by Caspar David Friedrich, 1810. Public domain

1. Dutch landscape painting of the Golden Age a century earlier foreshadowed the Romantic landscape vision – but the flat plains of the low countries lacked some of the drama of those who sought to lose themselves in the Sublime.



Play and silence

Susanna Pain

Benedictus Contemplative Church

“Embodied Listening: Awakening to the Spirit of Place” is the name of a retreat I led recently in the centre of Australia. On the third day I encountered a tricky situation on the way to Simpson’s Gap. Seems silly, but people were talking when the agreement was to be silent in the mornings. This ignited something in me, the desire for deep silence alongside play. It was about honouring the silence and looking for the best in each other, and then playing. I spoke with the group confirming their desires, then invited them to walk in the riverbed or along the path towards the gap listening for the wisdom of the land and her creatures.

The group left, while I sat where I was and cried, unsettled by the strength of my response, wondering whether I had handled that well or not. My desire in that moment was to release all that blocks the flow and to process my strong feelings. I was parched, thirsty for fun and laughter and thirsty for silence. What was the invitation in this situation?

Feeling broken and vulnerable, I write in my journal, praying to be able to let go and to rest, to find joy. Then I draw in my journal with my non-dominant hand, to eliminate judgement and to tap into my right-brain creative thinking. I draw a cracked pot with water inside it and around it and light shining through the cracks and around the cracks. I spend time with the image, grappling. The words from one of Mary Oliver’s poems surfaces. “*Your work is to be easy to be filled with light and to shine.*” Here was my invitation.

I had enticed people on retreat, desiring companions in this silence and play in the centre on Arrernte country.

“Come, rest, meditate, play, and reflect in the expansiveness of the magnificent central desert, beside ancient red rocks, under giant river red gums, in the sand, and around open fires,” I said. “We will be silent, listen, move, make art, sing and tell stories that connect us with ourselves, each other and the spirit of the land herself. Immerse yourself. Play in an embodied way using InterPlay tools and principles.”

And people responded, not yet understanding the possibilities for transformation. They came from all parts of the country with open hearts, not quite sure what to expect, 14 of us on a journey of deep authenticity and openness.

Our retreat began on a Sunday afternoon and it was raining in the desert. We did some warm-up exercises, and playfully told stories, beginning to settle, to be present, to open up.

We played outside, moving between shape and stillness, silence and space alongside words and movement. People began to unwind, to sink in. The next day we sat by an ancient coolabah looking, listening, free writing, creating a pantoum poem, then a haiku. We were silent, using the creative process to tap into truth, then we shared.

We walked the orange earth labyrinth, again opening, listening.

We were still in the arid landscape, gazing, listening, writing, drawing.

silent

paying attention

meditating.

On Wednesday evening we sat round the campfire yarning.

The week unfolded playfully, silently, colourfully, in the landscape. People were moved, people went deeper, people grew through the silence and creative practices.

In his foreword to *Move: What the body wants*, by Cynthia Winton Henry and Phil Porter, Phil Porter reflects on an ethic of play: To play is to do the things that we enjoy, that feed us, that we are compelled to do, that give us deep satisfaction, that lift our spirits, that are fun, that transport us, that are ephemeral, that lead to a sense of accomplishment, or that move us.

That’s what I do in the desert, and at home. I am silent, meditate and play, as a way of grounded listening. I find that, as Phil Porter says, “play, despite our preconceptions, leads to depth as well as to lightness.” On the day before the retreat began, in preparation, taught by an Arrernte Elder, I practiced slow stitching a bird. I became playfully present and alive ready to begin leading the retreat.



Photo supplied by the author



Photo supplied by the author

“I had enticed people on retreat, desiring companions in this silence and play in the centre on Arrernte country.”



