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## “Whoever hears you hears me:” hearing the voice of Christ as we listen to one another interpret the Bible in a global communion

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### Introduction

In the Lutheran understanding of Scripture, Christ is at the centre, as the Word made flesh. It is not only the person of Christ that is central, but all that Christ has done for us and for our salvation: his life and death and resurrection. Because of Christ and through the working of the Holy Spirit, God makes us his own in baptism, forgives us our sins, restores and heals us. We are born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ. In and through Christ, God is making all things new—a promise and a hope that include the whole creation.

This transformative gospel lies at the heart of the biblical narrative. Both in the world of the Bible and in the world of today we see people living out their faith in transformed lives. Being in the world, yet not of it, Christians can be open to perspectives and practices from their cultural contexts that become transformative in the light of the gospel. In this process, which is undergirded by the faithful hearing of God’s word, there is affirmation and adaptation, but also refutation. Being attentive to other realities, perspectives and practices is to recognize that in these also there is wisdom and knowledge and goodness from God, from which we can learn, and which we can appropriate. Other perspectives and practices can open our eyes and enrich our lives to see and experience the gospel working in ways that we were not formerly aware of.

Furthermore, as we listen to one another interpret the message of the Bible in a global communion, we can be deeply enriched in faith and life by appreciating and appropriating the gospel-illuminated perspectives and faith-expressions of our sisters and brothers living in their very different situations.

In this paper examples illustrating this approach are given from the Bible, from the time of the Lutheran reformation, and from the writer’s faith-life experience of living and working in other cultural contexts. One of my teachers, Dr Erich Renner, has described this mode of hopping from one example to another as ‘grasshopperisation.’ So, as Lutherans are fond of doing, let us begin with Paul.

### Paul: from Damascus to Athens

Paul speaks of his own conversion and transformation in various places, and primarily in Galatians 1:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:8-10.<sup>1</sup> He speaks of himself as one who had ‘violently persecuted the church of God,’ but who, because of the revelation of God’s Son to him, now proclaims Christ among the Gentiles. ‘By the grace of God I am what I am,’ he writes, ‘and his grace toward me has not been in vain’ (1 Cor 15:10).

As God’s chosen apostle to the Gentiles, Paul intentionally became ‘all things to all people, that [he] might by all means save some’ (1 Cor 9:22). With that intention Paul

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Note: For classical authors, texts and translations used are those found in the *Loeb Classical Library* series.

<sup>1</sup>See also 1 Tim 1:12-16.

travelled far and wide, and eventually found himself in Athens, where he contended for Jesus as Israel’s Messiah in the synagogue, and proclaimed ‘the good news about Jesus and the resurrection’ in the market place (Acts 17:17). There, Luke tells us, Paul entered into dialogue with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, some of whom politely asked him about the ‘new teaching’ he was presenting, and then took him away from the din of the *agora* to the serene space on top of the Hill of Ares, the traditional place for Athenian philosophers to meet for debate. Here on the *Areopagos*, in a speech of great moment, Luke presents Paul not so much as a Jewish itinerant preacher, but as a Christian philosopher. In an eloquent oration (Acts 17:22-31), the Christian speaker first makes contact with his hearers by showing appreciation for their religiosity, and then focuses in particular on one object of their devotion: the unadorned altar with its inscription, *TO THE UNKNOWN GOD*. From this starting point Paul announces his theme: ‘What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you’ (v23). In rhetorically correct style, the speaker now moves into the main body of the speech (the *probatio*), and, in the manner of Stoic treatises on theology, sets forth carefully reasoned arguments for the existence of one true God and God’s gracious provision for the world and for humanity.

