

# **JOHN ROFFEY MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2004**

## ***“PUTTING JEREMIAH BACK IN THE WELL”***



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## “Putting Jeremiah Back in the Well”

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we have been meeting these past few days. May their spirit remain strong.

Jeremiah 38: 1 – 6:

Now Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people, Thus says the Lord, Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live; they shall have their lives as a prize of war, and live. Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon and be taken. Then the officials said to the king, *"This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm."* King Zedekiah said, *"Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you."* So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.



## 1. Jeremiah – introduction

The book which bears the name of the prophet Jeremiah does not satisfy a modern mindset wanting to have a neat historical account in which material is presented chronologically, or even thematically. This is not the time for an extended exegesis – there are numerous commentaries which can provide that. But it is useful to set out an extended introduction of sorts and give the historical background which led to Jeremiah being put in the well.

There are more puzzles than answers for those who want to paint a picture of the man Jeremiah. Clearly he did not write the book, nor is he its core. That is at it should be, for the faiths which hold the book as sacred are interested in the word he brings from God – there is no other reason for including this material in the canon of scripture. Indeed, almost every aspect of Jeremiah's life is contested ground in Old Testament studies. We know little or nothing of his birth, and nothing of his death. There are arguments about his age and about when he exercised his prophetic role.

What is clear, though, is that the book is the work of a number of writers. Some of these were contemporaries of the prophet, others came later. Finally, a number of editors appear to have worked on the text to make it what it is today.

The majority view among scholars is still that Jeremiah received his call from God in about 627BCE<sup>1</sup>. He may well have been in his late teens at the time, as he responds to God in this manner: *“Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child”* (1:6)

Jeremiah, if the date of 627 holds true, began his work during the reign of King Josiah, who came to the throne in Judah in 640 and set in motion a range of far-reaching reforms and changes in the nation's life. He is generally regarded as having been a godly man, who reunited the southern and northern kingdoms when the opportunity arose. He placed the religious cult back in the centre of national life, both theologically and geographically by doing away with numerous shrines and worship centres which were at odds with monotheistic Judaism. The Temple in Jerusalem was given back its pre-eminence as the centre of worship.

This reformed cultus, however, was also the downside of Josiah's rule as it led to a triumphalist theology. The religious leadership, and the people, developed a false sense of security around the notion of being chosen of God. While the notion of 'being chosen' was deeply embedded in the theology of Israel from ancient times, the prophets constantly reminded the people that being chosen was meaningless without a commitment to God and to justice on their part. In 7:4 we read that Jeremiah stood at the Temple Gate and berated the people for their naïve belief that as long as they came to the Temple and chanted *“This is the sanctuary of Yahweh, the sanctuary of Yahweh, the sanctuary of Yahweh”* all would be well. In response to this a-historical sense of divine determinism, Jeremiah called on the people to let justice prevail, and then (and only then) would God remain in their midst and they remain with him.

Throughout his career, Jeremiah offered to the King and to the people God's Word reflecting the grave realities facing the nation. This was often, if not generally, in stark contrast to the soothing words of the other prophets in the land, and contrary to the advice of many in the royal household.

Thus Jeremiah was almost constantly under threat.

The land we know as Israel has always been vulnerable to the expansionist dreams of its neighbours. It is, after all, located in such a way that no significant trade can bypass it, and nothing excites national leaders like the opportunity to control the flow of trade and taxes –

then as now!

But let us turn back the clock a to a period before Jeremiah's time, to 735BCE, and the reign of Ahaz king of Judah – the southern kingdom. In order to secure his position and national security, Ahaz appealed to the then superpower – Assyria. This was an expensive alliance as it also meant that Judah came under attack from three sides from those countries not aligned with Assyria – including the northern kingdom of Israel. Assyria prevailed against all three of Judah's enemies. Indeed, such was the Assyrian Empire's power that the Northern Kingdom was destroyed utterly by 721 and its people exiled to other parts of the Empire. The nation ceased to exist – until its re-incorporation by Josiah over a century later.

Of course, Ahaz's alliance left Judah a vassal state in the Assyrian Empire. But all superpowers come to an end, one day. Egypt and Babylon each started to re-assert what they saw as their rightful places and by 609 Assyria was finished, and Judah was independent (for a while at least). Meanwhile, Egypt and Babylon began to jockey for the role of next superpower.

