

Soul Picnic – Westgate Version 23 October 2022

Paul's introduction

Hi everyone, if you haven't met me, I've been in and around Westgate for about fifteen years.

Before we do our Soul Picnic today, I want to provide you with some background about it, as well as introduce to you what we'll be doing.

I wrote 'Soul Picnic' – which, by the way, remains only a working title for this session.

Writing is my passion and my living; I lecture at Melbourne University in creative writing, I'm a freelance copywriter and editor, and I'm an author with six published books, including a recent collection of personal essays called *Matters of Life and Faith*.

I didn't have a church background, but I had a powerful conversion experience when I was twenty, which led me on a now decades' long journey of attempting to integrate my faith with church and my working life.

What I've come to understand about my conversion experience was that it was deeply mystical. And so, from starting in the Pentecostal church, then the evangelical church, I've found myself in recent years more and more drawn to mystical writers and teachings, and contemplative expressions of faith.

I've been involved in a number of small groups over the years, but two have stood out: Table Church, with Anne and Mark Wilkinson Hayes, Gavin Mountjoy and others not part of Westgate, and a men's group. They were both small, lasted years, were intimate, and had a contemplative heartbeat, which sat well with my mystical inclinations.

No longer involved in either of these groups, I found myself longing for that kind of intimate, contemplative faith engagement. I couldn't find anything around that quite fitted what I was looking for, but I didn't quite know what I was looking for, either. So I decided to write something to figure that out – and Soul Picnic, which remains a work in progress, was the result.

I showed it to Ros Harris from our friends at Pilgrim Uniting. Ros runs a meditation group at Pilgrim on Wednesday mornings and I thought she might be interested in Soul Picnic. Ros gave me some helpful feedback and said, *Well, if you want to try it out sometime, let me know and we can find a few interested guinea pigs.*

But one thing didn't lead to another and I didn't get around to taking up Ros's offer.

Then, when I was at a Westgate Sunday service recently, I heard Deb say that Westgate was about to have a deacons meeting about new ways of being church – and they were looking for input into that meeting. So I sent Anne Wilkinson-Hayes a copy of Soul Picnic and said this might be something the meeting could use to talk about.

But Anne said, *Why don't you run it on a Sunday at Westgate in October as part of our journey of exploration* and I put my hand down for a minute then thought, *Oh, okay, I'll put it back up again.*

You see, Soul Picnic was written for a small group, not a congregation, and not as a replacement for a Sunday service. It was also written with the expectation that, if it was ever run, people would be together for a while, slowly becoming more confident to share their deeper yearnings and experiences – or *non-experiences* – in their faith journeys.

So today's Soul Picnic has been adapted, as best as possible, for a congregation. It's not too much different to other contemplative styles of worship Westgate has conducted on Sunday mornings previously. It just represents a way in which we can in this season of experimentation put some things into practice from what's been talked about in previous weeks, especially from the Transfiguration Community

This session doesn't include worship singing, music, Bible readings, scripture quotes or preaching. It is instead an invitation into silences, prayer, contemplation of some writing, and speaking some words together aloud. Today those words will be projected on the wall, but in the Soul Picnic I envisaged, everyone would have their own booklet. And I've taken an approach to the words that may hopefully allow those without a Christian background to find something meaningful in them.

If you don't feel you want to speak certain words aloud, please don't feel you have to. Just let those words pass and join in where you feel comfortable.

When it comes to our time of silence, you may find that unusual. For some of us, it might be a rare thing. The silences today are short, much shorter than the Soul Picnic I've written for a small group, but I invite you to sit with today's silences. And, if you find your mind racing, speak a word in your head that's sacred to you – it may be God or Jesus – and then, if you find your mind racing again, speak your word silently again.

We'll come soon enough to the main section in Soul Picnic – a time when we will have a piece of writing and two paintings to contemplate in silence and then discuss in groups what that contemplation awakens in us, if anything. In the Soul Picnic I envisaged for a small group, in each session a different person would choose the work we engaged with, and it could be prose, visual art, poetry, or song. And there would be a different leader each session, too.

