

Reflection 19th December 2010

The big news this week, if you can believe the tabloids, has been the visit of Opra Winfrey. If you read the other papers, then the Wikileaks' affair, and the arrest of Julian Assange has been the main story. I can't help thinking that Opra fulfilled the picture we get of the early ministry of Jesus. There were thousands of ordinary people who wanted to 'see' her. People waited for hours at Federation Square to be at her 'only public appearance' in Australia. One person, who was in Sydney said 'I couldn't get as close as I wanted, but Opra looked at *me!*' Can you hear the longing: 'If only I can touch the hem of her garment'. She is a miracle worker.

Clearly there is something basic going on here. Opra *embodies* something fundamental for many people, and *offers* them something fundamental too.

Like Jesus, the miracles that Opra does are to do with hope rather than physicality. Here is a person who has 'pulled herself up by the bootstraps' and has become rich. Here is a person who has battled with her body image, and won. Here is a person who offers the same possibility to every individual 'if only I could...'

There has been some scholarly research about what Opra is on about. It concludes that Opra does not go beyond the 'American Dream' of individualism. Opra is like Conda-

liza Rice (the former US Foreign minister in the Bush administration). The message is: 'I found my own inner voice, I listened to it instead of to the people who said 'You can't' and here I am! You can be like that too.'

These days, I'm suspicious of individualism. Just look at the VCE results that have come out. The best results came from selective schools. Schools that had to take everyone did worse. So then people say 'I want to go to a good school' So they reinforce the stereotype. These things happen not because of individual effort, but because individuals are lucky enough to be born into a rich family, or because the context of their school supports them. Everything is a product of effort against the background of something else: luck, good genes, rich parents, the existence of scholarships and so on.

So Opra's 'message' is one that does not step outside the firm rails of what an individualistic consumer society would expect. That is in part what makes her so popular. She has managed the gap. She offers hope, but not too much. She offers improvement, but within the rules. She is not talking about the power of 'collective action' that achieved the civil rights and possibilities for African Americans like Opra in the first place.

The other part of Opra's message is more like Jesus' message than the first part, I think. She talks about finding meaning beyond getting rich.

She asks people to think about this: 'So when you've got all these things, then what is your purpose?' For Opra, purpose lies in service. Now this is very good. I always remember the story of the Holy Grail. Parsifal must ask a question when he gets to the Grail Castle. It is 'Whom does the Grail serve?' The answer is 'The Grail serves the Grail King.' The achievement of the vision of the Holy Grail is in being captured by something other than my own 'ego' and letting myself be drawn into it.

But service too can be 'within the rules' or outside them. Some wealthy families receive honours for service to the arts. Very nice. Cardinal Oscar Romero said 'When I gave bread to the poor people called me a saint. When I asked why the poor were poor, they called me a communist.'

This is where Julian Assange comes in. He is like Jesus too. He is offering freedom, but the kind of freedom that makes governments very nervous. Just look at how much collective power and arbitrary authority has been brought to bear on this one person who dares to challenge, by publication, the spin that we have been fed about why wars were prosecuted and so on. Now I *do* think that Governments ought to be able to find ways to have confidential talks. It is not productive of world peace or reconciliation if everything is made known all at once. But to publish the truth of a matter, that we already suspect to be the case? That

is embarrassing, and the full force of naked power is being brought to bear on Julian Assange, in the same way it was on Jesus. If he is extradited to Sweden, and then to the US, where he will be convicted and sent to prison, we will get a good idea about the same kind of processes that crucified Jesus.

So to follow Jesus is a complicated affair. On the one hand, he brings healing, and recognition and forgiveness and hope to those who are down trodden, just like a modern day messiah Opra does. But unlike Opra, Jesus brings the kind of analysis and freedom which Oscar Romero did to the poor, and Julian Assange does to us who are 'kept in the dark and fed on bull-dust.' He brings the light of truth to bear on ours and others' lives. That brings crucifixion. Do I want that? Like Jeremiah, I've spent my life trying to plumb the truth, and tell it, beyond the hypocrisy. Like Jeremiah, I've hated the consequences and wished I could be 'nice' like Opra. It's easier to be a Jesus like Opra than a Jesus like Julian.

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest



Paul Dalzell.

