

'GOOD MORNING GOOD PEOPLE!'

SHORT HISTORY OF A LONG PROJECT

'Good Morning Good People!' is the 'big work' of my life. It began with the reading a book from Basildon town library. That was in the early 1970s while I was living in England, having travelled from Australia two years earlier. *'In The Steps of St Francis'* by Ernest Raymond led me to read other books on Francis that made a deep impression.

The greeting of St. Francis: "*buono giorno buono gente!*" inspired the title song. Later came the idea of writing more songs to tell the whole story. I didn't start with a whole conception. The image of an archaeological excavation seems more appropriate; the shape of the whole only emerged as I dug here and there on different sides of a large buried object. The story of Francis was already known, but I had to discover my own approach to this story, my own selection of events, personalities, words and symbols. From the start, my approach to Francis was personal and reflective, but expressed in universal terms which would, hopefully, make it accessible and relevant to others.

When I first discovered Francis and became so entranced by him, the initial appeal was partly the romance and exhilarating freedom of his life. These aspects found expression in the earliest songs, 'Good Morning Good People!' and 'Francis and the Lady Poverty'. Later I tuned in to some of the difficult changes Francis went through. Though he was a very different personality to me I found connections and parallels that led me to continue.

The large scale of the project led to a change in my approach to songwriting. The individual songs for GMGP were written slowly. My usual 'one-off' songs are usually conceived and created in a short burst of energy. But with the GMGP songs, I would often come up with a fragment of a song that had promise but which would have to be left aside for weeks or months ... or years ... till I could take it further. Patience was needed and new skills. I found the emerging songs were longer and more complex than usual and I soon realised my 'Francis' piece was *not* going to be a catchy, fun creation like 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat' but rather, a slowly unfolding, deeply reflective and serious work.

Meanwhile my life moved into the 'Valley' through marriage, parenting and full-time work in a school for maladjusted children from 1975-1979. During this period, I worked on little else, creatively, except 'Good Morning Good People!'. Among the songs to come out of this period were 'Sister Bird', 'The Minstrels of God' and 'Changes'.

The nature of the 'drama' underlying GMGP is rather symbolic and abstract. I passed over opportunities for more nitty-gritty, flesh and blood drama eg. the conflict between Francis and his father, the camaraderie and conflict within the Franciscan Order and many colourful episodes in Francis' life. Instead I looked for crucial encounters and underlying patterns. The interplay and interdependence of opposites is important: light and dark, beauty and ugliness, success and failure, mountain and valley, cave and town-square, animus and anima, death and resurrection. There is a strong sense of the cyclical, seasonal nature of life - his life and our life.

Beyond symbolism, Francis is Francis - an historical figure, a great Catholic-Christian saint. In writing GMGP, I had to engage with his 12th Century spirituality. Often, I felt uncomfortable with the language and imagery used by his biographers and even by Francis himself. Sometimes instead, I used more universal language and symbols but at other stages I knew I had to stay with the self-understanding of Francis himself. At the heart of all

is his focus on Christ. The culmination of Francis' journey is the Stigmata – the wounds of Christ imprinted on his body. During one Lenten season I grappled with all of this and emerged with the song 'La Verna'.

In 1979, after 10 years away, I travelled home to Australia with my wife Madge and two children and we stayed for a year at Fr. Ted Kennedy's place in Burrawang on the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. During this period, I was influenced by the theology evolving from Ted's experiences in the poor inner-Sydney parish of Redfern where he was deeply involved with Aboriginal people, many alcoholic and destined for short lives. For a time, Ted had opened the Parish House to be a refuge for these people. I was led to reflect on the essential turning point in the life of Francis - his embrace of the Leper. During the year at Burrawang I wrote 'The Leper's Song', 'The Wolf of Gubbio' and 'The Mountain Song'. I also expended much effort, trying to make GMGP into a play with dialogue and stage directions as well as songs. But that was a false direction. Eventually I realised that I was getting out my depth. Anyway, I was going to finish up with a mammoth five-hour performance!

Back in England, in Kettering 1980-1982, I developed vocal and instrumental arrangements for some songs. I came to realise that the 15 songs already written made, in themselves, an almost complete shape. The underlying sequence started to become clear to me and the interweaving of recurring musical motifs started to give the work a feeling of wholeness and unity.

EARLY PERFORMANCE - JANUARY 1982

In late 1981, wanting to try out new vocal arrangements, I arranged to teach a few songs to the Kettering Catholic Church choir. The choir enjoyed the songs and their enthusiasm encouraged me to push on to some sort of full performance.. This was rather a hair-raising decision because Madge and I had decided to return to Australia to live. We had found buyers for our house and were expecting to fly out in late January. So a performance was planned for January 10th, 1982.