Photo supplied by the author



Photo supplied by the author

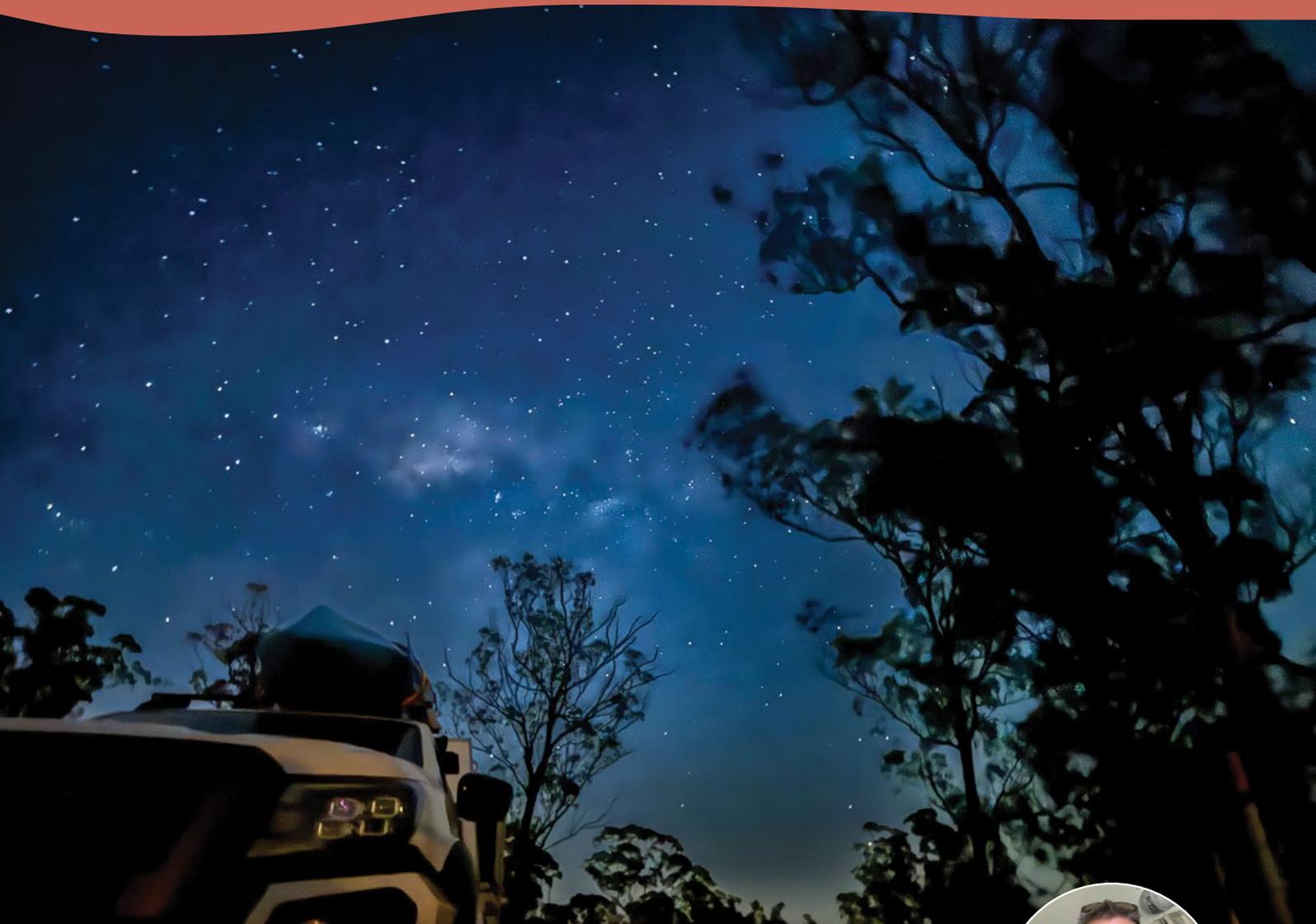


Photo by J C Photography

Exploring creative worship and connection through faith

Jason Hetherington

Founder, Titus Ministries



A little over six months ago, I found myself at a crossroads, feeling a calling that was both exciting and daunting. I was recovering from a major car accident that led to almost five months in hospital and rehabilitation due to a brain injury. Much of my ability to process information, learn, and function in the business world had been stripped away. But one thing kept me going: a promise from God that I would see a new, deeper relationship with Him.

