

**Sermon for the Keble Mass celebration of the Australian Church Union
preached at All Saints, East St Kilda, Melbourne,
Monday, July 14, 1997 at 8pm
in the 150th anniversary year of the Diocese of Melbourne
by the Rt Revd Paul Richardson, Bishop of Wangaratta.**

The sermon on National Apostasy preached by John Keble on July 14th, 1833, which we commemorate this evening, was considered by Newman to mark the start of the Oxford Movement. Keble spoke out in protest at plans by the Whig government to suppress 10 bishoprics in Ireland but the roots of the crisis of 1833 go back a little earlier to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828, the passage of Catholic emancipation in 1829, and the Reform Act of 1832. As JCD Clark sums up the situation, these events signalled an end of the “ancient regime” in England. The link between church and nation was loosened; constitutional arrangements that had been in place since 1688 were disturbed; Tories whose rallying call was “Church and King” were left apprehensive about the future. How appropriate that July 14th should also be Bastille Day!

John Keble was not alone in feeling that a major shift was taking place in English society. He saw the solution as lying in a high church re-assertion of the state’s duty to uphold the establishment. As Owen Chadwick comments, his sermon could have been preached in Queen Anne’s day. But, by affirming the apostolic basis of the church, he also made it possible for Anglicans to see that they belonged to a body that had a divine purpose and did not require the prop of state support.

Like John Keble we live in a world that is changing rapidly. Unlike him, I do not think we have really grasped the magnitude of these changes or seen the need for the church to respond to them.

Western society today is post-Christian. An account in *Christianity Today* (June 17th 1997) of a conversation between a German pastor and some young people he met outside his church captures what this means:

What is this place?

It’s a church?

What’s a church?

It’s a place where we meet. Its more than that. Its a group of us who have dedicated ourselves to following Jesus.

Who is Jesus?

He was a person we believe was sent from God — was God Himself
— whom God raised from the dead.

Statistics could easily be quoted to prove what this anecdote suggests: not only are fewer and fewer Australians attending religious services, the vast majority of our contemporaries have only the haziest idea of what the church teaches. People have not made a conscience decision to become atheists: they have not weighed the evidence for God’s existence in the balance and found it wanting; they have simply become atheists in practice, living their lives without reference to God. More and more it is the case that when men and women feel the need for some kind of spirituality they try to concoct their own private creed out of New Age beliefs or elements from many different religions.

In this situation the Church needs to recover confidence in the gospel. Christians must be prepared to enter into dialogue with modern culture and to give account of the hope that is in them. Sadly, there are few signs that this is happening. Lesslie Newbigin has described his experience at the recent WCC Conference on World Evangelism in Brazil. Newbigin was glad that oppressed groups were given the opportunity to speak out but he also saw the danger of allowing such meetings to be overwhelmed by calls for economic and racial justice. “I missed

very much the sense that we do have a gospel, “ he writes. “that we have good news and that it has been entrusted to us as a precious treasure on behalf of the whole world.”

It takes courage to challenge the prevailing secular world-view and real discernment to see when a chance occurs to do so effectively, but windows of opportunity do open for the determined apologist. The recent success of Deep Blue in defeating the world chess champion, for example, focussed attention on how human beings differ from computers. The science correspondent of *The Sunday Age* saw the chess battle as a sign that computers are on the way to shattering the picture of God creating humanity in his own image and with it all forms of religious belief. Wiser commentators drew attention to ways in which human minds surpass computers both in their inventiveness and in their attainment of consciousness. The prediction made in an article *The Bulletin* last week that self-awareness will be kick-started when we can build a computer above a certain level of complexity should be treated with a good deal of scepticism.

Human consciousness is one of the great mysteries of life. Men and women do not just react in response to stimuli; they are aware of what they are doing, able to describe and reflect upon what is happening to them. Evolution does not explain why this should be so since we could certainly survive without consciousness and adapt to our environment without self-awareness. As many philosophers and scientists have been driven to accept, we cannot equate thoughts and emotions with brain states. They are radically different and one cannot be used to explain the other. Also remarkable, and beyond the power of evolution to explain, is the fact that human thinking can actually make sense of the world around us. The odds against cognitive faculties that evolved by blind chance or genetic drift being so reliable are surely very great.

Faith in a God can explain why human beings are capable of making moral decisions, entering into relationships with others and appreciating the world around them. Faith in God can also explain why the course of evolution has produced free human beings with reliable cognitive faculties. Even more than that, it can help us to understand why such a marvellous gift as consciousness can also become a terrible burden unless it finds its proper goal. Human beings are the only creatures who know that they will die. Self-awareness breeds anxiety and fear. It can lead to boredom, frustration and despair. Men and women are made for life in community and for relationship with God. If they do not realise their true end, they seek escape in alcohol, drugs or even suicide.

Work, study, ambition, raising a family, the struggle to survive can give a meaning to life but not the ultimate satisfaction we crave. There is a revealing passage in John Stuart Mill’s autobiography where he describes the crisis he passed through when he realised that even if he obtained all his objectives in life he would still not be happy.

St Augustine got it right: our hearts are made for God and we are restless until we find him. It is a real puzzle that the universe should have been so ordered as to make possible the emergence of conscious human life. Only faith in God can explain why this should be so and only a relationship with God can make this life worthwhile.

The evangelical Anglican theologian from Sri Lanka, Vinoth Ramachandra, has talked of “bandwagon Christians” who allow the church to be hi-jacked by the latest political fashion and then try to marginalise those who do not agree with them. Unless we can abandon this kind of attitude, the part of the church to which we belong will not be around for much longer. The promise to Peter is to the church as a whole, not to one particular part of it. The Diocese of Melbourne has lasted for 150 years; there is no guarantee that it will be here for another 150 years or even for another 50 years. We need to think very carefully about the questions St Paul poses in our epistle reading this evening: “How, then, can they call upon the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10.14, NIV).