

## Smithy

It was January 1973, blistering heat, mid- afternoon on the central west coast of SA halfway between Perth and Melbourne. Rosemary answered a knock on the manse door, rushed down the passage declaring that it was Jesus or someone who looked like him. Yes, it was John who I had met only through those brilliant TLC broadsheets and the Jesus movement going on in the big smoke around Melbourne or Sydney somewhere. Shoulder length hair, those piercing but languid dark eyes, sweat pouring off him. This was the famous ride to Perth across the Nullarbor by the incipient God Squad. We spoke just for a few minutes meeting each other for the first time. Then he was off on the Honda 750 four into the torrid desert and me thinking 'I'll probably never see him again'. This was Smithy and this was 'the world is my parish' spirit of Wesley that defined this Aussie Wesley in the twentieth century. And there are many Wesleyan parallels in Smithy's style, vision and ministry.

Wesley sought to be useful to his last days. John was always at it, thinking talking reading as much as he could till mortality, panting, finally caught up with him! He was preaching just a month ago. Wesley rode horseback a quarter of a million miles over so much of England he became an authoritative topographer and keen naturalist. What attracted so many to this preacher who rode over two million k's on his motorbike, was his delight in Creation and creatures.

It was after a meeting in the Squads first mission in an established church. His Kwaka 900 with me pillion somewhere between Koongawa, and Wudinna. Out of the corner of his eye at 110 k's amongst all the non-descript bush John noticed all by itself a myrtaceae eucalyptus tetraptera!. On that day he infected me with the gum tree spotting and propagating bug! Trees lizards, rocks, dingoes, fish, birds eggs, endo and exo skeletons of all kinds collected and displayed. His house was full of specimens. Tertullian the great African church father when asked 'what is the glory of God'? answered: 'the glory of God is a man (human being) fully alive', the Creators essence, expressed in his image. We have never seen such until the True Man walked the dusty roads of Palestine and the crowds of working men and women of the villages beheld his glory, full of grace and truth. But we see glimpses, we see slivers of that light as his saints grow in grace. . And we saw beamings of it in this man we remember today. Not from himself but reflected on and within him from the One he loved, the lover of his soul. Smithy with intense curiosity reflected the graces of the Masters life.

Wesley was embraced by the miners and the oppressed farm laborer's of England's rejected classes. John's empathy with the rejected and marginalized of society was in his heart and deed. At that same mission trip in the early 70's in the packed local institute with the whole social strata of the district represented after a ripping address from Smithy important people milling around to congratulate him the preacher gave his undivided focused attention instead to one old laborer with a seeking heart and stumbling words. And over the span of his ministry it was the hungry 'others' who had his willing heart and mind so often.

These are graces that authenticate the gift. But for his gift, the text for this occasion is from the frequent description in the Book of Acts of the Apostles preaching method: *So he reasoned/debated in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:17 NIV).*

Debate, argue, reason. That was the hallmark of Smithy's style. It was the method of Paul in the synagogues, the intellectual forums and in the market place. It was Wesley's method and it was pre-eminently Smithy's. His penetrating apologia for the Gospel challenged, stirred, moved and under the mystery of the Spirits inner working persuaded many. It was his instinct, his endowment and his gift. Those of you who worked closely with him know what it was like when after putting up an idea Smithy came back with; 'well I have a problem with that for 5 reasons'. You had to learn just to pick

one of them, forget about matching him at every point. But later he would come up and say 'yeah I was thinking about what you said'. But truth mattered and in the market place of ideas the dehumanising secular humanist jungle was challenged by this fierce prophetic voice whose premise was Biblical revelation honed with a mastery of current research and contemporary literature. In 1982 John spent 3 months in Adelaide in the unprecedented 'God Cares' program addressing some 45,000 high school students every day in their auditoriums. He had read all their curricula novels, knew their texts and took on the vital issues of personal meaning, identity and hope revealed in the Gospel, with winsome and wonderful effect upon the hearts and minds of thousands of kids.

Although as at ease in the National Press Council as he was in the bar of an outback pub addressing life issues from the Master's guide book or yarning to a troubled alcoholic his forte was the market place of the Uni campus. At that time John had no formal tertiary education but his voracious reading, lightning fast mind and ready tongue tethered to the divine apostolic gift penetrated the flaws in the secular-materialist argument. John relished the public fora of ideas! I once asked John what he hoped to achieve in that setting, did he try and win an argument? He reflected on the question paused and replied 'no, I don't try and win the argument, but I do aim to make *their* argument's bleed! I want students to question their professors realising they haven't got the argument all sown up'

Through his proclamation John wanted the message to be seen ahead of the messenger. John was a leader by being an inspirer and many ministries have spun off from his influence. But ahead of it all he cherished the company, the words of the One he loved calling 'The Master'. Jesus was Smithy's inspirer. Across the generations, through the ages amongst people of all tribe's tongues and nations this everlasting Gospel of eternal redemption meets all the needs of our souls.

The Psalmist confessed it: 'When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.'

This is the One who reasons with our minds to gain entrance into our hearts. Who finds us in the mixed market places of human striving, abandonment, shame and outright highhanded rebellion with the Word that goes to the division of soul and spirit. Till eventually the soul begins to lift on the wings of faith.

In his strong leadership we saw in John especially in latter years the meekness which is the clue to strength. A leader looking to the great Leader who alone can lead and carry us ahead. In the Gospel it says that there is one who has gone before us. He is called the Forerunner in Holy Scripture. The same word used for the tender boat that would row out and carry the anchor and lanyard of the large merchant vessel loaded with grain in the ancient port of Alexandria to the solid wharf to which the big ship was safely hauled with its anchor firmly fixed there.

This same word is said of Jesus who has gone through the days and times ahead into the inner sanctuary, into our true home. His home, the same place he mentioned to the thief on the cross. There He has fixed the anchor of our souls with the great unnumbered multitude who shall be with him in the New Creation forever. It all comes to this. This Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. The flesh he took in life and death was that of fallen humanity and yours, and His risen body is indeed your new body in glorious hope.

This is the gospel that does us good! Does this not make you happy? Does it not give you strength to go on and joy to follow even now our great Master?

*Written by Rev. Ian Clarkson 23 March 2019*