Through this promise, I felt a desire to connect with others meaningfully, to share stories of faith, and to explore worship beyond church walls. Out of this desire, Titus Ministries was born—a journey to bring people closer to God by capturing and sharing stories of faith across regional Australia.

Photography quickly became a central part of this journey. Each photo I take captures a piece of God's creation, from the vast Outback skies to the quiet intimacy of a small church.

Photography feels like "Silent Prayer," a way of honouring the beauty God has placed in our world. Every landscape, every face, every moment I capture becomes a testament to His love and a reminder of the vastness of creation.

In these remote areas, I feel God's presence in the land, the light, and the details. Photography allows me to pause and see these moments fully, allowing God to speak to me through His creation. The open horizons, gentle rivers, and warm light filtering through gum trees all remind me of His presence. Out here, with only the land, God, and the occasional fellow traveller, I find myself renewed. Each photograph deepens my reflection on His goodness and brings a renewed sense of peace and purpose to my journey.

Alongside photography, I wanted a way to share these experiences with those who couldn't be there in person, so I began a podcast as part of Titus Ministries. I've named it

“Each photo I take captures a piece of God’s creation, from the vast Outback skies to the quiet intimacy of a small church. Photography feels like ‘Silent Prayer’, a way of honouring the beauty God has placed in our world. Every landscape, every face, every moment I capture becomes a testament to His love and a reminder of the vastness of creation.”

“God’s Word From Downunder” and it is available on Spotify. Through this, I share my experiences and the powerful stories of faith from people I meet. Each episode allows me to bring their testimonies to a broader audience, creating a platform for stories that might otherwise remain unheard. I hope listeners feel uplifted, encouraged, and reminded of God’s presence in their lives. Through these stories, I aim not only to inspire but to foster a community of faith that reaches across physical boundaries.

Away from the noise of everyday life, I feel a deeper connection with God. The openness of the land, the vastness of the sky, and the quiet moments remind me that worship is alive in all things. These experiences have shown me that sometimes the most profound worship happens in silence and in the beauty of nature.

Yet beyond the personal journey, Titus Ministries is about connecting with others, showing God’s presence in the quiet, open spaces of this country and helping others to experience it through digital media. Through photography, podcasts, and storytelling, my hope is to create a bridge that brings people closer to God and one another.

Photography and digital media have become more than just tools; they are expressions of worship, bearing witness to often untold faith stories. Each photo, each story, and each podcast episode is a testament to God’s work and a reminder of His love and grace. As Titus Ministries continues to grow, I pray that each image and story reaches someone who needs to hear it—whether it’s a word of encouragement, a reminder of hope, or a shared moment of faith.

In every moment, my hope is to bring the beauty of faith to light, to remind people of God’s presence, and to build a community that celebrates His work across this land. This journey isn’t just about documenting; it’s about discovering God’s presence in unexpected places and helping others see it through the lens of faith.



Photo by J C Photography



Photo by J C Photography

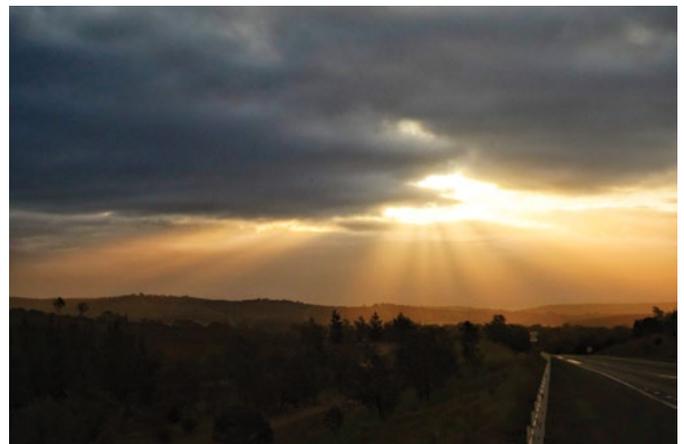


Photo by J C Photography



Common Grace’s “Let Justice Flow” Conference 2024

Monique Hughes

Communications Coordinator, Common Grace

Over 16-18 November, Common Grace gathered on Ngunnawal & Ngambri Country for their 2024 “Let Justice Flow” conference, held in the Chapel at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

This conference was an opportunity for Christians from an array of backgrounds, denominations and ages - coming from across Australia - to deepen and express their shared heart for Jesus and justice. For three days they learnt, prayed and acted together to see justice flow across Australia and beyond.