I have argued elsewhere that the real dialogue in the Areopagus speech is between Paul and the Stoics.<sup>2</sup> The dialogue proceeds from the assumption that the natural theology of the Stoics had developed a notion of God compatible enough with Christian proclamation to be used as a significant point of contact. Stoic treatises on theology conventionally divided the discussion into three parts, which we find also in the Areopagus speech: God, the world, and religion.<sup>3</sup> The speaker on the Areopagus links up with well-established Hellenistic proofs for the existence and nature of the Deity: God’s creative activity, God’s providential governance of the cosmos, and God’s care of humanity. The points of contact that are made are not haphazard, but follow a pattern typical of Stoic exposition on the subject of religion.<sup>4</sup>

This linking of the biblical message to Hellenistic ways of thought cannot be demonstrated exhaustively here, but let us give three brief examples. The ‘unknown god’ is first identified as ‘the God who made the cosmos and everything in it’ (v 24). The Stoic Epictetus uses virtually the same words: ‘God has made all things in the cosmos.’<sup>5</sup> The speech argues that God should be recognized because God gives to all people ‘life and breath and everything’ (v 24), and cares for them by establishing ‘seasons and boundaries for their habitation’ (v 26). This links with elaborate Stoic arguments for the existence of God based on the evidence of God’s gracious provision. Dio Chrysostom mentions the seasons as one such proof: Humans love and admire the divinity ‘also because they observed seasons and saw that it is for our preservation that they come with perfect regularity.’<sup>6</sup> In describing humanity’s relationship to God (17:27-28), the speech quotes directly from the

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<sup>2</sup> Dean Zweck, ‘The Exordium of the Areopagus Speech,’ *NTS* 35 (1989): 94-103; also ‘The Areopagus Speech of Acts 17,’ *Lutheran Theological Journal* 21 (Dec 1987): 111-122.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2.3; Acts 17:24-29.

<sup>4</sup> As exhibited in book 2 of the *De Natura Deorum*.

<sup>5</sup> Epictetus 4.7.6 (*ho theos panta pepoiēken ta en tō kosmō*).

<sup>6</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12.32.

literature of Hellenism: God is 'not far' from each one of us;<sup>7</sup> in God 'we live and move and have our being';<sup>8</sup> 'for we are indeed his offspring'.<sup>9</sup>

The speech not only makes points of contact, but also establishes points of refutation. Since there is only one God, the Creator and sustainer of the cosmos, it is folly to build all manner of shrines and images, as if these could contain or represent God (vv 24,29). Enlightened philosophers already know this.<sup>10</sup> To the extent that they have correctly perceived the nature of God and acknowledged him appropriately, they fit Peter's description in the Cornelius episode: 'Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34-35). And yet the message of 'repentance to God' is for all without exception, because all must appear before the one whom God has appointed to judge the world in righteousness. At the same time there is wonderful hope: God has given 'assurance' (Greek: *pistis*) to all by raising this man from the dead (Acts 17:30-31)

With consummate skill, Luke shows that the apostle whose intention was to be all things to all people was as good as his word. In the speech we find a Christian rhetor who has entered the thought-world of his hearers, and made it his own to such an extent that he is able to enhance the Jewish/biblical understanding of one true and living God, Creator of all things, by employing worthy notions of divinity in Hellenistic philosophy, the Stoic tradition in particular, and attuning them to key ideas found in the Hebrew bible. The Areopagus speech represents a beginning point in the long journey of the ongoing dialogue between Christian faith and philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

In our 'grasshopperisation' we now leap to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Consultation at Augsburg, 1530: a culmination of transformative perspectives and practices

We are Lutherans of many stripes and many kinds, but what holds us together in our diversity is a common confession. We are 'Augustana' Christians, churches of the Augsburg Confession

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century began in no small part because the church of that time was teaching certain 'non-transformative' perspectives, and as a consequence was advocating numerous 'non-transformative' practices. Because late medieval Christendom was in many ways a closed system in which other perspectives and practices were relentlessly stifled and stamped out (cf the Inquisition), the way forward was to go backwards, that is, to go back to the sources (*ad fontes*). In the light of those sources, the

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<sup>7</sup> *ou makran* very probably reproduces a 'topos' in Greek popular philosophy. Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 12.28) says that the people of long ago 'were not dispersed far away [*ou makran*] nor outside of the divinity by themselves.'

