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# The Parish Paper

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## 'Speaking the Truth in Love II'

### ON BEING DOMESTICATED

(We continue in our series by Archbishop Peter Jensen)

One of the most notable features of the Christian churches in Australia today is our almost total lack of intellectual significance. The churches exist as sociological entities, as organizations achieving certain goals of a social and educational nature; as making provision for a largely attenuated religious expression. There are individual Christian academics who make distinguished contributions in their fields and sometimes those fields have religious connections and connotations. There are certainly significant Christian poets, novelists and artists. But no one in their wildest imaginings would say that the churches are in the forefront of intellectual endeavor; that the theologians are worth consulting on matters of great significance; that there is in each of our great cities at least one powerful and persuasive pulpit voice able to command attention; that there is a powerful and persuasive Christian world view being promoted, even as an alternative. You don't find Christian books in secular bookshops, unless they are notorious.

It is not that we lack intellectuals. No doubt there are clever people and even intellectuals in the churches. What is lacking is a comprehensive and profound and recognizable theology able to be explored and used in order to challenge, enlighten and guide the thinking of the churches; able also to intersect with and challenge and illumine the thinking of the world. To take some examples: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an immediate challenge to the powerful naturalistic mindset of our contemporaries; the universal sinfulness of humanity throws light on the our understanding of human nature and hence education, politics, medical ethics and a hundred other community concerns; the judgment of the world at the end of history speaks directly to issues of conscience, of accountability, of right and wrong; the atoning death of Jesus Christ is the basis for a true understanding of such daily necessities as forgiveness and repentance.

The churches talk about medical ethics; we talk about accountability; we talk about forgiveness; we talk about authority – but we have ceased to talk about the theological foundations of all these things, since we are frightened of not being relevant and persuasive. We sing our songs to the world's tunes. As a result the memory of the faith is attenuated, and we sound like those who have lost confidence in the truth for which we stand. This is a major intellectual and spiritual crisis

for the churches, since if we continue thus the faith itself will disappear. Then we will have no contribution to make to Australian society that is our own.

What is truly alarming is that we are not alarmed. We have accepted the secular world's verdict that we have nothing of importance to say, and we have adjusted ourselves to this reality. We have become domesticated. It has all the sadness of seeing a great cat of Christian theology turned into a house pet. We have become just the sort of Christian movement which you would want to have if you never wanted to be troubled by it, if you wanted to control it. The surrender of our intellectual capital was achieved with hardly a shot being fired in the 1960s, but it was because we had allowed it to atrophy well before that. We were confused and demoralized.

The terrorist attack on the U.S. last year frightened the secular mind and threw up spectres of religious wars. This drew forth an extraordinary edition of the Sydney Morning Herald on Christmas Eve, one of the church's greatest festivals. There have been occasions when the Herald editorials have been fairly solidly Christian and theological. On this occasion, the Herald referred to the words of the herald-angels who sang about "peace on earth, and goodwill toward men." For the newspaper, this is in truth the message of Christmas. Religious fanaticism is marked by the "claim to possess an absolute truth denied to everyone else"; but "In essence, all the great religions deliver a similar message: the presence of God – or as some would express it, the attainment of enlightenment – makes both possible and imperative to the love of one's neighbor, the welcoming of strangers, the realization of the interconnectedness of all living things. Universal peace should follow."

Under these circumstances, what is required is, of course, dialogue, respect, understanding. Such dialogue can "force each participant in the dialogue to purge their theology and their practices of those things which have become obstacles to manifesting the original intention of their faith". What may have to go in such a purge may be judged by another astonishing article published on the same day, Christmas Eve.

The headline is promising: "The Love that Crosses the Great Divide"; the subject matter is a description of how Muslims view Jesus. "The Muslim Jesus is not divine, but a humble servant of God. He is not crucified – Islam insists that the story of the killing of Jesus is false. He is, as it were, Jesus as he might have been without St. Paul or St. Augustine or the Council of Nicea. He is not the cold figure of English Unitarianism, and he is less grand than the exalted human of the Arians. As you read these [Muslim] stories what comes across most powerfully is that the Muslim Jesus is intensely loved. There is an element of St. Francis of Assissi about him. The Muslim Jesus, shorn of all claims of divinity, could be more easily held on to by my agnostic friend than the Second Person of the Holy Trinity." (SMH, 24/12/2001).

Here indeed is a Jesus for modern people, for people who can believe the simplistic argument that enlightenment and peace is the fundamental message of all religions. The article is only claiming that the Muslim Jesus may also suit the contemporary agnostic, who cannot believe in Jesus, but cannot escape from him either. But the reference to the Jesus of Paul, Augustine and Nicea is sufficient to show that the author believes that we have arrived at a more authentic Jesus, shorn

of his divinity. But the problem is always going to be our estimate of Jesus, and the question "who is the true Jesus?" Of course, the Christian faith and all faiths can be turned into the same brand of enlightenment leading to world peace, if we give up the claim to the divinity of Jesus. But why, then, be Christian? I want to say that the loss of Nicene and Augustinian Christianity would be a cultural disaster.

For this, the Herald is not to blame. We ourselves in the churches have domesticated the Christian religion well enough. Instead of explaining and defending the gospel, we have sought the path of relevance. Our aim has been to demonstrate our usefulness to the community by pointing to our good works; the end result is that we are seen by many and see ourselves often enough to be merely charitable organizations. Furthermore we have put our hands out to government and to the business community for aid in doing these charitable works, further divorcing the gospel from the activities of the church. Often enough we have followed the well-documented path of starting schools, hospitals, charities, missions, only to see them fall into secular hands and cease from doing their work explicitly in the name of Christ. The first generation believes; the second generation assumes; the third generation loses. What we have assumed, rather than explained, defended, expounded and applied – that we are in imminent danger of losing.

(to be continued...)

**Archbishop Peter Jensen**

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