Common Grace’s National Director, Gershon Nimbalker says “The conference feels like a little slice of heaven, breaking through. Christians from every stripe, coming together to worship, to learn and to act in love for a world so desperately in need.”

The lineup of speakers included theologians, First Nations speakers, social workers, climate scientists, and advocates - who helped delegates delve into the crucial issues of First Nations and Climate Justice. Delegates then took all they had learnt, and went into our federal parliament to lobby and speak up for tangible change to our nation’s leaders.

Common Grace’s conference program was shaped by the wisdom and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Leaders, and emphasised relationship-based advocacy. Key Yarning Circles provided a unique space for deep listening, storytelling and collaboration, and to explore the interconnected issues of First Nations and climate justice.

Day One of the conference began with a Welcome to Country from Aunty Serena Williams and a Deep Listening session guided by Safina Stewart, proud Wuthathi and Mabuiag Island woman and Common Grace’s Relationships and Storytelling Coordinator, and Bianca Manning, Gomeri woman and Common Grace’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Coordinator, to help open and ground their time together.

Two Yarning Circles were also held exploring “Truth Telling and the Church” guided by Adam Gowen with Aunty Shirli Congoo, Nathan Tyson & Mikenzie Ling; and “From Genesis to Revelation - Our Creation Justice Story” guided by Jane Kelly with Father Stanley Marama from the Torres Strait 8, Dr Felicity McCormack, Dr Phillipa McCormack, Dr Mick Pope and Dr Byron Smith.



Common Grace delegates on front lawns of Parliament House, photo supplied by Common Grace

“It’s such a blessing to gather together as this movement of Common Grace, coming together as Christians from across Australia, passionate about pursuing Jesus and justice.”

Day Two of Common Grace’s “Let Justice Flow” conference opened with an Acknowledgement of Country by Adam Gowen leading into a beautiful church service and time of worship led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Leaders.

Bianca Manning also guided a Yarning Circle with Aunty Sue Hodges, Joshua Lane and Cameron Balcombe, sharing on “Safe, Free and Flourishing - Advocating for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Justice,” highlighting the desperate need for a more compassionate response to youth justice in Australia and for the minimum age of criminal responsibility to be raised.

“It’s such a blessing to gather together as this movement of Common Grace, coming together as Christians from across Australia, passionate about pursuing Jesus and justice. We have had such an incredible opportunity to come together, to deeply listen at this time - to deepen our understanding on issues of injustice, listen to and amplify the voices of people with lived experience, and be equipped to take collective action to bring about meaningful change.” said Gerson Nimbalker, Common Grace National Director

Day Three of the conference saw delegates meet on the front lawns of Parliament House for a time of prayer, led by Father Stanley Marama, and songs by musician Luke Vassella.

Teams of delegates then headed into Parliament House to meet with 50 Members of Parliament and Senators during Monday 18 November, calling for our nation’s leaders to listen deeply to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in pursuing a more compassionate, evidence-based approach to youth justice #RaiseTheAge #SafeFreeFlourishing, and take bolder action on climate solutions for the protection and flourishing of all God’s creation #RenewAustraliaForAll #ClimateActionNow.

Delegates finished the day meeting with our nation’s leaders feeling they had contributed to seeing change, but also feeling changed and refreshed to pursue justice themselves.

Addressing conference delegates before heading into meetings in Parliament House, Gershon Nimbalker, Common Grace National Director reflected, “Today, we are walking into a space where God is already working, it’s not just up to us. We are partnering with the work that God is already doing in this world. The deep baseline under all of creation that we’re trying to harmonise ourselves with, is the God of love, bending all things towards renewal, love and restoration. Our job is to jump in on that journey, hop in on the flow to see the change happen. Another world is possible, in fact, it’s inevitable. Let’s do our best to see it breaking through today. Amen.”