I'll give a brief introduction later to ways you might engage with the written and visual art today. But for now I just want to invite you not to analyse or critique the writing – or even critique your response. Just allow your response the freedom to emerge. In that openness to the spirit's work, let's trust that our creator can speak to us through that written art, the spiritual writing – and that our brief time of sharing from there can also take place with the same desire to hear our creator speaking to us through each other.

So, thanks for giving Soul Picnic a go. Let's get started. The words in **bold** are for everyone to say.

Leader: Thank you for being here, with each other, with the spirit amongst us.

All: **We come open to the touch of the spirit, the re-centring of our hearts and minds.**

Leader: Let's acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in this season that Aboriginal people of our area have for generations called 'True Spring'.

All: **We acknowledge the Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather, where the spirit of God has always dwelt.**

Leader: We pay our respects to their elders past and present.

All: **We recognise the Bunurong people's deep knowledge of this land, and know we all draw our wisdom and life from one creator spirit.**

Leader: For this time apart from our daily lives . . .

All: . . . **We give thanks.**

Leader: We come in various moods, with different burdens and joys.

All: **Living One, may your spirit move amongst us, healing and encouraging.**

Leader: We come recognising there is that within us we need to open up and share, and that within us we must keep sealed off and protected.

All: **Help us to know the difference, to work in partnership with You as you tend our souls.**

Leader: You are as close as our breath and as far away as the outer galaxies.

All: **We seek You everywhere. We give You our whole lives. We align ourselves with You, Living Spirit, our Creator.**

Leader: Whether we hear you or you remain silent . . .

All: . . . **our ears bend to you, our eyes turn, and our souls and bodies ache for the fulness of your presence, the light of your truth, and the foundation of your love.**

Leader: *(sets up candle and lights it):* As we set this candle to flame, we think of where we need your light in our lives. We think of where others need your light. And we think of how we can step aside and allow your light in the world, despite, and sometimes even because of, our darkness. Take some time now for silent prayer for yourself, others, and our world.

(pause for silent prayer)

Leader: Thank you, Living God, the beginning and the end of all our prayer.

All: **We find belonging and communion in the mystery of prayer. In the speaking and the listening, in silence and yet hearing. In hope and in action.**

Leader: We journey now into silence, the silence where you dwell.

All: Let silence be the doorstep to your presence. Let it be an oasis in our souls. Water that lives, wind that blows where it will – restore us, enliven us.

[5 minutes of silence]

Today's artworks and written passage:

John O'Donohue – from *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*

Because we sense how fragile and uncertain life can be, we long for a foundation nothing can shake . . . Being on earth, we feel we are on solid ground. Yet at its deepest foundation, the earth rests again on the nothingness of empty air – but it is held there by the invisible forces of gravity.

In the inner world, the deepest foundation of the mind and heart also rests on the invisible nothingness of the soul. The roots of all intimacy and belonging are planted powerfully in the invisible spirit. You belong ultimately to a presence that you cannot see, touch, grasp, or measure . . .

. . . To have true integrity, poise, and courage is to be attuned to the silent nature within you. Real maturity is the integrity of inhabiting that “immortal longing” that always calls you to new horizons . . .

. . . Real power has nothing to do with force, control, status, or money. Real power is the persistent courage to be at ease with the unsolved and the unfinished. To be able to recognise, in the scattered graffiti of your desires, the signature of the eternal. True prayer in the Holy Spirit keeps the graciousness and splendour of that vulnerability open.

(discussion time closes)

Leader: Not in the scream of the whirlwind, the shout of volcanic eruption, or the cries of a lashing storm . . .

All: . . . **Your voice is quiet. Your way is humble.**

Leader: We take our rest in you so our action can be full of the peace you bring.

All: We thank you for our lives, this day, this hope in our hearts: life eternal, with us even now . . . Amen.