<sup>8</sup> Possibly a quote from Epimenides of Crete.

<sup>9</sup> The exact words are found in a hymn to Zeus by the Stoic poet Aratus, *Phaenomena* 5.

<sup>10</sup> Eg, Strabo 16.2.35: 'What man, then, if he has any sense, could be bold enough to fabricate an image of God resembling any creature among us? Nay, people should leave off all image-carving, and ... should worship God without an image.'

<sup>11</sup> Hans Conzelmann describes the speech as 'the most momentous document from the beginnings of that extraordinary confrontation between Christianity and philosophy.' In 'The Address of Paul on the Areopagus,' in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed LE Leck and JL Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 217.

New Testament in particular, early Lutheran reformers critiqued the teaching and life of the church of their time, finding it sadly wanting, and went on boldly to proclaim a rediscovered evangelical perspective, on the basis of which they forged a corresponding set of transformative practices.

The burning question for people in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when life was nasty and brutish and short, and the fear of hell very real, was: 'How can I find a gracious God?' Young man Luther gave up the study of law with its promise of a good career and entered the monastery because the church of that time was in effect saying: if you really want to be sure of finding a gracious God, become a monk. And so he did, and did so with all his might: 'I took the vow not for the sake of my belly but for the sake of my salvation, and I observed all our statutes very strictly.'<sup>12</sup> He also said that if any could gain heaven by being a monk, he would be among them. But all to no avail: 'Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that [God] was placated by my satisfaction.'<sup>13</sup> There was no transformation here at all, rather, we see a young man plunged further and deeper into despair: 'I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and ... I was angry with God.'<sup>14</sup>

The transformation came from his study of the Scriptures, the task assigned to him by his wise superior, Staupitz. The more Luther studied and lectured in the Scriptures the more he discovered a 'new' perspective. It is not the place here to trace that journey in detail, but the full evangelical break-through came when Luther finally understood what the righteousness of God really is. Looking back on his life from near its end, Luther wrote about his transformative break-through. He describes how it was a single word in Romans 1:17 that still stood in his way: 'In it [namely, the gospel] the **righteousness** of God is revealed. He wrote:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.<sup>15</sup>

In the thematic language of our conference, we are talking here about the gaining of a transformative perspective. Here Luther discovered the gospel as 'power of God for salvation' (Rom 1:16). Here Luther gained a perspective that was to change him from a questioning monk, bold enough to post ninety-five theses about indulgences, to a driven reformer, ready and willing to put in place the transformative practices that go hand in glove with a transformative gospel.

Luther's evangelical perspective emerged in its 16<sup>th</sup> century Christendom context not so much from the insights of northern humanism or other movements of the time, but

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<sup>12</sup> *LW* 54: 338.

<sup>13</sup> *LW* 34: 336.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 336-337.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 337.

in reaction to the sterile and ‘non-transformative’ overburden of churchly practices that badly obscured the gospel. Luther broke through to an evangelical perspective by going back to the sources, and by that light and with that single focus, he steadfastly embarked on reform of the church.

Luther’s evangelical perspective and early Lutheran thinking about its implications for churchly practice culminated in the eloquent confession made at Augsburg, 25 June 1530. Much has been written about the Augsburg Confession, but here I would like to make just a few points.

The first is that over against the prevailing religious and political establishment of that time (‘Christendom’), the confessors at Augsburg clearly and courageously, even self-consciously, presented a coherent and comprehensive confession of their faith—a perspective that they themselves had experienced as transformative in their faith and life. In their preface to the Emperor they said:

Wherefore, in dutiful obedience to your Imperial Majesty, we offer and present a confession of our pastors’ and preachers’ teaching and of our own faith, setting forth how and in what manner, on the basis of Holy Scripture, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of this confession is a particular way of speaking the gospel that is absolutely clear, and prevents any kind of Pelagian muddying of the waters. This is, of course, the article on justification:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.<sup>17</sup>

