

**An address by Bishop Brian Farran at the graduation of students with the Diploma of Theology
from the Perth College of Divinity at Wollaston College, Sunday February 20th 2005**

Those social commentators who diagnose our culture are adept at succinct labels that identify trends and new arrivals in culture. The commentators have announced that a new form of economy has established itself. This new form is known as the experience economy.

I think this simply means that entrepreneurs have seen a market for particular experiences. Once we paid just for commodities. Now people pay for experiences. For instance, some travel companies now offer dare-devil experiences such as extreme bungy-jumping.

However, the experience economy is taking off, changing commodities into experiences. Marketing has honed in on the experience economy, and the most basic arenas of life are being touted in terms of experience. For instance, David Jones department store in central Sydney refurbished in late 2004 its cosmetics section at a cost of \$5million to create sophisticated, luxurious experience whilst essentially purchasing cosmetics. Now, however, it is not a transaction, it is an experience.

Even those voyeuristic reality television programmes are indicators of fascination with experience, vicarious experience, other people's experience. So we are moving according to the social analysts into an experience economy. We should expect more experience marketing, more concentration upon experience, more ordinary commodities being redressed as experiences. The supermarkets will have a field-day as we buy experiences of dental floss and not just the package!

Of course, taking experience seriously is not new to the Church. Indeed, experience always comes first in religious awareness. The digestion of experience, doctrine, is a second-order phenomenon. However, I guess for some time it has appeared as if consumption of doctrine was the only means of Christian formation.

The popular image of the Church is that it is a dogmatic institution, a hierarchy that tells people what to believe, that dispenses neatly tied up formularies. The knowledge that the Church might wish to explore human experience would be real news to most in our community. Somehow or other in the popular mind concerning the church, there seems to be a fissure between experience and doctrine.

This fissure is apparent in the extremes within the very wide ambit of churches that make up Christianity. I was appalled to read recently that there were thousands of denominations within the Christian Church. The disunity of the church becomes a major horrific scandal when such an inordinate number of denominations surface.

Many of these denominations (perhaps just single, stand-alone churches) would major on experience - radical disjunctive experience that highlights some spiritual ecstasy. They trumpet this as an assurance of being a genuine Christian. These denominations develop and trade with their own distinctive tag-lines to reinforce the original spiritual experience so as to glue firmly any new adherent into their folds.

Such denominations trumpet experience and proceed to standardise the experience and then to corset the experience into a tightly woven, yet simple, string of non-negotiable dogmatic propositions. The result is an unbreakable intertwining of a personal, profound experience that gives identity and purpose with a simple, repeatable belief system that serves to celebrate (maybe even romance) the original experience.

The religious supermarket that is so stridently competitive and in which we are placed on an obscure shelf simply offers this kind of experience-package in an increasing experience economy. It is therefore not surprising that the 'market-share' (if I can be so crude amongst Anglicans) lies with the kind of denominations I have described, whilst we in the style of Radio National insist that we are the

thinking person's church. We actually rate in Perth at about the same level of attraction as does Radio National!

It seems to me that what is developing amongst such churches is a recognition of the experience economy that packages religious experiences in a very tight wrapper of dogma that may itself have no real connection with experience.

Now this practice seems to me to be unhelpful and perhaps pastorally disastrous in the longer term. For a reading of the texts of the New Testament might suggest that reflection upon a surprising experience led to the texts themselves and later still to the development of doctrine, as the original and similar continuing experiences were digested.

I imagine that we are familiar with the notion that we can be too close to an experience to make immediate sense of it. Falling in love is such an experience that requires some degree of 'cooling off' in order to gain perspective and not to be overwhelmed by the experience. There are intense human experiences that require some distance in order to be comprehended and thereby become useful.

I am saying all of the above to lead to the major point that each Christian community needs resident theological reflectors in its midst so that its understanding of the Tradition does not become ossified and so that any experience can be evaluated in terms of the dynamic Christian Tradition (as understood by Anglicans). I am still surprised and saddened at how little of any parish's time (especially management time as in Parish Council meetings) is given over to theological reflection on the parish's state of being, or its experiences.

Most parish councils seem to do everything other than reflect theologically, operating as any board might, indistinguishable from any other secular board. Yet some of these secular boards could teach us to suck eggs, for they regularly within their meetings appeal to their core values and their strategic plans. These organisations reflect on their experience (practice) in terms of their tradition (core values).

Parish Councils might be very much helped by the person who poses the theological question to their planning to see whether or not the planning proposed has anything to do with the emerging Kingdom of God which is the Church's primary business.

I understand the task of leaders within our church to be thinking theologically about our mission, our context, our issues, our possibilities and using these insights and correlations as our primary planning data. I think that this method resonates with what gave rise to the gospels in the first instance - Christian communities seeking to understand their identity, their perplexity, their mission in reference to Jesus Christ and to the disclosure of God through Jesus.

The paucity and blandness of our theological thought and reflection means that we appear more like theological museums than churches. Churches are intended to be places wherein human life is understood through contemporary awareness of the activity of the Holy Spirit, prodding the world towards the Kingdom of God, here and now.

I consider that anyone who has begun to think theologically is an asset to the church, and a resource that should be used in determining the direction of the mission of the church. So, I want to offer my congratulations to you. You have begun a journey of thinking that will grab hold of your imaginations and that will be endless, for all the stuff of human experience is the grist for the mill of theological reflection.

We would be a less foolish, less clumsy church if we reflected theologically more often. We need

contemporary 'scribes' (Matthew the gospel writer's term) to bring out of the treasures of the Tradition and Experience, things old and new. Without such 'scribes' we will be unreflective blotters, simply absorbing experience unreflectively, and unable to discriminate as to whether the experience is of God or not.

Saint Paul, who was no mean theological reflector (theologian), at the end of an intricate moral exposition indicated that he, in addressing himself as he had to the Corinthian Church, thought that he 'had the mind of Christ'.¹

More than ever, we need reflective theologically formed persons who can search locally for the mind of Christ and help to keep the local church focussed on being a sign and sample of God's future, here and now.

? Check out Kenneth Leech for a suitable quote.

¹ See 1 Corinthians 7:40.