

Jesus had a profound ability to connect the surface, the physical, with the inner, the spiritual. 'Do you know what I have done to you,' Jesus asked the disciples after he'd washed their feet. It was not an act of mere physicality. It was a washing of the soul, a transformation of outlook and perception, a new faith.

In a world where religion is becoming more important, not less, we who belong to organizations rooted in the Anglican tradition are sitting on a goldmine. But more often than not instead of mining it we treat it as hindrance and irritation. Reclaiming the richness of our religious tradition, finding our tongues afresh, embracing the fullness of what it is to be human rather than the secular reduction of it, recognizing the reality of the spiritual, this has the potential to enliven and reinvigorate everything we do.

A gift we bring to inform the future is not simply more breadth in cultural richness but the dimension of depth in what it means to be human.

With St Paul in today's epistle

I pray that ... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through [God's] Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3.16-19).

Amen

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Anglicare Australia Conference
'Cultural Richness – Informing the Future'
2 September 2007

Micah 6.6-8 do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God
Eph 3.14-20 strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit
John 3. 12-17 'Do you know what I have done to you?'

The theme chosen for this conference – 'Cultural richness – informing the future' is an honourable one. Implicit in it are values that we would all feel drawn to affirm, I assume; such as valuing diversity, the capacity of human beings to make choices about and to participate in creating the future, drawing on the best of a variety of traditions to forge something new, creativity, responsibility and so on.

What's less clear is the extent to which the theme embraces the place of religion. Presumably that's implicit in the theme too, given that this is the national conference of Anglicare Australia and we are present here in Christ Church Cathedral as part of the Conference programme. But it's a bit of a vexed question: what is the place of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, in forging the future out of the cultural diversity that is Australia today?

This afternoon's first reading is one that's much loved of social welfare agencies and gatherings such as this. Our organizations are very pluralistic and include staff and volunteers of many different religious outlooks and of none. And the Micah passage can be read as playing down religious requirements in favour of less sectarian, less dogmatic, more humanistic values.

'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah.6.6-8).

Well justice is fine, kindness is no worries and if we skip quickly over that last little bit Micah, at this point at least, seems to let us off the religious hook.

And to many minds in our world today that's a very good thing. Religion in general and Christianity in particular have had a rough time in the press recently. Our own institutional scandals haven't done us any good, but I'm thinking too of the bitter and passionate attacks of recent times by secular, humanist atheists of the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

These atheists remain convinced that what started around 200 years ago with the enlightenment is the right way to go and the sooner it comes to fruition the better. The rising tide of science and human ingenuity has forced religion to retreat and when it finally disappears altogether the world will be a better place. When we can finally sink, once and for all, the infantile superstition and destructive dogma that is religion people will be free to enjoy the infinite benefits of rational thought and technological advance. Religion is the source of most, if not all, the ills of the world and it's a good thing it's disappearing out the back door.

This is the kind of direction of their thinking. But interestingly, some of them write with the kind of stridency and passion that itself has shades of religious fundamentalism about it. One wrote recently, 'I doubt there is anything that the entire religious population of the world could do to atone for the sins of religion' (de la Bedoyere, 2007).

And don't be too sure religion is disappearing out the back door. The respected Australian journalist, Paul Kelly, in his Acton Lecture late last year (December 2006) compellingly demonstrated that religion is playing a bigger role in politics, not a smaller one, all around the world, including in Australia. Many in Australia don't recognize this, he argued, because of the decline in Christian practice over a long period. But that doesn't mean that religion is a declining influence in civic and political life.

Three global trends have led to religion's growing importance: the resurgence of Islam and questions about how it will relate to secular states; Christian revival in much of the developing world and the Christian multiculturalism stemming from migration; and thirdly the obligation on politicians to forge unity and cohesion in the face of trends to define identity by culture and religion or lack of religion.

'God is making a comeback,' says Kelly. 'Those secularists who saw a new unfolding world of rationalism, tolerance, scientific progress devoid of the boggy of religion and religious superstition should be worried', he says. All major world religions are growing faster than world population growth. '...one of the most radical messages of the current age [is] That people do not live by reason alone.... The global trend is unmistakable.'

And yet in western societies there's widespread denial of the transcendent in spite of seemingly irrepressible signs of human thirst for it. In a whimsical reflection, another journalist and popular author Philip Yancey (2002, 4) muses that 'The health club is a modern temple, complete with initiation rites and elaborate rituals, its objects of worship on constant and glorious display' in floor to ceiling mirrors. And yet only the shell of the human being is in view.

You see this truncated view of what it means to be human even in value-based organizations. Yancey (2002, 7) tells the amusing story of how he was looked at 'with the horror of a heretic' when one day he asked at his Amnesty International meeting 'Why should we keep people alive?' The answer was supposedly self-evident: because life is good and death is bad; which completely missed the irony that Amnesty International exists precisely because that's not self-evident; human life is not universally accorded ultimate value. Why should it be? Yancey wanted to know 'Is it possible to honour the image of God in a human being if there is no God?'

But raising such questions at an AI meeting, he says, causes 'awkward silence. Explanations may follow. *This is not a religious organization ... We cannot deal with such sectarian views ... People have differing opinions ...*'

The spiritual stubbornly keeps surfacing from under the rising tide of secular humanism.

Sex is another example. Ubiquitous sex sells cars, wine, computers and dental floss (Yancey, 2002, 14). Our obsession with sex is an example of what happens when we 'block[s] the human thirst for transcendence': those longings re-route themselves into ... mere physicality' (ibid 16). 'Maybe the problem is not that people are getting naked,' says Yancey, 'but that they aren't getting naked enough: we stop at the skin instead of going deeper into the soul' (ibid). Obsession with sex is 'a modern mutation of classical idolatry, a commitment of spirit to something that cannot bear its weight What the Old Testament calls idolatry ...[we] call addictions... good things ... that outgrow their rightful place and begin to control and imprison a person's life' (ibid).

Addicts are searching for transcendence. And interestingly all the twelve step programmes to tackle addiction involve recognition of some 'higher power' (ibid 17).

Like the Samaritan woman at the well who had had five husbands and was living with a sixth man, 'When her deepest thirst was quenched ... all other thirsts took their rightful place' (ibid).