In the Augsburg Confession, Article IV on justification functions as the overarching transformative perspective that informs both the structure of the confession and the way each article is worded and presented. Let us put this simply and plainly: You begin with the Triune God, Creator of all things (article 1); you then deal with the biggest problem in God’s good creation: original sin and its consequences (article 2); then you talk about the sending of the Son of God to be the Savior from sin (article 3); then you spell out how the saving work of Christ is appropriated—justification by faith (article 4); then how God provides the ministry of the gospel and the sacraments so that we may obtain such faith (article 5), and then how justification results in the new obedience of the justified and their community in the church (articles 6 and 7), and so forth.<sup>18</sup> There is a logical progression here leading up to and proceeding from the central article on justification.

The evangelical faith confessed at Augsburg not only expressed itself in an integrated and coherent theological perspective, but also in enunciating the transformative practices that issue forth from that perspective. As the confession moves along the practices receive increasingly more attention. For the gospel to run its course, there needs to be good

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<sup>16</sup> CA, ‘Preface’ prg 8, in Theodore G Tappert, ed, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 25.

<sup>17</sup> CA 4 (Tappert, 30).

<sup>18</sup> Cf the analysis in Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 79.

order in the church and persons who are properly called (article 14), there needs to be a sorting out of which traditions help the gospel and which ones need to go (article 15), Christians need to know about their relationship to the civil government (article 16), and so forth. The last part of the confession (articles 22-28) deals with ‘matters in dispute, in which an account is given of the abuses which have been corrected.’<sup>19</sup> In light of the gospel, in light of the rediscovered evangelical perspective, some things need to change or be discontinued in the life of the church:

Among us the ancient rites are for the most part diligently observed, for it is false and malicious to charge that all ceremonies and all old ordinances are abolished in our churches. But it has been a common complaint that certain abuses were connected with ordinary rites. Because these could not be approved with a good conscience, they have to some extent been corrected.<sup>20</sup>

Implied here is that this is a work in progress. Transformation is taking place in the evangelical church’s practice, in view of the fact that certain practices had crept into the life of the church that obscure the gospel. The first problem to be addressed was the withdrawal of the cup from the laity: ‘among us both kinds are given ... in the sacrament’ (article 22). Following that: priest are now allowed to marry (article 23); abuses of the mass have been stopped (article 24); in confession a detailed enumeration of sins is no longer required and the emphasis is put on absolution (article 25); fasting is no longer obligatory (article 26); monastic vows are discouraged (article 27); and the ‘power’ of bishops is linked evangelically to word and sacrament (article 28).

At the time of the Reformation a transformative evangelical perspective resulted in transformative practices that promoted the gospel in the life of the church. This is sort of ‘old hat’ for us, but we need to appreciate how renewing and life-giving this was for the church of that time, and how we need to make this happen again in the life of our church today (*ecclesia semper reformanda est*). We can do this by asking how the gospel might best be communicated to the people of our time in their differing cultural contexts. What is the big God-question of our time? Maybe it is not so much ‘How can I find a gracious God?’ as it is ‘How can I find God at all?’, or ‘Does it matter? Do I have any need of God at all?’ What is the good news from God for our time, and how might we best say it? How will our culture help us say it? What is God saying to us through other perspectives? And how do we interpret these perspectives in the light of the gospel? As Christians, what can we learn from one another’s perspectives and practices that have emerged and developed as we have faithfully and for a long time heard and interpreted the Scriptures in our various cultural contexts?

I feel that both as a theologian and a Christian my faith and life have been enriched by the perspectives and practices of the Papua New Guinean Christians among whom I lived for many years, and so, to continue our ‘grasshopperisation’, it is to that life experience we now turn for a few examples.

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<sup>19</sup> Tappert, 48-94.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 48.

**'Anutu conquers in New Guinea'<sup>21</sup>**

Memories fade, but one that has not faded for me was meeting a very old man in a village in Papua New Guinea not long after I had arrived in the country. They said he was a hundred, and he himself told me that as a small boy perched on his father's shoulders he had seen 'Senior' Flierl (the pioneer missionary from Neuendettelsau). During our long conversation I asked him what the coming of the gospel meant for his people. He thought for a while and said, 'It meant that we could sleep.'