The deadline focused my efforts and over an intense period of 6-8 weeks I put together a workable sequence and script. Friends were enlisted as solo vocalists. Local musicians - a new-age folk band called Dibjak and the Ise Recorder Consort agreed to take part in the performance. Handwritten music and typed sequence-scripts were prepared for all involved. There were separate rehearsals for choir, Dibjak, Recorder Consort and soloists. Rehearsals were made difficult by the coldest English winter on record with temperatures dropping to minus 17 degrees Fahrenheit!

One last role had to be filled, that of the Narrator. We thought of Madge's brother John O'Brien, who would be perfect with his rich voice and soft Irish brogue. Only problem - he was living in Germany! But we persuaded him to come and reckoned we could cover his costs by taking a collection at the end of the performance. So, John came with just a couple of days to prepare his part.

Two full rehearsals were arranged for the Friday and Saturday. But blizzards on the Friday made travel impossible. The various sections of the performance group did not meet until the Saturday, the day before the performance!

The performance was quite simple (had to be!). Choir of twenty-five. Ten musicians. Narrator reading at lectern in centre stage. Solo vocalists stepping forward from choir to sing their parts. About eighty people ventured out in freezing conditions to hear us. The performance went well. Audience attention was deep and feedback was enthusiastic.

Primitive audio and video recordings made of that performance were enough to remind me in years to follow that GMGP had once 'worked' in reality, not just in my mind.

TWELVE YEARS ON

In 1982, Madge and I with two children Jason and Niamh moved to Australia, and made our home in Welby, near Mittagong on the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney. With the move to Australia I also took the step of leaving the security of a teaching salary to earn my living through music. The transition was made successfully enough. But pressure of work - concerts, recording, publishing and so on - meant that 'Good Morning Good People' stayed *on the shelf*. Yet I was always aware that this was the *big work* I still had to bring forth in its fullest potential. Every year I kept saying 'next year'.

In the meantime, in October 1988, at the invitation of Fr. Cyril Hally a scratch performance of GMGP took place at St. Columban's College, North Turrumurra with Claire Parkhill and myself singing the solo parts accompanied by a tiny choir and band consisting of guitar, recorder, organ and percussion. Even in such a threadbare production, the sequence still proved its capacity to hold and move people.

From the time of moving back to Australia, it was to be twelve years before GMGP was realised in its full form. Over that period I did further work on the project - revising the narrative script, developing fuller vocal and instrumental arrangements. I also wrote two new songs: 'Make Me an Instrument' and 'Clare's Song'.

It gradually became obvious that to mount a full-scale performance I would have to seek financial assistance. Otherwise I would never find the time, space and resources to complete a useable score and to gather the people needed. So, in 1992, I put together a 'begging kit' - a tape, script and letter explaining the reasons for my appeal. I 'launched' the kit during a small concert at St. Joseph's House of Spirituality, Baulkham Hills. Several of the Religious there: Josephine Mitchell, Susan Connelly, Bernadette Douglas, Carole Gibbons, Kerry Keenan (all RSJ sisters) and Cathy O'Keeffe PBVM formed a committee to help with the fund-raising. In Newcastle NSW, Dorothy Woodward (a Lochinvar RSJ sister) formed another committee with Leo and Michelle Drinkwater, Carole Barnett and Louise Roach.

In response to the appeal, Religious Orders were generous, and out of the blue I received contributions from several individuals including my Aunt Marie Martin. A successful application to the Mercy Foundation, North Sydney resulted in a grant of \$5000. I will always be grateful for the help provided by those many organisations and individuals.

The result of the fund-raising was that after many years of travelling, giving over 100 concerts a year to support the family, 1994 became a blessed year, a creative sabbatical year, mostly free for me to work on a full choral and orchestral score. Invaluable ideas and help were received in this time from Louise Roach (choral score) and Christine Tilley (musical direction).

The GMGP fund also allowed me to purchase some essential equipment and software for developing arrangements and producing music notation.

AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

Christine Tilley had agreed to become musical-director. With that, everything else became possible. In mid-1994, I began to gather local people interested in performing GMGP. Eventually, we became a choir of forty-five, an orchestra of thirty-two and two narrators. The people came from all sections of the local community and ranged in age from ten to

seventy plus. On November 12, 20 and 26, 1994, performances took place in Clubbe Hall, Mittagong, On the opening night we received a standing ovation from the large audience and after that, local word-of-mouth was so strong that the final performances were fully 'booked out', with nearly 2,000 people attending the three performances, including some who had travelled from Brisbane, Armidale, Wagga Wagga and Melbourne.

From these performances a good quality digital recording was made which eventually became the 'Good Morning Good People 1994' double CD.

