

‘Declare His Glory’ by ‘Shining like Stars’

The Moderator’s Address delivered by
the Rt Rev Robert Benn
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“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.”

1977 AND THE BEGINNING OF OUR WALK

1977 marked a significant turning-point in my life. Our family had just arrived back in Queensland after a decade of missionary service in Indonesia.

As we began the process of re-entry into Australian life, one of the most pleasing things that I discovered was that the Presbyterian Church of Australia was a church in search of its roots.

15 years earlier, I had refused to attend a Presbyterian Theological College in Australia. Most of the colleges were in the grip of liberal theology. Now I detected the winds of change.

Ken Gardner was Moderator General, and was gratified by the warm response that he received as he called the national church back to its confessional position.

Leaders of the denomination were once again willing to affirm and defend the Westminster Confession of Faith. Throughout the sixties confessionalism was in such decline that trying to find a WCF was not unlike searching for the needle in the haystack!

It was around this time that a group of leaders amongst Presbyterians who had voted to 'continue' called a meeting at the Ann Street Church, Brisbane. They met to consider the many challenges that our 'remnant' church was likely to face. My impression of that meeting made these words ring in my ears, "The zeal of the Lord has consumed them!" I was elated by what was happening.

It wasn't long before Prof Stanford Reid of Canada received a call from the Convener of the Christian Ed Committee. He was asked to come to Australia to help us to think through the implications of looking to the past – the New Testament church, the reformation, the progress of revival of religion in Scotland and Wales; then looking to the struggles of the present; with a view to becoming a renewed and spiritually invigorated church as we stepped into an unknown future, with a church only about 40% the size of what it had been just a year or two before.

I remember Prof Reid reminding us of the haunting words of Isaiah the prophet to the remnant church in his own day, "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father . . . for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed

him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion . . . joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of joy." (Isaiah 51)

And so Presbyterians regrouped. For the first time in many years we genuinely celebrated our reformation heritage . . . drawing attention to the principles of sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide.

The early days were difficult ones. Battles were fought and won.

We owe a debt to the theologians who held unswervingly to the historic Christian faith and taught the rising generation of ministers – Robert Swanton, Allan Harman, Robert Miller, Douglas Milne, John Davies, Jonathan Boyall, Bruce Christian, Harold Whitney, Graeme Goldsworthy and Norman Barker. Others like Guido Kettmiss saw the strategic nature of a ministry in Christian literature and kept a flow of \$1.00 WCFs circulating around the church. Committees were re-established. Ministries were restored.

A smaller but humbled church was declared "to be in good heart."

MOVING THROUGH THE YEARS

Since those days we have passed through the age of the Baby Boomers, the Busters, Cold War and Detente.

We have watched a seemingly invincible kingdom collapse in the dust and debris of the Berlin wall. We have lived through a cultural revolution in which we learned through bitter experience that “Greed was not good” and that the cost of sexual liberty is moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

We have lived through Generation X and Y. We have heard them say, “We are institutional relativists”.

Now we are living through a cyber and communications revolution which has its own unique dangers. Now all of the world is interconnected. Globalisation is the new reality with all its attendant risks. As John Piper says, “Globalism and the postmodern worldview come in the same package . . . we can’t have one without the other.”

So where are we at this moment in history? We are told that we are a post-Christian, post-feminine, post-modern, and post-marriage society . . . in need of a new ethic for personal and sexual relationships.

But we are also a church on a mission to be a “Light to the Gentiles”, commissioned to “Declare His Glory”.

THE ‘RELIGIOUS’ SOCIETY IN WHICH WE EXIST

So what are the analysts saying about Australian spirituality, and what the church should be in this context?

Gary Bouma wrote in Australian Soul following the 2006 census: “I detect amongst Australians that God is essentially benevolent, but a long way away, quite possible to hide from, safely in a preamble of the Constitution, just to be sure, able to be got around and while useful for desperate last-minute appeals, not quite relevant to daily life.”

It doesn’t surprise us therefore when he informs us that amongst so-called Christians there is, “A low level of commitment and consistency between belief and practice.” Well, we ask, why would there be?

Presbyterians, on the other hand, are committed to the authority of the Scriptures and the uniqueness of Christ as an atoning sacrifice. We stand quite unashamedly for absolute truth. Truth for all, and truth for all times.

But Gary Bouma tells us that that kind of God is “not the God in demand today.” Further, he is dismissive of the notion of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and says, “it does not feel right to see God as having to punish His Son instead of us.”

He continues, “In post-modernity we can expect what has been called bricolage . . . the piecing together of cultural elements drawn from a variety of sources. So we have Christian meditation, Christian yoga . . . theologies must be emotionally satisfying.”

Again he writes, “Purists, (referring of course to people like Presbyterians) decry the blending. Those who complain

about such sharing seem to argue that there is or was a pure religion. This is an untenable position”, he says.

Nevertheless, the Scriptures tell us that we can lay claim to a pure form of religion, centred and focussed on Christ. Schaeffer contended that all other religions are simply a bad memory of this pure religion!

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

So what are we to be? Richard Dawkins and Pure Secularists say we are deluded. Theologically liberal church folk call us evangelical fundamentalists. Those committed to creating another world religion that will encompass all, who speak of interfaith dialogue as the top item on the agenda see us as pathetically intolerant, and the sooner we are out of the way, the better.

A letter from Nerida Bell, a Presbyterian missionary in Japan tells us, “To be a Christian here is difficult, for the nail that sticks up gets hammered down!”

Never would we have expected in Australia that Bible-believing Christians would be the nail that protrudes, that needs to be hammered down. But it has happened, and it is happening.