I was not expecting that answer, and for that reason I still remember it, and all the more because in subsequent years I discovered how typical and how true that answer was. Typical, because Niuginians have an uncanny way of using a simple picture to convey a profound truth. And how true, because the coming of the gospel made deep, untroubled, refreshing sleep a reality. Such was the fear of enemies, whether physical or spiritual, that they often used specially carved wooden support or stool that would keep the head propped up, so that one would not sleep too deeply and could have ears open for the warning sounds of approaching hostility.

Especially in the early days, the gospel was experienced as a most welcome and transformative message that delivered people from paralyzing fear, and bestowed upon them a peace they had never known: peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is our peace (Eph 2:14), peace from the endless cycle of trying to placate demanding spirits, peace with former enemies through the breaking of spears at baptism, peace with neighboring people with whom your group had been feuding so long that even languages parted ways. The transformative power of the gospel meant deep peace, and deep sleep. The old man's answer was spot on.

The theology of this transformative gospel is reflected in the hymnody of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in PNG. There is a strong recurring emphasis on being rescued from darkness and now walking in the light, of being trapped in consuming guilt and anger and God coming to bring peace, of being delivered from a dark prison and now rejoicing in God. Here are some examples.

The first is by Wahaoc from Wareo in the Finschhafen area:<sup>22</sup>

He led us, that Messiah,

from the hand of Satan

he led us, led us.

Our Lord dragged us up,

us, out of the mud.

For him let us live, let us live, as his heritage, let us live.

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<sup>21</sup> This is the title of a book written by former ALC/ELCA missionaries; Albert and Sylvia Frerichs, *Anutu Conquers in New Guinea: A Story of Mission Work in New Guinea*, rev ed (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969). Anutu is a traditional indigenous name for God that is commonly used in the north-east part of Papua New Guinea. In the Kotte language God was also called 'Märeng-fung'—origin of the earth.

<sup>22</sup> Trans from Kotte language mine; no 253 in the *Lutheran Gae Buk*, rev ed (Madang, PNG: Kristen Pres, 1960).

O friend, let us praise our heavenly Lord,

O yes, friend, let us praise

our heavenly Lord, O yes, let us extol him.

The next song is by Nawasio Gedisa and was translated from Jabem into Tok Pisin.<sup>23</sup>

O Jesus came and stayed,

he is with us.

Let us truly give thanks to him,

Now and for ever.

*Alleluia, -leluia,*

*Praise the name of God*

*Alleluia, -leluia, alleluia.*

Many years ago

Flierl arrived at Simbang.

Brought the Good News to us,

joy and peace.

Our ancestors were in darkness

here on the earth.

The light of God has arisen now

and it gathers us.

Let all us Christians

praise the name of Christ.

He is the Child of God.

O, all of you come!

Holy Spirit, you come now,

come into our hearts.

Guide our church

to do your work.

This song is by Desiang, from Wemo, Finschhafen:<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Trans from Tok Pisin mine; no 331 in *Rejoice and Sing*, Papua New Guinea edition (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1978).

You owner of peace, ooe,  
 Lord, you owner of peace, ooe,  
 make peace, ooe,  
 Lord, make peace, won't you.  
 Guilty, guilty, ooe,  
 Guilty, a heap of guilt, ooe,  
 make peace, ooe,  
 Lord, make peace, won't you.  
 Unravel the knot of anger,  
 that animosity against friend,  
 Its onset, ooe,  
 Lord, chase it away!

These examples from the hymnody aptly illustrate the main idea that I have proposed in this paper: that at the heart of the biblical narrative lies the transformative gospel, and that as people are transformed by this central message they can adapt perspectives and practices from their cultural context that become transformative in the light of that gospel. And furthermore, that as we listen to one another interpret the message of the Bible in a global communion, we can be deeply enriched by appropriating the gospel-illuminated perspectives and faith-expressions of our sisters and brothers in their very different contexts. Allow me now to illustrate that further with a few stories.