It has been said of the Assyrian Empire, (and this in a commentary on Jeremiah published in 1941):

*“Outside the Empire an anti-Assyrian front was gradually built up, for a policy of 'frightfulness', although it had brought about submission, had made no friends. Assyria never seemed to realise that she had any duties to the peoples she conquered; they and their lands were simply to be spoiled and plundered, and then exploited for her own benefit.”<sup>2</sup>*

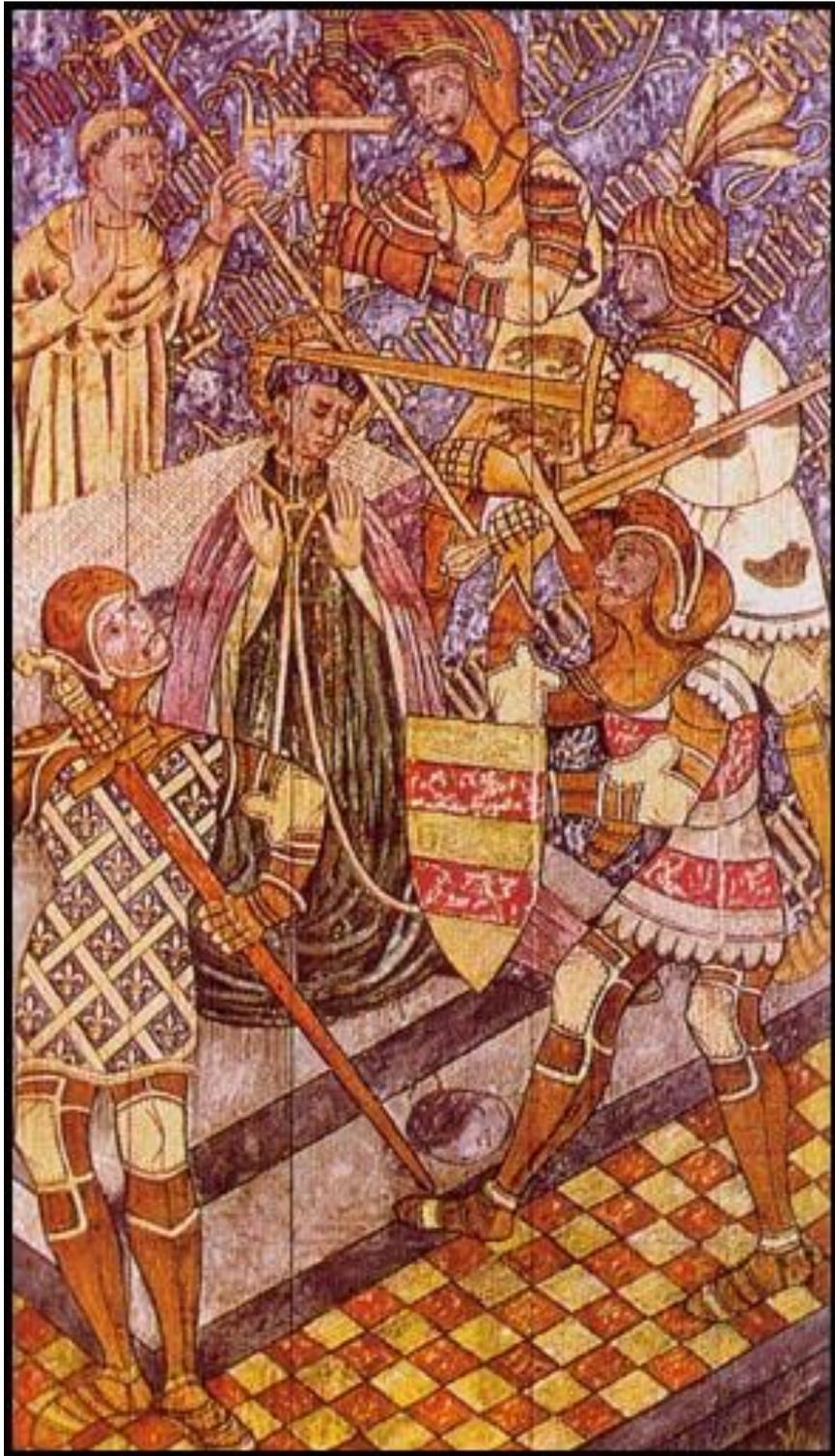
So, by 609, when Jeremiah had been at work for some years, there was plenty of evidence to draw on indicating that Judah was not as safe as some were claiming. It was in that year that Egypt, with an Assyrian remnant, tried to take on the Babylonians at Carcemish. Josiah decided that this was the time to show his commitment to the Egyptian cause by joining the battle. Unfortunately, he was killed and Jehoahaz took over the throne. His kingship did not meet with Egyptian approval and he was immediately deposed and exiled to Egypt.