Safina Stewart painting *Flood of Justice*, photo supplied by Common Grace



Bianca Manning, Let Justice Flow Conference, Common Grace, photo supplied by Common Grace



Linda Burney MP meeting with Common Grace, 18 Nov 24, photo supplied by Common Grace



Interview with Centre for Religion, Ethics and Society (CRES) scholar, Professor Ben Myers

Interviewed by Liz Jakimow

Communications Officer, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

Your research areas are systematic theology, English literature and modern Anglican thought. What drew you to these areas of research?

I studied literature at university and was always interested in the interaction between poetry and religious ideas. I wrote my doctoral thesis on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. That book is so steeped in the religious debates of its time that you can't really read it without some knowledge of Puritan theology. So I found that theology was an indispensable tool for understanding the ideas in great poetry.

Does having an understanding of literary texts also improve understanding of theological texts?

Yes, absolutely. When I started teaching theology, I found myself drawn increasingly to a literary approach to the discipline. I wasn't really interested in a scholastic approach to theology, where you harvest classic texts for timeless truths. What always intrigued me was the human beings behind these great texts. What prompted them to write this way? What were they trying to achieve? What kind of rhetorical devices did they use to persuade their readers? What earlier literary traditions were they drawing on?

When you're asking questions like these, you're really approaching theological texts with a literary sensibility. And this makes a huge difference. Calvin's *Institutes*, for example, can be read as a kind of scholastic textbook that tells you what Christians ought to think. Or it can be read like a massively elaborated monastic rule, an attempt to apply the logic of the cloister to a whole social order. Or for another example, Augustine's *Confessions* can be harvested for doctrinal quotations on any number of doctrines – that would be a scholastic approach. Or you can take a literary approach and ask: why does Augustine tell his own life story, in the form of a prayer, as a way of trying to articulate the truth? And why does his own life story keep lining up so neatly with various biblical motifs?

When you approach great works of theology with a literary sensibility, you're reading texts from the past more as exemplars than as authorities. Theological texts are products of human imagination and human ingenuity. They can exemplify what it looks like – and they can warn of the hazards! – when human beings try to respond in words to the transcendent truth of revelation.

Your book *Christ the Stranger* was named one of the best books of 2012 by *The Guardian* and one of the best 100 books in religion and philosophy for 2012 by *The Christian Century*. Then in 2019, your book on the Apostles Creed, was an ECPA book award finalist and a SparkLit Christian Book of the Year Award finalist. How does it feel to have your books recognised in this way?

I never thought much about it. You certainly don't write anything looking for that kind of recognition. But I sometimes hear from individual readers who've found these books helpful. I heard from one person who said he'd read my little book about the Apostles' Creed and then decided to get baptised. That kind of personal feedback means a lot more to me.

You also founded the blog, *Faith and Theology*. What did you hope to achieve by starting up this blog? And were those hopes realised?

I didn't really have any hopes or expectations when I started blogging. Blogging was pretty much brand new at the time and there were no other blogs that focused on theology. So on a whim one day I started a blog to see if there was anyone else out there interested in talking about theological books and ideas. Over time, an online community grew up around it. In those days, every blog was really a community of like-minded people who gathered online every day for a conversation. Looking back on it now, it was a bit of a golden age for social media. There were no echo chambers, no partisan divisions, no systemic nastiness, no trolling. All those developments came later.

You also post on X (formerly known as Twitter). In June this year, you posted a series of Rilke translations, noting where you had difficulties in the translation and asking for input. What are the advantages and disadvantages of sharing research, and getting feedback, on social media? And how might it compare to writing a blog or sharing research and receiving feedback in person?