For Niuginians everything is story. The first Christians became Christians by hearing the story. Wisely, deliberately, and perhaps because they had little say in it, the first missionaries learned much about the culture and stories as they learned languages, and gradually began to catechise the people. Like Paul in Athens, they discovered that behind all the up-front religiosity connected with placating ancestral spirits and nature spirits, there was the knowledge of a great Creator Spirit, known variously as Anutu or Anut.<sup>25</sup> With Paul the missionaries said, 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this we proclaim to you' (Acts 17:23). And like Paul in the Areopagus speech, the starting point was that the unknown God, Anutu, Creator of the cosmos, Lord of heaven and earth. That was the starting point, and the people learned the faith by learning the story, the *Heilsgeschichte*. In fact that German word would be a good translation for the name of the book they used: the *Miti Binang*, the story of the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Teaching the faith as Bible-story was indeed most appropriate. But not for a moment should we think that this was a one way street, because the tellers and hearers of the story were always appropriating the biblical story into the world of their stories. The

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<sup>24</sup> Trans mine; no 431 in the *Lutheran Gae Buk*.

<sup>25</sup> Also called Māreng-fung, 'Earth's-Origin', by the Kāte people.

<sup>26</sup> 'Miti' is a Kāte word that is not easily translated. It is used to translate 'gospel', but in its strict sense has the idea of everything being in right and harmonious relationship (not unlike 'shalom' in Hebrew).

most dramatic evidence for this is quite literally in drama. Niuginian Christians have long employed dramatic presentation as a way of celebrating and proclaiming their faith, and not infrequently for making a pointed statement about some issue in the life of the Christian community. A couple of examples:

It is just before dawn on Easter day at Senior Flierl Seminary, Logaweng, Finschhafen. The whole community has gathered at the small cemetery, on the road down to the student village. In silence, large torches made of palm leaves are lit, and then the people make their way in procession along the road, past the church, and up to the lawn and garden area atop a coral ridge. There the Easter story, rather much as we find it in Matthew's Gospel, is enacted. Some students hiding behind a bush wobble a huge sheet of flat galvanized iron to simulate the rumbling sound of an earthquake, an 'angel' comes down from atop a coconut palm, and the terrified soldiers stir from their slumber in the unmistakable uniforms of the Papua New Guinea Constabulary. The acting is very lively, and the people are animated and excited by what they see. It is just the biblical narrative, but they have made it truly come alive in their world, and deliberately contextualized certain aspects of it.

At a church dedication the expectation is that there will be a dramatic presentation. On this occasion—in a remote mountain village—the usual long procession from outside the village to the church door becomes an enactment of the exodus. 'Egypt' was their former life in bondage to demanding spiritual powers, 'Moses' is Senior Flierl who first brought the light of the gospel into their world, and the 'promised land' is symbolized by the church that is about to be dedicated. On this festive occasion the people made the exodus narrative come alive in a joyful celebration of their own liberation through the gospel.

It was a two-day walk to get to that dedication, my first bush-walk. As we cross a raging torrent I notice that the talking in our group became very animated, so I ask Bishop Mufuacnuc what it is all about. 'They are telling stories about the spirit of the river,' he says. 'But,' he adds with a wry smile, 'you and I went to school and we know that there is no spirit in the river.' I rather think he was not entirely serious and was having a bit of a shot at our western world-view. So demythologized, so single-mindedly scientific had our world-view become that Niuginians would have found it quite unbelievable. Things have changed somewhat since then, but we who were brought up in the western tradition still have a way to go. From Melanesian and similar cultures we could learn a deeper awareness of the spiritual nature of creation, a deeper reverence for life, and a deeper sense of the liveness that exists in all things. Psalm 104:30 comes to mind: 'When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.' At this time when the ecology of the whole globe is in deep crisis, we need to revisit our theology and practice of creation, and in doing so we would do well to pay attention to other perspectives on creation, and other readings of the pertinent biblical texts, such as I found during my time of living and working among Papua New Guinean Christians. This does not mean compromising our faith in one true and living God, the Creator of all things, but of being open to other realities.<sup>27</sup> The river in my little story may well be alive and teaming with life in ways that are beyond our ken—beyond our western way of interpreting the world around us—but that does not make the spirit of the river a divinity. The biblical distinction