It was in this ferment that Jeremiah's words of warning were put before a succession of rulers in Judah. The record shows that his utterances were anything but popular, contrary as they were to the prophets and priests of the cultic centre.

Things only became worse in Judah as successive kings tried to secure the nation's independence and homeland security, first aligning themselves with Egypt, then with Babylon, then with Egypt again. By 598BCE, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had had enough and marched on Jerusalem. This first siege resulted in the exile of the royal family and the notables of the land.

And it was between this initial siege and deportations and a second siege in 588/587 that Jeremiah came to be put in the well.

We can perhaps understand that Jeremiah's preaching was unpopular – after all, saying that everyone who stayed in the city would be put to the sword is pretty tough stuff! And so those who had the ear of the King, and believed that resisting the Babylonians was possible, set about the task of silencing God's messenger. They would have preferred to kill him, but King Zedekiah was hesitant about that. The courtiers, however, were given power to do what they wanted. No doubt they assumed that putting Jeremiah in the mud-filled well would be the end of him.



## 2. These meddling priests

History shows us that those in power rarely like to be told that they are wrong. Indeed, we know within ourselves that it is not the most comforting of experiences, whether we consider ourselves to be people of power or not! It requires a considerable degree of what psychotherapists call ‘integration’ to be able to accept being confronted by someone saying “You are wrong” and to take their criticism on board. It does happen – King David confronted by Nathan, the Apostle Peter confronted by Paul, and the academic Robert Manne confronted by refugee advocates.

Sadly, examples of the opposite more readily come to mind: Thomas Beckett and Henry II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adolf Hitler, Steve Biko and the Apartheid Regime.

But it is not my intention to dwell on those who have died while defending their truths. Rather, I want to look at those who do the silencing. And it is clear that not all those who stand in opposition to the prevailing wisdom, or against those in power, are condemned to death.

As an aside, I note that there is a common phrase about ‘speaking truth to power’. It is my contention that those in power do not often need to be told the truth, as it is usually abundantly clear. Rather, what is needed is that they act from a position of truth, rather than one of self-interest (which is often disguised by referring to some other value, such as ‘the national interest’ or ‘the economy’).

But, let us move on to those who would silence the meddling ones ...

*“Consciously or not, the public priest invokes the prestige and power of his (or her?) religious office when he involves himself in politics – unless he explicitly discards the biretta, so to speak. When he indulges in political campaigning in full Jesuit regalia, as (Frank) Brennan does in his homily ... I feel ambushed”.*<sup>3</sup>

So writes Frank Devine of Frank Brennan, in *The Australian* on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2003. The heading for Devine’s advice to Brennan is “*Do-gooder priests should stay out*”. Inter alia, he complains about Brennan’s call for a return to ‘moral decency’.

Brennan, a little while later, cites Andrew Bolt as holding the view that “*those who appeal to public morality ... to wake up to ourselves because we are so out of touch with what the people want*”.<sup>4</sup>

Advice to church leaders from within the media is also not new. In a leading article in February 1940, the Times in London advised “*those about to deliver Lenten Courses not to confine themselves to topical matters, but rather to concentrate their attention on things Biblical*”.<sup>5</sup>

In Monty Python’s “*The Meaning of Life*”, a woman who is about to give birth, is told to shut up by a male doctor because “*You’re not qualified! We have the machine that goes ‘ping!’*” This is a routine obviously much loved by politicians and journalists alike when church leaders speak about public issues.

On the occasion of a visit to Brisbane by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* reported the then Premier of Queensland, Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s views that the Archbishop “*did not understand the Queensland situation*” - on the issue of

industrial relations legislation. And, of course, the Premier felt the need to point out that “*the job facing church people is to get their followers back into the churches and preach the Gospel to them*”.<sup>6</sup>

Without wanting to get into a detailed exegesis of that last comment, it is worth noting the following:

1. The Premier – well known to be a conservative Christian – overlooked his own identity among “church people”, which implies
2. that the task he assigns to the Archbishop is one he shares,
3. that he believes that churchgoers are “followers” of church leaders – not of Jesus Christ apparently, and
4. that the Gospel is only to be preached inside the church to churchgoers!