I haven't used Twitter much in recent years. About once a year I show up to take a look around and post something there. A lot of academics are on Twitter, especially in certain fields. There are some virtuous echo chambers as well as all the vicious ones! I think Twitter can be helpful when you have a really specific query – a translation query is a good example. You're not really asking for a discussion, just for feedback on one specific point. Twitter doesn't work so well for more complex

social interactions. It's not a good forum for conversation or debate or sharing different points of view. There are some scholars who have managed to use Facebook for quality conversation and debate – Michael Jensen is a good example, his Facebook account functions almost like a blog. People go there for serious conversation. But I think that's quite unusual, and I think Michael must have worked pretty hard to curate that space on Facebook. In general, I don't really see social media as providing much in the way of scholarly community – not like it used to be with blogging.

You have recently been appointed a Scholar in Residence at Heidelberg University, where you'll be spending a few months working on a book project on representations of God in literature. Can you tell us a bit about that research and what you hope to achieve?

The book starts with the question: why did the biblical authors prohibit visual representations of God while taking so many liberties with literary representation? The author of the Abraham story, for example, gives God dialogue and emotion, tells you what God is thinking, and takes you into the inner workings of God's mind in a way that anticipates modern novelistic techniques. There's a lot of creativity involved in this kind of literary representation. An ancient story about God, told in this way, was seen as divine revelation; whereas any attempt to depict God visually was seen as idolatry. I find that disjunction between word and image really fascinating. It's part of my motivation in writing this book. I'm looking at the way God is represented in various works of literature, including by authors who don't actually believe in God. And I'm trying to understand what exactly is going on when someone "creates God," so to speak, as part of an imaginative literary work.

If you had to choose your favourite poem, which one would it be and why?

If I had to choose, I would go with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I've been reading that book and returning to it for more than 25 years now. And I'm still only getting started. I think all great literature has this special quality, that it can speak to different parts of you as you get older. There were certain things in Milton that really appealed to me when I first read him as a teenager – I remember loving the battles between the angels and devils. Later, when I had learned more about life, I was particularly moved by the way Milton portrays marriage and domesticity. When I read him now, I'm particularly struck by the pessimistic providentialism that underlies his vision of history – a vision that's both thoroughly pessimistic and thoroughly hopeful at the same time. And there are other things in Milton that will no doubt speak to me when I'm older. I look forward to finding out.

"Theological texts are products of human imagination and human ingenuity."



Ben Myers, photo by Liz Jakimow

What would the world be without literature?

I can't imagine it! It's like asking what the world would be like without language and culture. If you took these things away, you'd be removing the mental apparatus that makes it possible to think about the world. Literature is just everyday language turned into art. Wherever you have language, you will have stories. Wherever you have stories, you will have someone who is particularly good at telling them. Over time, language itself adapts to meet the needs of great storytellers. Just think of all the words that only exist because Shakespeare invented them – "laughable" is an example, or "impartial" or "sanctimonious." Once those words have been invented, we *need* them. We could no longer express ourselves fully without them. In other words: if you took away Shakespeare, you'd be taking away part of the human spirit, part of our capacity to experience the world. Take away literature, and what begins to vanish is the world.