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<sup>27</sup> There is a huge ongoing discussion about the relationship between Christianity and traditional Melanesian religion. The various positions in the discussion are well summarized by Marilyn Rowsome, 'Melanesian Traditional Religion', *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 17/2(2001): 36-56. Also helpful is *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, ed Ennio Mantovani (Goroka, PNG: The Melanesian Institute, 1984).

between the Creator and the created is not to be blurred, and to the Creator alone our praise and thanks are due (cf. Rom 1:25).

### A couple of snapshots from the land down under

We conclude our ‘grasshopperisation’ with a long hop to the land of long-hopping creatures. Australia has been called ‘the South Land of the Holy Spirit’,<sup>28</sup> but it has also been called ‘the most godless place under heaven.’<sup>29</sup> There is a sense in which that is true, because Australia is a very secular and materialistic culture, and not many people go to church regularly. And yet God is in this land, and always has been.

Like the Athenians of Acts 17, The Aboriginal people, in their diversity of beliefs, also acknowledged the Creator. Aboriginal Christians, looking back to the time of their ancestors, can relate to the first words in the letter to the Hebrews: ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways.’ Reflecting on this text a group of Aboriginal Christians said this:

We believe that this text applies equally well to the ancestors of our Aboriginal people as it does to the ancestors of the people of Israel. The Creator Spirit spoke to us in many ways, especially through the land which links us to the Creator Spirit.

As one of our workshop group said:

Aboriginal culture is spiritual. I am spiritual. Inside of me is spirit and land, both given to me by the Creator Spirit. There is a piece of land in me, and it keeps drawing me back like a magnet to the land from which I came. Because the land, too, is spiritual.

This land owns me. The only piece of land I can claim a spiritual connection with—a connection between me and the land—is the piece of land under the tree where I was born, the place where my mother buried my afterbirth and umbilical cord. The spiritual link with that piece of land goes back to the ancestors in the Dreaming. This is both a personal and sacred connection—between me and the land, me and my ancestors.<sup>30</sup>

I read those words and the book in which they are written eleven years ago, and that gave me some insight into the way Aboriginal people relate to the land and the pain they must feel in being dispossessed of it, as happened under the *terra nullius* policy that has only recently been overturned.<sup>31</sup>

Reading about it in a book is one thing, but actually to hear an Aboriginal person saying it is another. About two years ago I went to the Red Centre, as it is called, to teach at a course for Aboriginal pastors and evangelists and church workers. Our ‘campus’ was a clearing out in the bush, and we sat in warm sunshine on the red earth under the deep blue canopy of the sky. It was cold at night, and we slept in swags (a kind of sleeping bag) alongside body-length fires. My companion was old Pastor Davey Ingkamala. Before

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<sup>28</sup> Muriel Porter, *Land of the Spirit?: the Australian Religious Experience* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990) ix.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Breward, *Australia: “The Most Godless Place Under Heaven?”* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1988) title page.

<sup>30</sup> The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards and Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn, Victoria: HarperCollins, 1997) 4.

<sup>31</sup> This was the policy that regarded the land as vacant on the pretext that Aboriginal peoples were nomadic and therefore did not own the land.

retiring at night we sat by the fire and he told me many stories. He told me how some years previously he had gone through the traditional initiation that he had missed out on as a young person. He said that an important part of initiation was learning the ancestral stories about the Dreaming, and how if you don’t have these stories you are in effect landless and not fully recognized as a male in the tribe. Since many of the characters in the stories were originally regarded as divinities, it was interesting to hear how he related both to the stories and the characters in them. For him involvement in the stories meant no compromise of his Christian faith, because in his hearing of them now everything is undergirded by faith in one true land living God, the Creator. And yet, as he said, the stories are important, because without them he cannot belong properly, either to the land or to his own people.