But lest we think that only politicians on the so-called conservative side of politics should play this game, I remind you of the various stoushes which occurred between then Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Peter Hollingworth, first when the latter was the Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and subsequently during his tenure as Archbishop of Brisbane.

These became, at times, uncomfortably personal, as in the reported outburst by the Prime Minister on October 17, 1990 in which he said that the Archbishop should “*stop meddling in politics and stick with spiritual matters*”. He went on to say “*Bishop Hollingworth should show a ... reluctance in entering into a dissertation on mysteries of the unholy trinity of economic policy – monetary policy, fiscal policy and wages policy – because he doesn't understand it*”.<sup>7</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that such altercations make front page news. (although in the case of the example just cited, *The West Australian* could not bring itself to run something so “Eastern States” before page 12!) Strangely though, when the particular church leader provides evidence that they understand perfectly well and offers an opportunity for a follow up story, it rarely gets the same prominence, let alone an acknowledgment from the particular politician or journalist. It seems that the argument is the story, not the issue.

A case in point, which I witnessed at first hand.

In late 1996 the High Court of Australia handed down its decision in the Wik case, which considered the co-existence of Native Title with pastoral leases. The Federal Government responded with the famous, or infamous, Ten Point Plan to amend the Native Title Act to overcome any ‘uncertainties’ created by the Court's decision.

After the Plan was made public, the Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley, issued a statement opposing the proposed legislation on the basis that it would result in more extinguishment of Native Title and that it was racist. The Prime Minister, John Howard, responded to these comments by saying that the Archbishop did not understand the issues or the Ten Point Plan and he despatched the Special Minister of State, Senator Nick Minchin, to Perth to provide a briefing to the Archbishop.

Along with a number of others, I sat in on the briefing, which lasted for some two and a half hours. As the meeting broke up, a number of journalists gathered to question Senator Minchin and the Archbishop. The first question, to Senator Minchin was “*So how did it go?*” The reply was “*It was a very good meeting. The Archbishop obviously has a clear understanding*

*of the issues and the legislation.”*

I just wanted to ask the gathered media whether any one there could remember that, only a week before, the Prime Minister had claimed that the Archbishop didn't know what he was talking about! Furthermore, I was aware of the extraordinarily detailed analysis and briefing provided to the Archbishop by a specialist Native Title lawyer in Perth before he made his public statement.

And to prove that the Bjelke-Petersen approach is not a thing of the past, we have the Sir Thomas Playford Lecture, delivered in August 2003 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer. He used the occasion to attack, amongst others, the Primate Archbishop Peter Carnley for seeking *“Popular political causes or cheap headlines”*. Again, the call to provide *“spiritual comfort and moral guidance”* is to the fore, as is the implied rebuke *‘You're not qualified!’*<sup>8</sup>

I find this a strange example of the genre, for a number of reasons.

That a political leader wants to focus attention on the messenger and away from the issue is not surprising – that is a feature of each example I have put before you.

But, the Minister in this case used a Liberal Party function to deliver the attack. He, like his leader, dislikes church leaders *“hogging the limelight on complex political issues”* (quote) but was clearly quite comfortable using a partisan political occasion to instruct church leaders on their duties.

Furthermore the Minister went on to commend other church leaders for their moderation and their adherence to what he obviously believes to be their core business – filling churches by being theologically and politically conservative.

And of course the Minister was not above treading on specialist theological and ecclesiological ground:

*“I remember where once there was a confident global communion, with room for civilised doctrinal disagreement under a canopy of shared belief. Those days are long gone.*

*In their place, uncertainty or disbelief in the fundamental tenets of Christianity are commonplace among senior clergy.*

*Not since the Enlightenment swept through France has clerical scepticism been so much on the ascendant.”*<sup>9</sup>

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Primate has gotten under the Government's skin. Mr Downer's speech was made, as I said, in August 2003, and yet the Prime Minister came back to the issue again in February 2004, when he was reported in *The Adelaide Advertiser* as *“accusing some church leaders of indulging in ‘partisan’ politics and offending and dividing their own congregations.”*<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the accusation of partisanship, the depressing aspect of this statement from the Prime Minister was that the church's role was *“still overwhelmingly benign”* - something we need to correct very smartly I would suggest!

There are three mysteries here.

