

Malcolm Francis Bell was a prophet.

As Senior Student at St Francis Theological College in 1968, it was tradition for Malcolm to be sent as curate to St Luke's, Toowoomba, following his ordination to the diaconate.

World-wide student protests, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and the Tet Offensive in Vietnam formed the historical backdrop that year.

As part of his duties as curate Malcolm taught Religious Education at a local school, where he applied a theological lens to the politics of the war in Vietnam. Rumours began circulating that he was a fifth columnist and the powerful City Fathers of Toowoomba complained to the Archbishop.

Malcolm was deeply immersed in the music revolution of the 'sixties. It seemed natural to him to invite his friends to St Luke's for a Rock Mass. Archdeacon Arthur Lupton was shocked one afternoon to find his church filled with hippies, rock music and a whiff of marijuana.

When Archbishop Philip Strong was forced to sack Malcolm and his fellow curate Austin Parry from St Luke's, it became an international news story. Malcolm told reporters at the time that he had received seventy letters from around the world, only ten of them abusive.

So it was that in 1969 Malcolm and his new wife Trish were initiated into the ecstasy and the terror of prophetic ministry. From being a celebrity couple, the toast of Toowoomba, sought out for a major feature in

Woman's Day, they became homeless and excoriated by society.

Malcolm loved the Church, and in spite of all evidence to the contrary, believed in its ability to reform, to transform into the living Body of Christ.

Ivor Church, Principal of St Francis College, had urged Malcolm to join a monastic order (in spite of being booked to preside at Malcolm's marriage!). Now in exile from Anglican Church ministry, as no-one in Australia was willing to give him a job, the rhythm of action and contemplation, *ora et labora*, the monastic rhythm which was to mark the rest of Malcolm's life began.

He worked with Russian immigrant farmers in Central Queensland, who had been funded by the Australian Council of Churches. He would not take a full stipend for his work with the ACC, a pattern of evangelical poverty which continued throughout his church ministry.

Malcolm's licence as a deacon was restored in 1971 and he worked as an assistant curate in return for housing, at St Peter's West End where many remember the rock masses he organised there.

In Brisbane during the Joh era, political activism was a dangerous occupation. Malcolm knew that he and his seven fellow activists were risking their lives when they walked into the Brisbane Stock Exchange in May 1972, and threw blood on the blackboards there. This act of protest was planned, in secrecy, on the campus of Queensland Uni, where Malcolm was studying at the time.

A media statement was issued at the scene explaining

how big money was being made out of the blood of conscripts and the Vietnamese people. But what really enraged Joh Bjelke Petersen at the time was not so much that Malcolm threw blood on the Stock Exchange, but that he was wearing his clerical collar and quoting the Bible while he did it.

Malcolm was thrown into the Police Watch-House overnight and released onto Roma Street in his underpants in the morning. Fr Harold Evers, in a quiet act of mercy, paid the \$80 bail and came to take him home.

Malcolm did time in Boggo Road gaol. As an act of public humiliation, His hair, which was down to his waist, was ritually shorn by a fellow prisoner, with the Prison Governor and wardens in attendance. Later, Malcolm's Aboriginal friends took the hair and braided it. During his priestly ministry Malcolm used one braid for *asperges* (sprinkling with holy water), and the other for exorcisms.

Malcolm's license was withdrawn by Archbishop Felix Arnott following the Stock Exchange scandal so he was homeless again. A friendly estate agent leased him a block of land in Redlands where he built a log cabin and a teepee out of corrugated iron as a meeting place for like-minded people seeking respite from the hurly-burly of city life. First Nations people, notably the radical Pastor Don Brady, congregated regularly at the commune, around the log fire. But by September 1972 the Redlands Shire Council stepped in to have the illegal dwellings demolished. Malcolm, always sensitive to the power of symbolic action, conducted a public burning of the log cabin.

Another time of withdrawal followed. *Ora et labora*, the Benedictine pattern of daily prayer and work; building his family home at Thornside, raising his two sons, time spent on the bay in his boat.

Malcolm and Trish were a progressive couple. Trish pursued her career as a social worker while Malcolm became the prototype house-husband. Eyebrows were raised amongst the other mothers at the school gates when Malcolm turned up each day to collect his boys.

By 1986 Malcolm felt called back to diocesan ministry. This is what he wrote about his meeting with Archbishop John Grindrod:

“I was preparing myself in the quietness of the Holy Sacrament Chapel in the cathedral. I was particularly conscious of St Hilda's window. Suddenly sunlight shone through the stained glass. It was an ecstatic moment of sheer joy. St Hilda was known as a controversialist, and I too had often been called that. I was unsure of myself and my identity at the time. I was coming back into the church after a long period of absence and I was wondering what was happening to me? Had I given up on all that controversy, and was I coming back into the church to give all that up? This was a wonderful confirmation of my identity as controversial. I loved this experience that gave answer to my self-doubt and strengthened me for my interview with the Archbishop.”

During seventeen years as Vicar of the inner-city Parish of Windsor, Fr Malcolm's prophetic work continued in a less public and controversial manner. The vicarage housed INCH, a community housing project for disadvantaged people; Kaiah Association, a project which pioneered mental health care in the community;

Hands on Health, a chiropractic clinic for the poor. The rent from these progressive organisations paid the parish's diocesan dues. The Mulchers rented space in the parish hall, and later evolved into Northey Street City Farm.

St George's faithful, mostly elderly, parishioners hosted many fringe-dwellers, and shared their vicar with his work as Prisons' Chaplain, and Chaplain to the Murri Anglican Fellowship.

Fr Malcolm retired early, in 2005, as Vicar of Windsor, rather than preside over the sale and demolition of St George's Church, which he and Sister Julian had tended for so many years.

The “skillful means” (as Buddhists call it) of withdrawal marked the final chapter of Malcolm's life's work. Summer and winter he spent countless candlelit nights in the small chapel at his hermitage, with the scent of frankincense wafting over the compost heap and the chicken coops. At his interview for assistance with Aged Care last February he told the social worker that what he really desired was silence. He wished, he said, that more people understood how beautiful silence is.

Malcolm continued bricklaying, his other love, with three shifts a week on Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island), building a house for the artefacts of Oodjeroo, who he buried there in 1993, and the work of her son Bejam, Malcolm's Nunukul brother. That building remains unfinished. Malcolm's last words, three days before he died at home in his cell, were, “I must lay bricks.”

Malcolm has bequeathed his hermitage to the church, as a place of respite for people in ministry. For twenty-five

years it has been marinated in prayer, and has become what the Celts call “a thin place,” a place to rest.

This bequest is Malcolm's final prophetic word to the church he loves. World-wide the church is awakening to the reality that its power does not consist in buildings or in institutions, but as an evolving organism which is the Body of Christ.