



ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL

MELBOURNE

GOD'S POLICE

God's Police

We very nearly all spoke French – not by virtue of obligatory exposure to it during our school days, but because of Monsieur La Perouse.

An official despatch from Captain Arthur Phillip to London reported that, 'on the morning of the 24th [of January, 1788] the greatest astonishment was spread throughout the fleet by the appearance of two ships, under French colours.' It was only 'the opposition of the wind, and a strong current', which prevented their entering Botany Bay, and which drove them out of sight to the south. These were the ships *Boussole* and *Astrolabe*. It was the next day – 25th January, seven days after their arrival – that Phillip 'quitted Botany Bay' in HMS *Supply*, and sailed north to Port Jackson; the remainder of the fleet, under the command of HMS *Sirius*, was ordered to follow 'as soon as the abatement of the wind... should facilitate its working out of the Bay.' This they did on the 26th, and it took only a few hours to make the transit to Port Jackson, and to assemble in Sydney Cove. The French anchored in Botany Bay a few hours prior to the fleet's departure for Port Jackson, and La Perouse requested that some letters he had written be conveyed by the English to the French ambassador in England, when it was convenient; to this request, Phillip agreed. At the same time, 'a few of the convicts contrived to abscond, and endeavoured to get admitted into the French ships, but were, with great propriety, rejected.' [*The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*]

French colonial policy, and a relatively weaker sea-power – coupled with the disappearance of La Perouse's expedition in the Solomon Islands some months later – made it unlikely that this continent's modern history could have been other. So, on 7th February, 1788, 'a regular form of Government on the coast of New south Wales' was declared and established: with great solemnity, on a space previously cleared at Sydney Cove - 'the military drawn up, and under arms; the convicts stationed apart' – the Royal Commission was duly read by Mr D. Collins, the Judge Advocate. All the territory from Cape York in the north (10 deg 37 min south), to South Cape (43 deg 39 min south), and west to 135 deg east ('as reckoned from Greenwich') now constituted New South Wales. Two hundred and twenty-three years later, and here we are...

Pondering our – or any body else's, for that matter – national history, is a complex and tricky business, especially when we seek to enquire of God's part in it all. The history of the world is, after all – at base – the history of conquest, migration, and dispossession, a reality in which one man's discovery is another man's disaster. In Arthur Phillip's diaries and official records, there is relatively scant mention of the population of this continent encountered upon his fleet's arrival: the force of arms, the application of hard science, and a religiously and philosophically-backed justification of both claim and settlement contrived to make the indigenes the objects of conquest, and (in time) glad subjects of the King.

There are two great dangers for any Christian attempt to speak of God's hand in that thing we label 'history': the first, that God is made the Great Legitimater of all that our ancestors did, and we do; the second, that God is removed from the equation altogether, and made the Absentee Landlord. The one can mire God in the mess and inconsistencies of our history; the other, preserve God squeaky clean, but at cost of disengagement. This is all the more perilous an exercise when a developed Christian understanding of God – whom we declare to be eternally Three Person'd – is read back into the texts of Holy Scripture. Andrei Rublev's famous icon, 'The Trinity' (sometimes known as 'The

God's Police

Hospitality of Abraham') dared to interpret the strange narrative in Genesis 18 from a Trinitarian standpoint; truth be told, theological thinkers had been doing so long before Rublev's C15 efforts.

The daring detail of the early chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, the second reading of the Law, with its close involvement and prescriptive requirements attributed to the divine will and purpose are all the more daring when the Persons of the Trinity are named in the detail. (Try substituting the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at every point in the text where the Tetragrammaton is written.) There is no attempt to exculpate God in Deuteronomy from this closeness to history – and it was a mixed history of triumph and failure, of settlement and conquest, of murder and dispossession as well as cooperation and compromise – no attempt to have extensive footnotes offering a thousand qualifications and exclusions which spare God any potential misunderstanding or embarrassment.

Indeed, the description of the land '[into which] the LORD your God is bringing you', can very easily (with little descriptive modification) be applied to this continent: 'a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates... whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper.' Dorothea Mackellar could have penned it, at least in part.

The great, lurking disaster in this conquest and settlement – and, one suspects, in any other – is that God is 'forgotten', and the commandments neglected or wilfully ignored; the result must inevitably be oppression, inequity, and distortion, making any unfolding divine plan (with all the difficulties such a position carries within it) an incomplete parody of itself. The usual cause, according to the writer of Deuteronomy, is (ironically) *prosperity*. For any settled people, it seems, this is the greatest danger, for it breeds pride and self-sufficiency. The antidote is not some self-imposed, struggling subsistence existence, but a constant reference to the declared ways in which God would have us live.

For Christians, this must be *par excellence* (to speak French if only for a moment!) a view of life and the world that is determined not by the Ten Commandments; to a lesser extent by the so-called two 'Great Commandments', *but by the resurrection of Jesus*. It is this moment in history which at once embraces and exceeds history that shows us something of the Trinity's vision of the future for all that is created: this is the moment that anticipates the future of all things; that embraces all cultures and colours and expressions of human hope and creativity; that imposes a new and life-giving ethic on all things living. This is what we are to remember, to enact, to dare to believe. The difficulties of declaring God involved in the mystery of history are not thereby dissolved – but they are somehow brought within God's orbit. Happy Australia Day...