First, that church leaders are called to give moral guidance, but when they extend morality beyond the personal and into the national sphere it is no longer acceptable. It seems there is no national morality, only politics.

Second, when church leaders do write in the public arena about matters theological, they still can't win. The Dean of Perth, John Shepherd, wrote a most interesting, thoughtful and thought-provoking piece for *The West Australian* at Easter 2003. The article explored the Resurrection, and its meaning. The responses from many quarters bordered on the hysterical and, to my mind, called into question the possibility of ever having a serious debate in our community.

And third, it seems that when it comes to theology, ecclesiology and the Christian faith, everyone is qualified to comment. Thinking about the “*you're not qualified!*” allegation which is so often put to church leaders, I thought back through the issue of the qualifications needed for high office in our nation.

Does it ever cross your mind that government ministers can be appointed over a weekend and be regarded as experts by Monday morning? The two longest serving Treasurers in our federal government in the past two decades have interesting backgrounds for the task. One was a manager of a rock band and a union official, the other a lawyer of not many years' experience.

It has to be acknowledged, by way of contrast, that the Minister for Foreign Affairs served in the Australian Diplomatic Service for six years. However, I can find no indication of theological studies in his biography.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no ‘school for ministers’. Rather, they are introduced to their departments and provided with briefings and then expected to answer questions in Parliament, face the media and plan their legislative programs.

Media training, however, is provided at the most sophisticated level possible – and at great expense.

But a more serious issue is also at stake here. My examples have been of government leaders criticising church leaders personally. But a new trend is emerging which has the potential for wide ranging effects on the work of the churches and their agencies. I refer, of course, to the sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit threats to the financial well-being of our agencies. This is not something on which I have to lecture this room!

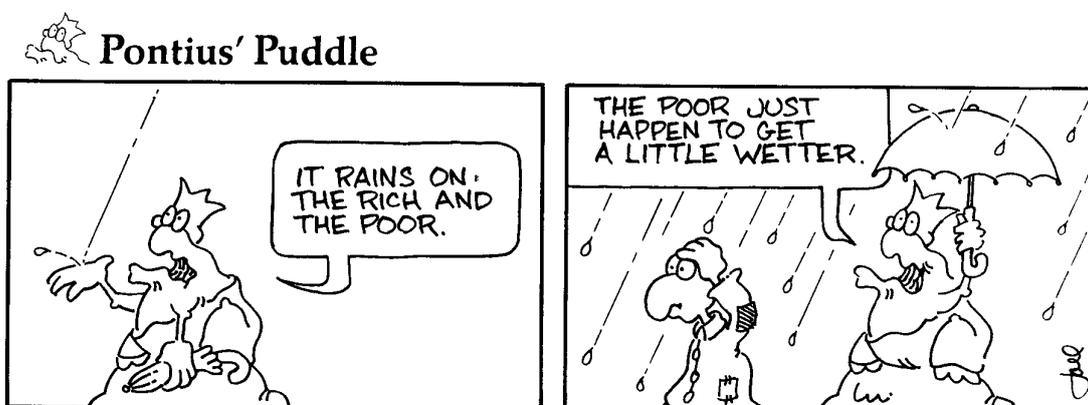
In a recent paper from The Australia Institute, this shift in governmental attitudes towards the broad range of non-Government Organisations (NGOs) is considered and addressed at length. The paper's authors are not only concerned about threats to funding or charitable status, but take a wider view about the effect on debate in the public domain, and the effect on Australian democracy.

The concern of the authors is that “*there has been a serious deterioration in relations between the Federal Government and NGOs to the point where many believe they have been ‘frozen out’ and fear their funding will be withdrawn*”.<sup>11</sup>

Among the roles played by NGOs in maintaining a healthy democracy, the authors cite the creation “...of deliberative forums, representing marginalized and stigmatized groups that

otherwise have no public voice and promoting a richer public debate by providing information and opinions that would otherwise not be heard.”<sup>12</sup>

The authors conclude that “... over the past nine years in particular, a pattern has emerged in which the Federal Government has set out to stifle democratic debate. It has been highly effective at silencing, or at least muting, its critics in civil society. ... Like individual citizens, community groups are being worn down and are increasingly reluctant to engage in the democratic process because they no longer believe that they can make a difference.”<sup>13</sup>



### 3. Discomfiting church agencies.

Church agencies, like individual church leaders, also come under fire in the community – and from within the Church. Some examples from recent years demonstrate just how turbulent life can be for those of us who seek to speak out on issues, or worse, decide to take action.

