

Cherish What We Have Received

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, on Sunday 17 October 2010, by David Gill. The readings were Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; St Luke 18:1-8.

Some years ago, while working with the National Council of Churches in Australia, I found myself ensconced in the chair of my favourite dentist. The man in white had finished his investigation and was looking at me accusingly. "David," he said sadly, "you've been grinding your teeth again".

I said something to the effect that if he were responsible for fourteen member churches he'd be grinding his too. "Yes, things must be tough in your line of business right now," he sympathized. "Maybe what the Church needs is a new product".

That really did start my teeth grinding. But of course it is the way the commercial world thinks. Alas, it's the way churches sometimes think too.

A couple of years ago, for example, a Uniting Church congregation in the centre of Melbourne announced that it was proclaiming "A New Faith for the 21st Century". There were radio ads, banners went up on city streets and billboards appeared on expressways asserting, among other things, that Abraham was an invention, Moses a mass murderer, the Ten Commandments the most negative document ever written, and Jesus a Jewish peasant but certainly not the Son of God. Predictably, the media had fun with it. The switchboard of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania lit up like Times Square. Other churches were incensed, and even Muslims and Jews bought in to what started to look like an instant interfaith consensus. Soon the advertisements stopped, the billboards came down and the minister at the centre of the ruckus was invited to have some deep and meaningful conversations with the Synod's leaders.

"A New Faith for the 21st Century"? Full marks for wanting to reach out to people who have given up on orthodox Christianity and for trying to reconnect with the searching of our compatriots. Not so full marks, however, for seeming ready to surrender the essence of the Christian faith in the process.

The issue, of course, is not peculiar to this denomination, this country or this point in history. We find it already in the Christian scriptures. It was there, simmering away in the background, in the second reading we heard this morning.

The second letter of Timothy may have been written by Paul, as it claims. Or the author may have been someone else, early in the 2nd century of the Christian era. Who wrote it doesn't matter much -- either way, it was recognized as authoritative when the Church was putting together its sacred texts. Clearly it originated with a church leader who was concerned about the dark clouds of false teaching that were threatening congregations in Asia Minor.

What these heresies were is not spelt out. Beyond dispute, however, is the high anxiety the writer has about them. “The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears,” – a wonderful image! – “they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

It was a time of danger. So make sure your foundations are secure, he told them. Be confident that your anchor will hold. How? By cherishing the faith you have received from the Church and through the sacred writings. By the latter he doesn’t mean the Bible, for the Bible as we know it didn’t exist. He was referring to a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

Well, that was all long ago. But the same danger lurks for the Church in every age, our own included. In the 21st century, like the 2nd, we have the problem of “itchy ears”, people hankering for something new, poised ready to run after whatever takes their fancy, tempted to trim the message to fit whatever the market might buy.

Don’t misunderstand me. This is not a dig at so-called “progressives,” or at “evangelicals”. The same temptation exists right along the theological spectrum, although more acutely perhaps at both ends.

So, how are we to guard against the danger? What is to be done about those “itching ears” of our churches today? Let me offer you two quotes from wise theologians of recent years, which taken together may suggest a way forward.

First, Karl Barth, who produced a whole bookshelf of weighty works and must rank as the most influential Protestant theologian of the 20th century. Asked by a journalist for a summary of the central conviction underlying all his work, Barth stunned his questioner with a one-sentence reply: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”. That is, the message of divine grace, received through the witness of scripture, is the heart of everything.

Second, Davis McCaughey, whose fingerprints are all over our Basis of Union and who was the first president of the Uniting Church in Australia. Addressing a conference of the Australian Student Christian Movement, he told his audience “Your Christian vocation as students is to think till it hurts, then think some more”. Good advice, and not just for students. God did not give us brains so we could switch them off in matters of faith.

Cherishing what we have received, and not being afraid to think until it hurts: Christians are called to do both, to find the right combination, to ensure that each is tested and enriched by the other, and to live out the resulting tension as part of our discipleship.

That tension is well captured in the title of a book of essays published some years ago by the then Archbishop of York, John Hapgood. He called the book “Confessions of a Conservative Liberal”, and he explained the key terms this way.

Liberalism "... represents an openness in the search for truth which ... is profoundly necessary for the health of religion. We grow in knowledge only insofar as we are prepared to criticize what we think we know already. True knowledge is tested knowledge, just as true faith has to be sifted by doubt."

Conservatism "... is to treasure what is given by tradition, what is best from the past, and what has proved itself by its durability. It is to display a certain humility towards the things we have received and may not fully understand, and so to conserve them as potentially fruitful for the future. It is to respect continuity".

A conservative liberal – if you're looking for a label for yourself, I commend that one!

And here at St Stephen's?

Forgive me if this sounds patronizing, but I think the instincts of this congregation are pretty sound. Here we are not just cherishing a spiritual heritage that deserves gratitude and respect. We're trying to enter more deeply into that heritage, to explore its depths. Here we are not just ready to test that inheritance and to think new thoughts, we're prepared to do so even when such thinking hurts.

So next time my dentist proposes that the Church switch to selling a new product, I might just suggest that he drop in at St Stephen's some time. He might discover here something that many, many others have discovered before him -- that the Church remains the improbable trustee of a wonderful treasure beyond the world's imagining.

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