

## **Alive to the sacred in a secular world**

Last week on ANZAC Eve I found myself atop Mt Ainslie taking part in a Vigil for Peace. As the sun set and the lights of Canberra began to illuminate the clear crisp Canberra autumn night, I found myself touched by the sacred. Yet many of those present would not have chosen to describe it as such. After all it was intended to be a secular event with no overt religious elements. However a chorus of women began singing gentle refrains that would have been just as appropriate at an evening of Taize Prayer, although there was no mention of God in the lyrics. This was followed by a welcome to country by an Aboriginal woman elder who spoke of the 'spirit of the land' calling us to gather there in peace. Another person read a piece of poetry that prompted our creative imagination to explore the meaning of true peace. This was followed by a song and words of lament uttered with a sense of longing akin to intercessory prayer experienced each Sunday in our worship service.

As I reflected on the experience I was reminded of the book 'Religion for Atheists' by Alain de Botton. Although a non-believer himself, de Botton argues that atheists and agnostics should stop spending their time trying to disprove the existence of God and mocking religions and instead steal from them. Religions, argues de Botton, have real insights into how to build a sense of community, sustain lasting relationships, overcome feelings of envy and inadequacy, escape the conforming demands of our consumer society, encourage human creativity and address emotional needs. De Botton suggests "in a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.

And in a sense the people who organised the peace vigil last ANZAC Eve had cleverly learnt the insights offered by religions into the aspirations and longings of the human spirit; almost to the point where I had to ask whether it was necessary to name God in that sacred moment. But perhaps de Botton unwittingly provided me the words for why it is important for me to name the sacred. In his chapter headed 'Perspective' de Botton writes: "The signal danger of life in a godless society is that it lacks reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and ultimate annihilation. When God is dead, human beings – much to their detriment – are at risk of taking psychological centre stage. They imagine themselves to be commanders of their own destinies, they trample on nature, forget the rhythm of the earth, deny death and shy away from valuing and honouring all that slips through their grasp, until they must collide catastrophically with the sharp edges of reality. (He concludes) Our secular world is lacking in the sorts of rituals that might put us gently in our place."

Ultimately that is why and what I believe. That we and all creation are in relationship with a deeper reality than we can ever fully know, yet that humbling reality frees us to accept ourselves as having been accepted and loved into being, the natural response being to accept and value the worth and integrity of all creation. I sense that was the aspiration and longing within the hearts of those gathered round me atop Mt Ainslie on that crisp autumn night. I hope they experienced the sacred; an experience I named 'God', revealed to me through a Galilean carpenter's son who left a community touched and inspired by the sacred.

Ivan Roberts