In the late 1990s, the New South Wales Government held a Drug Summit which resulted in a range of recommendations for reform. One of the more controversial was the recommendation to commission a non-government agency to trial a heroin injecting room in Sydney. The first group to offer to conduct the trial was a Catholic religious order the Sisters of Charity. Their offer, however, was withdrawn at the request of the Vatican.<sup>14</sup>

The Board of Social Responsibility of the Uniting Church in New South Wales subsequently stepped up and was given the go-ahead. It is to the credit of the Board and its staff that they persisted, given the criticism leveled against them. The head of Wesley Mission, Sydney – itself a Uniting Church agency – described it as “*the worst social action*” of the Uniting Church Synod. The Revd Gordon Moyes, who heads up Wesley Sydney, is now also a member of the New South Wales Parliament, and made his criticism firstly in that forum, and repeated it on the Wesley Mission internet site. I wonder what Mr Downer would make of such a confluence of influences?

But let us also cast our gaze in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church. During the 1993 federal election campaign, the Catholic Social Justice Commission in Perth issued a detailed critique of the Coalition parties’ *Fightback* policy platform. The Commission found the document to be incompatible with Catholic Social Teaching and deplored its direction on industrial relations, and on wages policy.

The Commission, as well as its document, was criticised and condemned by people inside and outside the church and inside and outside politics. Such was the reaction that the Commission

was disbanded and its Executive Officer's employment terminated. It was replaced by a new body with a revised constitution and with considerably closer oversight by the leadership of the Archdiocese.

Moving closer to home, I want to put before you now three examples from the Social Responsibilities Commission of the Anglican Province of Western Australia – that place I call my employment home. The Commission was established by a resolution of the Synod of the Diocese of Perth in 1983 and given a Charter which, amongst other duties and rights, allowed that the Commission would make public statements “in its own name”. It would seem that not everyone approves of that provision in the Charter, as has been shown on a number of occasions.

At the 1991 Synod in Perth, by which time it should be noted that the Commission had become a Provincial body, the then Executive Officer announced that the Commission was planning to conduct a 24 hour ‘phone-in’ on the issue of police violence and harassment. This was roundly condemned in Synod by the Diocesan Secretary and numerous other speakers. The media labeled it “*Dob in a Cop*”.

The phone-in went ahead and elicited some 1440 calls, of which 25% reported incidents which the callers regarded as violence or harassment. In some ways, the exercise could be seen now as a small step on the way to our more recent police Royal Commission.

The Commission was suitably supported in its freedom to carry out such an exercise by the leadership of the Church, although this seemed not to be noticed by the critics.

Second example. The Commission has had a long involvement in environmental issues, and no doubt some of you will remember that the 1990 National Anglican Social Justice Statement “*Justice for the Earth*” was prepared by the Western Australian Commission<sup>15</sup>.

Soon after that statement was released, the Commission decided to take a specific interest in logging in old growth forests, a hot issue in Western Australia as in other parts of the country. Speakers from the pro-logging lobby and from the anti-logging lobby were asked to come and address the Commission at a special meeting. As a result of this meeting, and the discussion which followed, the Commission released a statement opposing all logging in old growth forests.

That statement drew criticism from a number of quarters and resulted in a delegation visiting the Archbishop. The members of the delegation, all Anglicans I believe, belonged to the ill-named Forest Protection Society. I say ill-named, because this ‘society’ was in fact a company set up by the timber industry to further its interests throughout Australia, according to its articles of association.

The delegation sought an assurance from the Archbishop that he would speak to the Commission and get it to not issue any further statements about the issue. To the best of my knowledge, no such assurance was given, nor did the Archbishop speak to the Commission about the issue.

At a later date, when the Commission re-iterated its views on the subject, the Forest Protection Society was quoted in the media as having gained an assurance from the Archbishop, and called on him to disband the Commission. He took no action.

My third example draws on the Commission's position on homosexual law reform, adopted in mid-2002. The State Government had signaled its intention to legislate to bring Western Australia into line with other States on such matters as the age of consent for homosexual activity. The Commission considered the issue at length and decided to support the Government's moves.