Launch of two books by Prof Scott Cowdell

Dr Jonathan Cole

Director, CRES

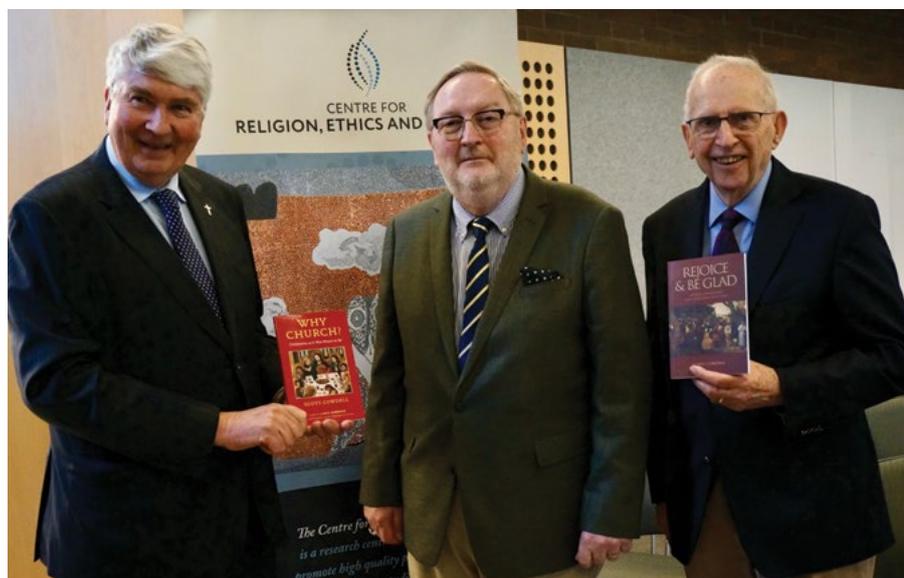
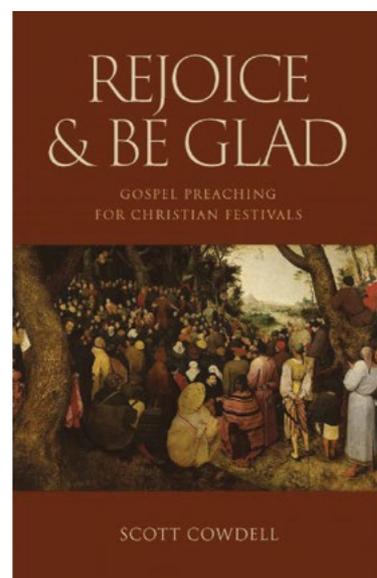
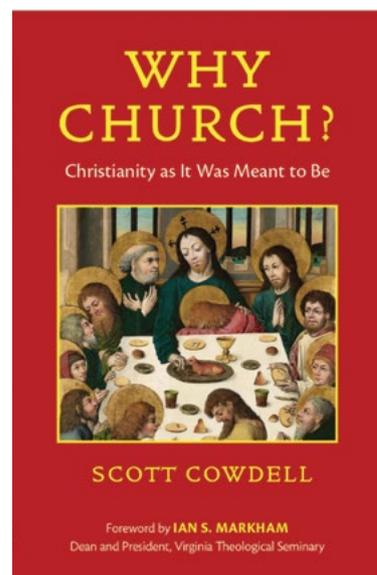
On 12 November, the Centre for Religion, Ethics and Society (CRES) was pleased to celebrate and launch two books by CRES Adjunct Research Professor, Scott Cowdell: *Why Church? Christianity as It Was Meant to Be* and *Rejoice and Be Glad: Gospel Preaching for Christian Festivals*.

Why Church? seeks to reclaim the centrality of church to Christian faith, life and mission at a time and in a context in which it has become marginal to the culture around it and optional for far too many who belong to it. In his formal remarks to launch the book, Fr Frank Brennan highlighted Scott's ability to write "deftly and graciously about the spiritual journey and the relevance of the institutional church, acknowledging [here quoting from the book] "Jesus's desire to share the Passover with us in the Eucharist, and to enlist us in the world and life transforming Christian adventure through the church."

Rejoice and Be Glad contains a series of sermons preached by Scott at festivals throughout the liturgical calendar during his more than three decades in Anglican parish ministry (Scott was received into the Catholic Church earlier this year and formal approval has been sought from Rome for him to advance toward ordination). What distinguishes Scott's preaching, and this collection in particular, according to Hugh Mackay, who launched the book, is its social relevance, its critique of religious hypocrisy and its powerful use of metaphor. Hugh commended the mixture of generosity, scholarship, warmth, humanity, humility and humour contained in the sermons.

"Jesus's desire to share the Passover with us in the Eucharist, and to enlist us in the world and life transforming Christian adventure through the church."

In his closing remarks at the launch, Scott focused on the fundamental optimism underpinning the two works as expressions of his commitment and abiding faith in the church, with *Rejoice and Be Glad* providing "a resource and an encouragement for fellow preachers" and *Why Church?* "offering something realistic but chiefly positive and hopeful about the Church."