Years earlier Davey Ingkamala told the story of his conversion and subsequent life as an evangelist and pastor, and this has been published.<sup>32</sup> The thing that really stands out in the story is his strong faith that the One he knows as Creator of all is a God of very great love, who does not give up on sinners. Pastor Davey concludes:

I still remember the words that God spoke to me earlier on [this was in a vision of blinding light], ‘First the heat will burn you.’ I can see that God’s word is true and strong. He does not speak for no reason, nor without effect. His word has power. Whatever he says, happens. So today I thank and praise God with all my heart that he has called me to do this work, to be a true and honest worker for him. God has shown me, a sinner, his very great love. I keep on thinking about the fact that God really is a God of love. That his love is without limit, and that in the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior, it embraces the whole earth.<sup>33</sup>

My second Australian ‘snapshot’ is just that: a photo. This is a photo of a war memorial in Papua New Guinea. It is a tall block of black stone, with just one word on it: MATESHIP. The memorial is situated at one end of the long and torturous Kokoda Track, along which thousands of young Australian soldiers made their way during one of the battles of World War II.

I only saw the photo a few days ago, but its connection to major ideas in this paper was immediate. In the briefing for this consultation the question was asked: ‘How can theologians from around the world learn from cultural, gender, social, economic, political and interreligious realities different from their own and be transformed by them?’ I have not had time to develop this, but the unique Australian phenomenon called ‘mateship’ is one such reality that could be picked up to enhance theology and life in this part of the world.

Mateship is the name given to the strong egalitarian bond between Australians, especially in times of hardship. It was the bond between the harshly treated convicts who came on the first fleet of ships in 1788. It was the bond between settlers trying to come to terms with the extreme isolation and hardship that came with trying to carve out a new existence in the harshness of the Australian bush. It was the special bond between Aussie soldiers during the world wars and other conflicts. It is the virtue that comes to the fore when tragedy strikes—as it did so wonderfully during and after the apocalyptic bushfires that ravaged Victoria a few weeks ago.

I think it is self-evident that the notion of mateship has possibilities for Christian theology and life in the Australian context. I cannot unpack that here, but just a couple of

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Pastor Davey Ingkamala’s Story,’ translated from Arrarnta by John Pfitzner, in Paul GE Albrecht, *From Mission to Church 1877-2002: Finke River Mission* (Adelaide: Finke River Mission, 2002) 222-225.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

starters. One starter would be in connection with the theology of the cross. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13). And further on in the same passage: 'I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends' (v 15). Both of those notions are at the heart of mateship. Mateship, whether in time of war or in fighting terrible fires, means being willing to risk your life, and even lay down your life, for your mates. There is no hierarchy in mateship because we are all mates together, so watch out for those who want to lord it over you. Mateship is like the body of Christ as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, in which there are many members, and where foot or eye has no right to lord it over others, but where 'the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it' (vv 25b-26). In our city there is a billboard sign for occupational health and safety awareness. It shows two persons wearing hardhats going off to work in a dangerous place. The caption in large letters reads: Look after your mates! Every one knows what that means in Australia, but the church has not done very well in appropriating that kind of message, and others like it, for proclaiming the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen with Paul in Athens, with Lutheran confessors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and with the gospel at work in our own time, there is in our conversation with other realities both affirmation and appropriation, but sometimes also refutation. This calls for wisdom, for discerning what God wants to give us not only in God's word, but also in God's world, because, as it says in James, 'Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights' (1:17). In the light of the gospel, our theology and practice, our faith and life, can be deeply enriched and made more relevant as we hear one another interpret the Bible in our different contexts in the unique global communion of faith in which we as Lutherans belong.