As a denomination we are out of step with our society. To a certain extent we have lost our nerve. Historian Manning Clark calls the church’s witness “a shy whisper”!

So disillusioned with Christianity are some members of our society, that when other religions seek a voice, they are often given the media’s prime time. But we are caricatured as being the out-of-touch, rather odd eccentric group.

When Brisbane announces that they will celebrate Buddha’s birthday, 200,000 people turn up, many being descendants of WASPs.

When the spiritual leader of Tibet comes to Canberra, politicians fall over each other to have the opportunity of meeting with him.

And the City of Darebin in Victoria (2005) “takes on board the task of promoting, facilitating and nurturing interfaith dialogue, relations and cooperation” (Bouma) . . all funded by the taxpayers’ dollar.

And so it goes on.

TAKING OUR STAND

So now, in the context of Australian life, culture and spirituality, we need to stand with Luther, voicing with confidence that we fix our eyes on Jesus the Author and Finisher of our salvation, declaring, “Here I stand. I can do none else. So help me God.”

But what are we to be? Or as Schaeffer puts it, “How then shall we live?”.

How can we “declare His Glory” with such integrity that, as with Jesus, “People will come from towns and villages to hear”?

GUIDELINES FROM PHILIPPIANS

Philippians chapter 2 states powerfully why our commitment to Jesus as Saviour and Lord is so fixed and profound. Christ is equal with God. He did not grasp at equality, but surrendered that right, in order to become a servant . . . a servant obedient even unto death on the cross. Therefore God gave Him a name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Piper states it quite poignantly. “The centre of our Christianity and the centre of pastoral life is the dishonourable, foolish, gruesome and utterly glorious reality of the tortured God-Man, Jesus Christ. More and more He must become the issue. Not the vague, comfortable, pleasant Jesus.”

That being so, I ask again, How should we live, that we might be channels of God’s good news to Australia? Paul gives us the answer!

“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you

shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.”

One of the first songs we teach little children is, “Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are”. I love to take my grand-children into our back garden, and there gaze up into the heavens through the branches of the massive radiata pines, and talk to them. I love to intensify the measure to which they are mystified, transfixed, and wondering about the beauty of the heavens . . . twinkling with glories of the creator’s energies.

It’s what the world should be able to do as it gazes at the church, and sees the church leadership. Absolutely no hint of suspicion that they can’t be trusted with their children! There’s wonder at the evidence of purpose, commitment, and integrity. There’s Someone worth dying for, because He first died for them!

The world should be able to look at us, and see something radically purposeful and profoundly attractive. A church that is “shining like stars in a crooked and depraved generation”.

So that as they gaze they will see that . . .

In our personal lives, while others are zealous for sport and entertainment, we will be zealous for God. And while others are dabbling in all things which border on the immoral, we will be passionate for holiness.

In our families, the open Scriptures rather than television will be the rule and guide for our homes. We will be ever ready to teach Biblical precepts to our children (Deut 9) and take delight in ushering our children and grandchildren into the Kingdom where grace abounds.

In professional/work-a-day life, we will be radically different. The word “integrity” will be heard to describe us.

In respect to the use of time, while others are scurrying around accumulating goods, we will be available to build relationships with a view to introducing our friends to Jesus.

In our community life, while others are consumed with selfishness and greed, we will be committed to generosity for the dispossessed, caring for the lonely.

As we meet, we will not be focussing on a God who exists to meet our needs and satisfy our desires, but One who is all glorious . . . a consuming fire, gracious, merciful, and compassionate. Then we will be confident that if an unbeliever comes in, “he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is here . . . God is really among you.’” (1 Corinthians 14:24,25)

In short, we will be a community which is counter-cultural. We will acknowledge no other lords – neither the lords of mind and imagination who direct the television networks, nor the lords of entertainment and sport. Instead we will confess only one Lord – Jesus.

Then in a world . . .

- where Cardinal Pell is in trouble, because “the church has no right to dabble in politics”
- where Douglas Coupland is writing “Life after God”
- where Secularists are baying about “the Church babbling on with its irrelevant superstitions”
- where Richard Dawkins talks about “The delusion of God”, with plenty of media space to promote his wares
- where Dan Brown is selling an alternative Jesus
- where the drama with the two Dannies demonstrates the evidence of political correctness gone crazy
- where Jesus Seminar people are using coloured balls to work out a Jesus that suits them
- where Global theologian Lloyd Geering is writing “Christianity without God”
- and where many main-line denominationalists are calling for religious compromise and adjustment to “One size fits all” . . .

What are we to be?

A PASSION FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Recently the Dean of the Australian College of Theology was invited to attend a dinner for company executives. Recognising that many companies were not strongly in favour with the Australian public, there were robust comments made about Company Reputation. One speaker made this statement, “If you lose dollars for our firm by bad decisions, I

will be understanding. If you lose reputation for our firm, I will be ruthless.”

Fellow leaders. In our Australian Society and our Australian Church, the reputation of our God is at stake. There is a very real sense in which we need to be ruthless, ruthless in being counter-cultural for the reputation of our God.

The Apostle Paul yearns for an uncomplaining, non-arguing community, becoming blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which we shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life!

John Piper longs for, “radically Bible-saturated, God-centred, Christ-exalting, self-sacrificing, mission-mobilised, soul-saving, culture-confronting ministers. Let the chips fall where they will: palm branches one day, persecution the next.”

Isaiah, overwhelmed by the depravity all around him cries, “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent. For Jerusalem’s sake, I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness shines out like the dawn”. (Isaiah 62)

Dear friends, that’s what I would love to be among you for the next three years. A leader who reflects those graces and those passions.

And I invite you to walk with me.

Robert Benn
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