It was decided to set out our position in full in *The Anglican Messenger* in an insert called "*Justice Perspectives*", which we produce with *The Messenger* three or four times each year.<sup>16</sup>

The statement was greeted with considerable criticism from a number of quarters. The Bishop of Bunbury wrote expressing his concerns, namely:

- that the position was at odds with the views of many in the Church;
- that statements by the Commission are received in the community as the views of the Anglican Church, not just of the Commission;
- that he felt the Commission should consult the bishops of the Province before issuing statements on controversial issues;
- that he felt that the Commission should be chaired by a bishop.

The Bishop took his concerns to Provincial Council and after consideration and discussion, Council decided to appoint the Bishop of Bunbury to the position of Chair of the Commission. Some changes were made to the Charter of the Commission, including that the appointment of the chair will be made by the Council and that it will always be a bishop. Other changes reflect more accurately the Commission's role as a provincial body.



#### 4. Let us debate!

Behind the Bishop's concerns lies a genuine belief that the Church should only speak with one voice on issues before it. He is not alone in holding this view by any means, but I offer a cautionary word against it.

It is my experience in the Church that it is the voices of dissent that are too often silenced when institutions insist on agreement before statements are made. Such agreements are too often a 'lowest common denominator' consensus.

I remember vividly a telephone conversation with John Roffey when he left Churches of Christ in the mid-1980s and became an Anglican. Asked what prompted his move, John offered two reasons. First, that there was nothing left in Churches of Christ to foster his spirituality. Second, and this is the pertinent point for this occasion, that as someone 'of the left' in Churches of Christ, he felt he was being frozen out. I pointed out to him that the Anglican Church was equally polarised between left and right, to which he replied: *"Yes, but when you are in the first percentile on the far left of the Anglican Church, there are a lot more people with you."*

That is my dilemma with the 'only one voice' argument – it results, almost by definition, in the most conservative position being heard. And the most conservative voice does not often advance the scholarship, or the understanding, or even the debate.

It is a maxim of political parties everywhere that diversity, division and dissension are political poison and result in political oblivion. A great deal of time and energy is expended, indeed is wasted, making sure that the public utterances of all concerned are as one. "Being on message", "clarifying statements" "singing from the same hymn sheet" (an interesting metaphor!) have all become part of politico-speak.

But the Church is not a political party and we do not have to win elections to be voted in as the Church next year.

And so I want to appeal to you to debate! Let us get beyond the sound bite and the 30 second attention span when we are confronted by issues. Just because political parties, sporting clubs, corporations and government departments do not allow public discussion of issues does not mean that we have to adopt the same mentality or methodology!

In his book *"The Go-Between God: the Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission"*, the late Bishop John Taylor pointed to the work of the Spirit as *"From within the depths of its being he urges every creature again and again to take one more tiny step in the direction of higher consciousness and personhood; again and again he creates for every creature the occasion for spontaneity and the necessity for choice, and at every turn he opposes self-interest with a contrary principle of sacrifice, of existence for the other."*<sup>17</sup>

Taylor, at face value, is addressing individuals, but addressing his comments to the Church is equally valid. Can the Church also not take 'one more small step' towards fullness? Does the Spirit not challenge the Church to take risks?

Why are we afraid to debate difficult issues? Have we accepted the notion that 'a diversity of views empties the pews?' That is an affront to our experience and our theology as Anglicans, surely. We know there is diversity at all levels of our Communion, and we are reminded of it

almost daily. Whether we come across it when we choose a parish to worship in, or see it reflected in our Synods and in the utterances of our leadership, we know it exists.

Such diversity, in my view, only becomes damaging when we insist that our view is the only truth.

Earlier I cited the concerns of The Australia Institute about the effect on our democracy when debate is stifled. The Church is not, of course, a democracy. However, we are also responsible for building and maintaining something of value in society – the community of the People of God. That is not something which comes about easily or naturally. It requires a commitment which is greater and more profound even than that needed for a healthy democracy. We are not all theologians in the Church (any more than in Government!), but as the Anglican tradition has taught us, our theology is crafted from a range of sources, and we all contribute to it.

That may make for discomfort, and it may leave issues unresolved at times. It may strain our friendships and our structures, but the alternative is lethargy and enervation. It is my contention that it is not debate and dissent which empties our churches, but rather a refusal to engage with each other, an inability to listen to each other, and an unwillingness to be open to the creative activity of God.

Let me take you back to the Book of Jeremiah for a biblical example of an uncomfortable debate which no-one tried to resolve.