(l to r) Frank Brennan, Scott Cowdell and Hugh Mackay, photo by Lisa Carley

Jesus through Medieval Eyes by Grace Hammon

Liz Jakimow

Communications Officer, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

While *Jesus through Medieval Eyes* may sound dry and irrelevant, this easy-to-read book by Grace Hammon introduces us to a Jesus who has just as much relevance for today. Through medieval artists, mystics and theologians, Hammon introduces us to various forms of Jesus that were important to medieval people: the judge, the lover, the knight, the Word, the mother, the good Medieval Christian and the wounded God.

The medieval period can seem particularly foreign to us. Some of the ways they thought about Jesus can be strange or even off-putting. For example, one of the most bizarre illustrations in the book is Jesus giving birth to the Church out of his side during the crucifixion. However, our lack of familiarity or comfort can sometimes uncover our own biases and lead us into new ways of thinking about Jesus that we may have missed.

While this book seeks to introduce us to the medieval Christian,

“In medieval times, many people could not read so images were extremely important in conveying certain aspects of Christianity.”

it is also a discussion on Christian life today. Hammon frequently uses examples of her life in 21st Century America to illustrate some of the points raised by Medieval Christians. For example, she shares experiences of her life as a mother to reflect on Jesus the mother. She also provides guidance on how meeting each medieval face of Jesus should change how we act and live in the world as Christians now.

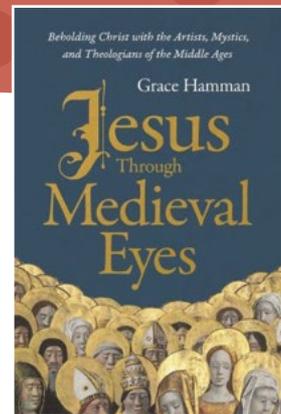
At the end of each chapter, the book provides different practices on how we can embrace the specific face of Jesus just revealed. Each of these practice areas include a scripture verse to meditate on and a prayer. They also include suggested activities, most of which are fairly easy to do. One of the suggested practices is to watch *Lord of the Rings* or another movie involving courage to help us think about Jesus the knight. An activity for the wounded God suggests gazing at a picture of the crucifixion in silent contemplation for 5-30 minutes.

In reading *Jesus through Medieval Eyes*, I also became keenly aware of just how powerful arts and creativity can be. In medieval times, many people could not read so images were extremely important in conveying certain aspects of Christianity. Hammon includes a number of

illustrations in her books some beautiful, some rather strange. Yet they all show how the arts present different elements of Jesus that are sometimes missing from theological texts. They also allow us to reimagine Jesus in our own times, or to place ourselves into the Christian story. Medieval people did this by hiring artists to place a picture of themselves in devotional books.

I started this book expecting to discover different and interesting ways that people thought about Jesus in medieval times. I was not disappointed. However, it also provided insight into how we think about Jesus today, and ways in which we might uncover new truths about Jesus by looking to the past or to arts and creativity in our own time.

So in following Hammon’s example of ending each chapter with suggested practices, let me end with another possible activity. Draw a picture of Jesus. Don’t worry about artistic merit. That is not the point. Just draw what you think of when you think about Jesus. Then ask yourself what does that reveal about the way you perceive him? And can you add anything to reveal a new facet of Jesus you previously hadn’t considered?



A page from the Athelstan psalter. This is a tenth century addition, made at the Old Minster, Winchester, to the ninth century original. The image is the enthroned Christ surrounded by heavenly choirs. By British Library MS Cotton Augustus ii., Public Domain

Upcoming Events

Jesus Laughing and Loving Exhibition

By appointment
Monday to Friday 10am - 3pm
The Chapel



Annual shutdown

Tuesday 24 December 2024,
reopen Thursday 2 January 2025



CES Forum

7pm, 26 Feb
Chambers Pavilion



Christians for an
Ethical Society

Commonwealth Day Celebration

11am, 10 March
The Chapel



St Patrick's Day Service

12pm, 15 March
The Chapel





Bible Garden, photo by Liz Jakimow



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Engage Issue 17 – The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture