

STANDPOINT -
A monthly column on Anglican
issues

DRAWING A FINE LINE FOR
DEBATE

The problem is not in evangelicalism as much as in the friends of evangelicalism who have not been as tough minded as they should – Archbishop Peter Jensen, January 2003

I was reading the latest issue of the *Witness* magazine which primarily comments on world justice issues and the Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA). I noticed on page 6 a summary of other news under the heading: ‘Sydney newspaper reports allegations of nepotism against archbishop’. Seven prominent lines told more than this now tired story; its sub-text about power and gender left me deeply uncomfortable.

The business of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney has once more engaged the national, the denominational and the international media. Commendably, Anglican Media Sydney has responded openly, detailing comments from every source. No pretenses, no self-justification, just the details so that the reader can draw their own conclusions — congratulations to all concerned in keeping the affairs of the Diocese open, at least in these matters. But no praise at all for the continued devaluing of human sexuality and for the promotion of male power.

Dr Peter Jensen’s views about leadership in the Anglican Communion, the nature of evangelism, strategies for church growth, Bible authority, gender and sexuality are beyond doubt. Much of the media greets this with surprise, as if the archbishop and his supporters had invented a new brand of Evangelical dialectic and action. But the

clues to their meaning are clear. If you and I, ordinary members of the Church are to take our part in debate and interaction, we need to focus on these issues without distraction.

On 24 June 2001, before his consecration as Archbishop of Sydney, the *Catholic Weekly* reported Dr Jensen’s primary goals. His agenda, he said, is set by ‘the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ and this points to ‘the main contest’ between materialism -- ‘men and women who think that this world is all there is’-- and the coming kingdom of God. Alan Gill, author of this report, perceptively noted that the comment was offered as ‘a kind of manifesto or mission statement, in line with the Evangelical tradition of giving public testimony to belief and motivation’.

Why is there such surprise that the archbishop has subsequently urged adoption of a diocesan strategic plan that affirms both the centrality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and evangelism? This is surely a classic Evangelical response. And does not everything else flow from this? If the ‘new body’ and the ‘coming kingdom’ must primarily engage us, then the battleground is set for all the archbishop’s other issues.

Those of us who want to keep justice on the agenda of the Diocese of Sydney as our primary goal, must address *these* principles. The accusation of ‘nepotism’ is simply unworthy and it fails to recognise the closeness of Jensen’s marriage and family relationships. Some people may have wished for a different leadership mix but to keep on discussing this matter is to lose the centre of concern about justice in the broad areas of ‘power’, ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘inclusiveness’. If justice comes from the heart of God, and if justice motivates us to see good even in our enemies, then the struggle is really about the men and women

of this age who need to hear that their crisis matters, that they are indeed ‘the image of God’. The here and now needs to be claimed as the kingdom of God pressing in all around us. Justice to the oppressed is not an optional extra, nor is it some second cousin to evangelism – justice is the mind and heart of the compassionate God.

It is right to rejoice at the urgency to see people ‘converted’, but a narrowness of vision for their possibilities should leave us grieving. The tragedy for some may be broken relationships, divorce, violence and sexual manipulation – against that all of us must protest. But our relationship is more than ‘protest’ or a denunciation of sin; it is yearning for people’s wholeness.

And here, there is an obvious tension. Archbishop Jensen claims that ‘genuine evangelicalism always estimates reality from the point of view of God’s judgement; it sees human need as fundamentally that of salvation from the future wrath of God, and it sees human beings as fully deserving that wrath’ (“The Gospel and Mission of Anglican Evangelicalism – January 2003: address at the Anglican Evangelical Conferences in the UK”). The whole text is worth reading for the clarity of its exposition. You can find it on the web at <http://www.anglicanmedia.com.au/index.php/article/articleview/586/1/25/>

If this is immovable ground, then Sydney exponents of justice may need to begin the dialogue with ‘eschatology’, the interpretation of the world and human life in terms of its end. Alternately they could refuse the right of Sydney Evangelicals to set the ground rules of debate. They could make this is the time to set another agenda where culture, the interplay of relationships and the universal surge of spirituality to explore ‘God’ and ‘human nature’ in new terms. Here we can believe intensely in the generosity of the human spirit, in the power of forgiveness and in an awareness of God

that cannot be confined by our definitions. This is a time for justice-focussed Christians to sit as friends and co-workers with all those who share our wonder in the search for an authentic humanity.

I was asked recently for a statement of my personal faith. I offer it to you here:

I believe that at the heart of all true religion is a blending of compassion and justice. This impels us to reach beyond our closed circle of acquaintance and search for the mark of beauty and goodness in every human being. In this encounter we can discover within ourselves the quality of mercy and forgiveness that enlivens compassion and justice. You become my companion, sometimes my intimate. At that moment, your different culture or social status or religion enhances my own awareness of my humanity. Seeing you, touching you, knowing you, links me with you and brings me into the orbit of your pain and disadvantage’
(*Adelaide Advertiser* 28 January 2003)

Our Christianity should make us more open to people of other outlooks, other cultures, and yes, other ways of embracing sexuality. Our generation is searching for new ways of relating that affirm their natural and their spiritual yearning. What is at stake for us in this engagement is nothing less than an understanding of the ways of God and the fundamentals of classical theism.

