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'Speaking the Truth in Love I'

This series entitled "Speaking the Truth in Love" comes from a lecture given by Peter Jensen, Archbishop of the Providence of Sydney, Australia. His analysis of the Church in Australia might be made equally of our situation in the United States.

'SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE' I

My thesis is simple: the role of the Christian churches in Australia today is to speak the truth in love. This is what we have failed to do effectively. But on this depend the future of the church and the good health of our society. To fail here is to fail everywhere; to succeed here is to lay the foundation for all that we need to do in God's name and for his glory and for the good of people. The words of the Apostle Paul challenge us still: 'the church of the living God...' he wrote, is 'a pillar and buttress of truth' (1 Tim 3:15).

I am aware that this may seem to be a daring and even provocative thesis; indeed there would surely be few who would agree with it. For a number of people outside the Christian community, the church has no role; it would not matter if all churches disappear-ed. Indeed, the churches are regarded as nothing more than sad remnants of a day when the wowsers ruled this world and it was a grey and gloomy place. Others would be more charitable; the churches are best seen as religious clubs; entitled to exist as do clubs for the study of stamps or steam engines, but of no great significance, except when they try to use their ancient customs to interfere with our lives. Then they must be resisted.

But there would be those who are far closer to the churches, and indeed those who are members of the churches who would regard my thesis with deep concern. To their minds it suggests a retreat from our true responsibilities in the community, and a retreat all too suspiciously like pietism. For them the churches' role in the community is to stand witness to the moral, social and political imperatives which may flow from the Christian faith. In fact, it is to do more than stand witness; it is to become actively involved in the political processes which will preserve such values as human rights and the renewal of the environment. More than that, it is to get involved in the lives of people in works of compassion; it is to feed the hungry, care for the sick, and visit the prisoners.

We could say more. Driving such imperatives is often the recognition

of Christian failure, not least, for example in mid-twentieth century Germany. Too often Christians were involved in abuses of civil rights and much worse; too often Christians were passive bystanders to atrocities. There were of course, glorious exceptions, brave souls who dared that others may live. But they were notable as the exceptions; if others had been as brave and as committed, more could have been achieved. Perhaps the atrocities could have been averted altogether. Many Christians are rightly driven by the desire not to fail in our own generation.

And yet, my thesis is: the role of the Christian churches in Australia today is to speak the truth in love. This is as frighteningly narrow as you may already suspect me of being, because I am going to say that the truth of which I speak is not merely truth in the sense of genuine communication, or conformity to reality, or even prophetic criticism of the government; it is first and foremost to be defined as the truth, the truth of God's word, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. That's the truth; that's God's truth; and that is the truth – in one sense the only truth – which it is the role of the churches to witness to in this country, here and now.

I am going to claim this so boldly because the need is desperate; we can no longer afford to assume the truth, or to modify the truth to suit our hearers; we must speak the truth or perish and leave our beloved nation to the gods of this world. If that is all we can do, then that is what we must do; when all else that we may do - when all our works of mercy and our political initiatives - are beyond our strength and wisdom, God's truth must still be our passion. If in some horrible circumstance we were forced to choose between feeding the body with bread or feeding the soul with Christ we must not hesitate; truth matters more than bread. Urgency at this point is laid upon me, and to speak otherwise, or to be agreeable because I want to be well received in the churches or the wider community, would be to fail a sacred trust.

I will explore this topic by means of four connected essays.

CHURCH MANNERS

From time to time we need to remind ourselves of certain manners that are appropriate for worship. And while occasionally we may all be guilty, some of us are guilty more often than others are. Please do your best to mind your manners in church. The following are areas that we need to work on.

Arrive on time. In order to prepare yourself to worship Almighty God, you should make sure you are in your place and have composed yourself and said your prayer before the bell tolls. This is a good moment to take account of sins that should be confessed as well as thanksgivings for which God should be praised.

Be quiet. Before the service, during the service, and after the service, you should be as quiet as possible. Before worship, silence is necessary to compose yourself and allow fellow parishioners to collect themselves. Instead of talking, listen to what God is saying to you. During the service, concentrate on the liturgy, on the prayers, and even on the sermon! If your mind wanders during the administration of communion, read from the Psalter. And after the service, be quiet

for the organist's postlude. God is praised by the offering of music, and many wish to listen and to be edified. The time to catch up with friends is after the service at the coffee hour.

Be considerate. I know that our kneelers present a challenge for some of us. But those of us who can kneel should. And I mean a full kneel, and not a half-sitting. If you are physically unable to kneel, please be mindful of those behind you, and sit a little forward so that they can kneel properly.

Be helpful. If a visitor sits near you or even in your favorite place, it is most helpful not to growl. If the visitor needs help with the Prayer Book, give them a kind hand, but please don't be too pushy. Common sense and courtesy are the rule.

Turn off your cell phones. We have done much better with this lately. Just a reminder.

Use the proper parking space. Sometimes those of us who do not need the spaces designated for the handicapped are using them anyway. Please reserve these for those who truly need them.

Thank you for taking the time and making the effort to mind your church manners. When you do, you give honor and glory to God.

(to be continued...)

Archbishop Peter Jensen

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