In 2005, the Mittagong cast (which grew to 100 in 1995) was invited to perform GMGP at the National Folk Festival, Canberra, April 17, 1995. In November there were three further presentations including one at the Riverside Theatre, Parramatta.

Thanks to the inspiration and commitment of Dorothy Woodward, there was also a Hunter Region production in 1995 at the Mission Theatre, Newcastle. On March 15 and 17, a local choir and orchestra under the musical direction of Craig Wattam gave two performances that were very well received.

ON THE SHELF AGAIN

'Good Morning Good People!' was then 'on the shelf' again for another nine years. The full-scale performances in 1994-95 had required great slabs of my time and energy and box-office returns, after considerable expenses were not enough to keep me afloat. As a singer-songwriter I have always been 'in the small-time'. I reside at cottage-industry level of the art-world.

NINE YEARS ON. IRELAND & U.K.

In 2004-5 and 2007-8 Madge and I fulfilled our longtime dream of living and working in Ireland, her homeland, for an extended period. This led to 'Good Morning Good People!' finding a new lease of life - in an unexpected way. As I struggled to make a start with my music in a country where name and work were mostly unknown, I stumbled on the idea of offering my musical presentation on the life of St. Francis of Assisi - a name that is so well known and loved.

I started writing and phoning to float the idea. Initially, three invitations were received to present GMGP - from Kilnacrott (Norbertine) Abbey in Co. Cavan and from Capuchin Parishes in Cork and Dublin. The new presentation *had* to be small-scale. In my preparation, a lot of time and practice went into reducing the orchestral score to one guitar. As for the vocals, there would be just me and occasionally, perhaps, a female singer. The simplification was radical yet somehow appropriate for a work about *the little poor man of Assisi*. But I knew the essence would still be there and I felt confident that the story and the songs could still engage.

This proved to be so. During our four years in the northern hemisphere, there were nearly fifty presentations of 'Good Morning Good People'. Irish venues included Franciscan Friary Churches in Dublin, Galway, Killarney, Wexford, Athlone and Clonmel. For some concerts I rehearsed with local narrators on the day before the concert. (Lovely to hear local accents telling the story of Francis).

In at least twenty concerts I was joined by Belfast vocalist Josephine Mulvenna who had taken a liking to GMGP. She brought a strong dramatic presence to her parts. (Josephine's mother always travelled with her and so easily holds the record for most performances attended). Shauna Boyle (singer) and Roma Dix (flute) visited Ireland from Australia and

performed GMGP concerts with me while they were there. There were performances in Scotland including Franciscan Churches in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

In September 2008, before returning to Australia, I was joined by flautist Roma Dix for a series of concerts around England. Franciscan venues included Woodford Green (London), Chilworth (Surrey), Canterbury (Franciscan International Study Centre), Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford (Greyfriars Parish) and Preston.

By this time, through much practice, I had reached the stage where I could perform the narration and songs 'by heart' as well as accompany on guitar. The narrative script continued to evolve – informed by conversations with learned Franciscans along the way.

AUSTRALIA 2009

Madge and I returned to Australia in November 2008. In January 2009 I mailed out to many Parishes, Retreat Houses and Tertiary Institutes to offer the possibility of performing *Good Morning Good People*. The response was pleasing. In 2009 there were over forty performances – often with Roma Dix (flute) and sometimes with female vocalists I was fortunate to know who like to sing this work: Louise Cassidy (Sydney), Claire Parkhill (Canberra), Shauna Boyle (Brisbane), Anna Demetriou (Melbourne), Catherine Mahony (Newcastle)

Over the years the narrative-script evolved in its wording and came to include a couple of extra stories – for example, how Francis and his early companions walked to Rome to seek the Pope's approval for the foundation of a new religious order and how, during the Crusade wars, Francis crossed enemy lines to meet with the Sultan.

AUSTRALIA 2013

A performance in Sydney was attended by a woman who was moved to tears on hearing the small-scale version of 'Good Morning Good People'. She was already familiar with the full-scale version (from 1994) but she liked the way the small-scale presentation had developed, and she especially liked the clarity of the words. Later, she wrote to me and offered to pay for recording and production costs of a new recording.

The gift she offered (for which she wishes to remain anonymous) was gratefully accepted. And so a concert was recorded in Bowral on July 16th, 2013. The recording became a new double-CD 'Good Morning Good People' Bowral 2013. In this performance Roma Dix plays flute, Catherine Mahony (from Newcastle) sings female vocals. I sing, play guitar and speak the narration.

Concert invitations are fewer these days but the story of 'Good Morning Good People' continues to unfold. Over so many years I have been glad to tell the inspirational story of St. Francis of Assisi through my words and music.

Peace and all good blessings

Peter Kearney