Justice demands that our agenda be the affirmation of people from backgrounds different to our own and that will mean support for homosexual and transgender people. And support does not mean mere tolerance or the privatising of behaviour; it means the endorsement of these differences as expressions of the compassionate God. Here is an alternative agenda for modern Anglicans.



Will we divide on these fundamental issues? Will there be two Anglican denominations operating in tandem? Probably. There are no surprises here.

Since the 1930s the Evangelical leadership in the diocese of Sydney has modelled its future on the existence of two such churches in South Africa. In all the present hostility to the new Archbishop of Canterbury, this issue for Sydney has been made abundantly clear.

‘The Church of England will have to change to meet the needs of Evangelicals as they evangelise’, said Archbishop Jensen following a recent sermon to the English congregation of St Helen’s Bishopsgate (*Church Times* 24 January 2003). That change will mean that ‘authentic Anglicans will occupy the same territory, not in communion with each other but in communion with other Anglicans’. And the model for change is ‘the example of the Church of England in South Africa – “always acknowledged by Sydney, but never invited to Lambeth”.’

This conviction has impelled the Diocese of Sydney, at least since the 1930s and the episcopate of Howard Mowll. An ‘authentic’ Christianity is Evangelical, bible-based, Gospel preaching, centred on substitutionary atonement, looking for the coming again of Jesus. It has a model in the passion of Protestant martyrdom, in the Puritan single-minded pursuit of Truth, and in Revivalist hope for the coming Kingdom. Structurally it is a church only when meeting around ‘the word’, an ‘intermittent’ reminder of the presence of God among us. Its continuities lie with other like-minded Christians and through the personal faith of generations of believers

This is an in-your-face statement that there are ‘authentic’ and presumably ‘inauthentic’ Anglicans. As the comments moved immediately to the views of the new

Archbishop of Canterbury, it is difficult not to see deliberate contrasts set. Maybe my mind is running ahead of the facts, but as the challenge to the Archbishop of Canterbury shapes around his views of human sexuality, then he must be an ‘inauthentic’ Anglican. He is in question, as is his role through Lambeth. So, if a stand is to be taken, should it perhaps be here? Before we have a bible text debate, maybe we should try to establish what it actually means to be Anglican. Is there something distinctive about this Church?

The answer has more than a little to do with the experience of ‘grace’. I seem to recall that this was the burden of the early English Protestant Reformers. They argued for continuity with the primitive and mediaeval church where that theme was believed, and took their succession from the exponents of ‘grace’. To use a term sometimes applied to modern sects and denominations, Anglican reformers were not ‘restorationists’ – that is to say, they did not try to recapture some artificial past in faith or order, but as modern people they grasped an idea, a transforming theme. Grace continues to be the virtue that companies justice. To reach others with the liberating words of Christ, to see them empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to realise that their life, even in its darkest places, can be awakened. And this Church through its social services and chaplaincies, and the every-day affairs of parishes, engages the life needs of the world around it. The kingdom of God is revealed in a little child, in the beauty of discovery, in the longing that touches every human being.

What makes me anxious about the Diocese just now is the spirit of ‘restorationism’ that tries to lock us into a moment of Reformation history, or a piece of Evangelical rhetoric. Then, in every way, the Bible is bent to re-shape that event. But quite the contrary should be true for us. We are in a new place with other religions and



increasingly since the 1960s in a new place with sexuality. Now is the time to explore ways in which gay and lesbian people can find their true God-given destiny among us. Now is the time to allow their sexuality to be honoured not defamed; it is time to explore the manifold sense of God about us, and to find its affirmation in the profound mystery of Incarnation. This is a time for careful and mature reflection, and for a re-discovery of a theology of justice.

Even in a fractured communion, we will probably continue living with each other.

The pity is that some of us will have to live with the label 'inauthentic'. Maybe now is the moment to learn the biblical injunction of loving more intensely – and forgiving each other from the heart. Then, in the heat of whatever dispute ensues over doctrine and practice, we won't be beguiled into seeing the person beside us as 'the other' or 'the opponent'. Change is inevitable -- painful, testing, but unavoidable. Maybe two denominations in a loose confederation will come into being. The Christian world is fractured anyway over theologies of the Holy Spirit's working, over ecclesiology and over Christology. You and I will bring transformation to these debates as we are committed to the centrality of justice.

I turned over the page of my *Witness* magazine to read Ray Gaston's article 'Time to Resist'. Yes, this is our time to resist, to turn the other cheek, to practice non-violence, to be peace activists. It sounds trite to use these powerful descriptors of the limited, passing pieces of ecclesiastical propaganda that trouble us, but I will let Gaston have the penultimate word. He wrote, 'Wouldn't it be a refreshing change if the *Church Times* were filled, not with letters debating the 'orthodoxy' of our new Archbishop [of Canterbury] over homosexuality, but with debates on tactics for anti-war activity?

This then would be a church really exploring living the Kingdom in the present world crisis, a church being "foolish" for Christ's sake.' Yes, how about these as issues for authentic Anglicans and how about less talk of ecclesiastical power and more commitment to peace and a more compassionate understanding of God's other children who also yearn to be loved.

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