On numerous occasions Jeremiah had contact with King Zedekiah. Sometimes the King called Jeremiah to come and see him, sometimes Jeremiah took the initiative to confront the King. And in some of the texts we only have the words of the oracle Jeremiah delivered, without details of the face to face encounter.

The various oracles record almost every possible fate for Zedekiah – life, death, exile, well-being and prosperity in his own city. Each oracle was a word from God to Jeremiah for the King.

This may seem odd to us, particularly if we have grown up assuming internal consistency in the biblical witness. But here, as with so many other aspects of the Book of Jeremiah, we see that many hands have shaped the text to bring the prophet's message to a wider audience. Each theological school through which the material passed has left its mark and, remarkably, no one has tried to smooth out the problems presented by the composite picture. It's a far cry from modern politics!

It is, as some have suggested, a debate about the King's fate and about the fate of his kingdom – with each theological school putting its stamp on the discussion.<sup>18</sup>

As with all areas of human endeavour, the Book of Jeremiah shows us that life is rarely simple. There are few simple answers and we do well to hold our conclusions lightly rather than tightly.

And finally, a word or two about the fate of Jeremiah.

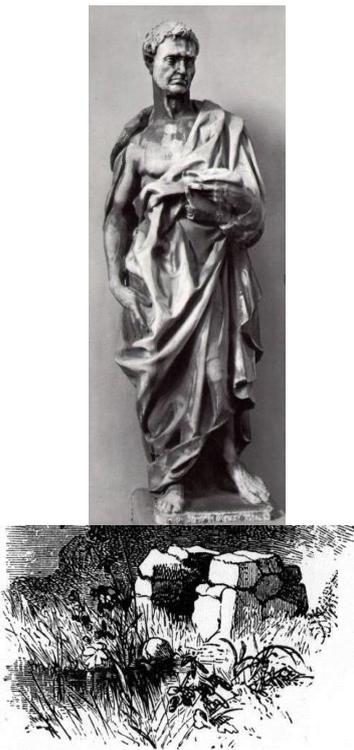
I opened with the first part of Jeremiah 38. If we read on, we find that:

Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate. So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, *"My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city."* Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, *"Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies."* So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, *"Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes."* Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

Note that "Ebed-Melech" is a title, not a name. It is best rendered "a palace servant"<sup>19</sup>. He is a no-name, possibly a slave from some foreign land. It may well be that he had no name because people could not pronounce it and so did not bother.

But named or not, he is effective in shaming the King into having Jeremiah released from the well.

My message to you in this address is simple. Let us make sure that no-one, whether a person with a well-known name or not, can silence the Church or its constituent parts. To allow such a thing to happen would be, to coin a phrase, "Putting Jeremiah back in the well".



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- <sup>1</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah*, New York, Doubleday 1965, pxxix.
- <sup>2</sup> LE Elliott-Binns, *Jeremiah: a prophet for a time of war*, London SCM 1941 p29
- <sup>3</sup> Frank Devine “Do-gooder priests should stay out”, *The Australian* December 11th, 2003..
- <sup>4</sup> Brennan “Honesty and the Issues”, *The Sydney Papers*, Summer 2004 p125.
- <sup>5</sup> Cited in Elliott-Binns, *op cit*, p10
- <sup>6</sup> *The Brisbane Courier-Mail*, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1985
- <sup>7</sup> *The West Australian*, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1990 p12.
- <sup>8</sup> The Hon Alexander Downer, MP *Sir Thomas Playford Annual Lecture*, Adelaide 2003
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>10</sup> *The Advertiser*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004
- <sup>11</sup> Sarah Maddison, Richard Dennis, Clive Hamilton *Silencing Dissent: Non-government organisations and Australian democracy*, *The Australia Institute Paper No 65*, June 2004, pvii.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p44
- <sup>14</sup> *ABC Radio – PM program*, October 28, 1999.
- <sup>15</sup> Social Responsibilities Commission, Anglican Province of Western Australia, *Justice for the Earth*, Social Responsibilities Commission of General Synod, Sydney, 1990.
- <sup>16</sup> Theo Mackaay, *Homosexual law reform*, *The Anglican Messenger*, November 2001, p9.
- <sup>17</sup> John V Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, London : SCM Press, 1972, p36.
- <sup>18</sup> Applegate, J “*The Fate of Zedekiah*”, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol 48, 1998 p 138-9.
- <sup>19</sup> Hollaway, *Jeremiah Vol2*, *Hermeneia* p289.

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