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Abstract: If we were to stand outside the Australian Anglican Church and observe its common life we would see much argument over matters that contemporary society may well believe are irrelevant or inexplicable. Thus, it appears increasingly more difficult for the Anglican Church to make its presence felt and to have its voice heard in the larger world. The sexual abuse scandals that have enveloped the church and the wider community over the last decade have meant that, in addition to the disgraceful perpetration of these abuses by individuals on innocent children and adults, the church has failed to deal adequately with such scandals. The Public face of the church has been damaged considerably as a result. This writer looks at the confession within the Anglican Eucharistic liturgy and asks discomfited and disturbingly difficult questions of the church about what it takes to build anew the Public image of the church.

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Editorial

Tom Frame

When the administration of British Prime Minister William Pitt ‘the Younger’ announced its intention to establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay in July 1786, there was no religious motivation in either the choice of the location or the immediate aspirations of those who deemed it necessary for Britain to take physical possession of New South Wales. Although the decision to appoint a chaplain to the First Fleet was an afterthought, the formal orders issued to the governor, Captain Arthur Phillip RN, required him ‘by all proper methods’ to ‘enforce a due observance of religion and good order among the inhabitants of the new settlement’, and ‘take such steps for the due celebration of public worship as circumstances will permit’.

As a British colony, the spiritual and moral character of the new society was entrusted initially to the clergy of the Established Church of England. For the next thirty years, the Church’s ascendancy in New South Wales was maintained by the structures of an English colonial administration with assistance from missionary organisations and wealthy benefactors in Britain. Much has changed since then.

The 2006 national census revealed that the Anglican proportion of the Australian population was 18.7 per cent, down from 40.3 per cent at the time of Federation in 1901. For me, the proportional decline was not the startling figure. I was astonished to learn that 3.7 million Australians still declared an affiliation with the Anglican Church. Although the majority of these people do very little about their adherence to Anglicanism, this nonetheless represents a very substantial constituency within the Australian nation, with Anglicans heavily represented in positions of political power and cultural influence. Although it is not the national church, the Anglican Church is intentionally inclusive and porous because it still aspires to be a church for the nation.

Although there are Australians who want to end any public discussion of religion and to exclude all religious bodies from the public square, the open character of our democratic system, which accepts religious diversity and the constitutional entitlement of churches to operate without government interference, means that Anglicans will continue to engage in conversation about the kind of society Australia ought to be. But what do Anglicans have to say? Is there a social vision peculiar to Anglicanism? In his short book *Christianity and the Social Order* published to coincide with

his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942, William Temple gave Anglicans something approaching a charter for public life.

Temple argued that the Church was bound to interfere in civil matters on four distinct grounds:

[First], the claims of sympathy with those who suffer; second, the educational influence of the social and economic system; third, the challenge offered to our existing system in the name of justice; fourth, the duty of conformity to the 'Natural Order' in which is to be found the purpose of God.¹

In other words, the Church was 'bound to interfere' because it is by vocation the agent of God's purpose, outside the scope of which, Temple said, 'no human interest or activity can fall'. He was equally succinct in his description of the manner of the church's interference:

[First], its members must fulfil their moral responsibilities and functions in a Christian spirit; second, its members must exercise their purely civic rights in a Christian spirit; third, it must itself supply them with a systematic statement of principles to aid them in doing these two things, and this will carry with it a denunciation of customs or institutions in contemporary life and practice which offend against those principles.²

It was also clear to Temple that the church ought to recognise and respect the limits of its competence to comment on and interfere in social and political matters, and leave to informed Christian citizens the implementation of religious principles in their own social and political contexts.

Anglicans will continue to be active in the public square in response to what they believe to be divine prompting. Being an Anglican does not imply electoral support for one political party over and above another. It is possible to be an Anglican of good conscience and be a member of, or cast one's vote for, either the Coalition or Labor. Neither party can presume the votes of Anglicans by saying they have captured the Christian social vision in their respective policy platforms. This leaves the entire Church plenty of scope to be active in the public square while respecting the religious plurality of contemporary Australian society. But what could and should

the Church say in the context of public debate? In what ways could and should the Church be active in the public square?

These questions were the focus of a public seminar held at St Mark's on 21 September 2007. The theme was 'Public but not Official: Anglican Contributions to Australian Life' and our keynote speaker was the Reverend Canon Robin Gill, the Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Professor Gill is a leading public theologian in Britain and was, with his wife Jenny, a visitor at St Mark's for several weeks during Spring. We look forward to welcoming them back to St Mark's.

This edition of *St Mark's Review* contains all the edited addresses from the seminar. Readers will quickly realise that the speakers, other than Professor Gill and Professor James Haire (Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture), are members of the St Mark's academic faculty. This was deliberate. As the majority of the faculty are also members of the Charles Sturt University Public & Contextual Theology (PACT) Strategic Research Centre which has a particular focus on the content and conduct of public theology, this seminar was an opportunity for some detailed and deliberate discussion on what constitutes the sub-discipline of public theology and what kind of contribution St Mark's can make to its development.

I am most grateful to my colleagues for taking this invitation seriously and much appreciate the thoughtfulness of their papers. This edition of *St Mark's Review* will, I hope, set the public theology agenda for the Anglican Church and influence the attitudes and actions of the church's members as they go about their daily lives and participate in conversations about the kind of nation Australia ought to be.

Professor Tom Frame
Director, St Mark's National Theological Centre
30 November 2007

Notes

- 1 William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, Penguin, London, 1942, p. 17.
- 2 Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, pp. 31–32.

Neither Public nor Official

Text: Ephesians 3:7–10

Peter Pocock

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:7–10

The writer of Ephesians portrays Paul as the 'very least of all the saints' charged with bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles, and revealing the mystery and wisdom of God to those in heavenly places. In this series of papers we will be asking the question: how does the Anglican Church of Australia contribute theologically to Australian life and how might the Church develop and promote Public Theology? Coming to the ensuing discussion from the perspective of Paul this writer suggests that before entering into the 'Public but not Official' debate, we ought to consider our present ecclesial situation through the discussion of three points.

First, it appears to be increasingly more difficult for the Anglican Church to make its presence felt and to have its voice heard in the larger world. Imagine a tiny Christian community in Ephesus, struggling to survive. They had no buildings, no modern media, nor any means of spreading their gospel message into the world other than by word of mouth. Without doubt they had no ability to engage in the public sphere, and consequently no field of influence. Yet they had a message that so fired them up that they believed that they could not only take the Gospel to the Gentiles, but to the whole cosmos. Somehow this Ephesus community knew that they could and would make a difference. They must have been an arrogant lot. Alternatively, they believed the Gospel with such conviction that to them all things were possible.

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If we were to stand outside the Australian Anglican Church and observe its common life we would see much argument over matters that contemporary society may well believe are irrelevant or inexplicable. The Ephesus community had a Gospel to proclaim! Nothing stopped them! Yet, it seems for contemporary Anglicans that so much else gets in the way. So how do we sustain relevance in an ever changing world while still maintaining our biblical foundations and theological integrity?

Second, how can the church be engaged in public conversation if it does not have its own house in order? The sexual abuse scandals that have enveloped the church and the wider community over the last decade have meant that, in addition to the disgraceful perpetration of these abuses by individuals on innocent children and adults, the church has failed to deal adequately with such scandals. In case after case there is evidence that the church has sought to cover up the crime, to silence the victim, or to minimise the effect on its image. Fortunately, many dioceses have begun the process of addressing this problem. However, there is still a long way to go. In the meantime the church has had to face the depletion of its integrity, community trust and credibility. Third, we need to start over by putting aside all theories about what churches are 'supposed' to 'do,' and instead seeking who/what the church is called to 'be.' We need to start over by asking how is God calling the Anglican Church of Australia to be God's hands in the world?

Within the Eucharistic liturgy each Sunday morning the majority of Australian Anglicans offer this confession:

Merciful God, our maker and our judge, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do: we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves; we repent, and are sorry for all our sins. Father forgive us. Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

As a church community we confess that we have sinned against God in 'thought, word, deed, and in what we have failed to do.' The church is frequently consumed by present controversies while holding fast to positions in order to maintain the status quo, to save face, to minimise community pain, or to preserve the appearance or reality of being in control. Yet if the church says 'we are wrong, we made a mistake, we should not have done this,' a path to healing and wholeness is provided for both

the church and the individuals it has hurt. In order to be God's hands in the world we start over by admitting our mistakes and our short comings!

The confession offered in the liturgy is frequently seen as personal. It is both corporate and personal — 'we' is used, not 'I' — 'we', of course, encompasses 'I'. The ecclesial community confesses their corporate sin as well as their own individual transgressions, and the church and the individual proffer repentance while seeking forgiveness. Price and Weil suggest that '...private transgressions are in some way the concern of the whole church';² likewise the transgressions of the church are the concern of the private individual and the wider community. Absolution follows confession. This writer posits that most Australian Anglicans would see absolution as applying to them individually, and not to the church as a whole. In other words, the church is not absolved for its sins, whereas the individual is set free. If there is to be forgiveness and absolution from the wider community for the sins of the church then there must be honest contrition on the part of the church. Can forgiveness be given by the victims to the ecclesial community without absolution? Whether or not absolution is offered, responsibility is not abrogated. In order to be God's hands in the world we start over by apologising and asking forgiveness from God and the community God has called the church to address!

In our corporate and individual confession we ask God to 'Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life.' To be strengthened by God to 'love and obey' we need to hear what God is saying to us. It is essential to 'newness of life' that as an ecclesial community we listen to God and God's word. It is vital that we listen to the public, to the local community, and to those in need we would rather ignore. In order to be God's hands in the world we start over by listening!

In the listening process the church *ought to* ask itself discomfited and disturbingly difficult questions. This includes the question: how might we engage in the public sphere in issues of public concern, that will contribute to forgiveness, healing and reconciliation? Thus, in order to be God's hands in the world we start over by exercising careful and considered discernment!

Paul calls the church to humility, to 'becoming the very least,' and dispensing the gift of God's grace to all. It is through genuine repentance, the admission of our mistakes and short comings, asking forgiveness, listening to God and to community, and careful and considered discernment that integrity, trust, credibility and respect will steadily be rebuilt.

Is the Anglican Church of Australia willing to do what it takes to recover its Public but not Official place in the community? For if we are not, we will not be listened to, there will be no one to debate with, we will be *persona non grata*, effectively rendering the Anglican Church neither Public nor Official!

Notes

- 1 Lawrence Bartlett (ed.), *A Prayer Book for Australia for Use with 'The Book of Common Prayer' (1662) and 'An Australian Prayer Book' (1978): Liturgical Resources Authorised by the General Synod*, Broughton Books, Sydney, 1999, p. 120.
- 2 Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living*, revised edition, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, 2000, p. 187.