

**Commemoration of John Keble (14 July), preached at St Mary's
North Melbourne, 15 July 2011**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

In 1833 John Keble preached a sermon from a very high pulpit to a group of legal and civic luminaries in a university city. Keble's sermon, in its substance and context, holds almost nothing of relevance for the Anglican Church in Melbourne in 2011. It is, like most historical documents, so grounded in its own time and place that its purpose and cares have long been left behind. The notion of the Christian state, let alone the notion of that state becoming apostate in the manner of Saul in 1 Samuel 12, is an irrelevance to us here today. (I could here make a quip about CRI and School chaplaincy, but that is a story for another time.)

Keble's sermon is irrelevant – but not entirely. Two points, I think, bear repeating and revisiting, even in Melbourne in 2011.

The first is Keble's realisation that the church was in danger, and his reference to "The growing indifference, in which men indulge themselves, to other men's religious sentiments." In other words, he identified the great failure of liberalism in the church – that in trying to be inclusive we give full reign to those whose opinions are dangerous and downright wrong.

The second is Keble's call to "the Church and churchmen", as a "first duty", having discerned the possibility of error, to engage in intercession followed by remonstrance. In other words, when we see that which we perceive may be wrong we must pray for guidance and, having received spiritual guidance through prayer, if the wrong is proved, we must speak out against it.

So, after long prayer and discernment, let me now be pompous enough to tell you where I believe there to be error in the Anglican Church of Australia in 2011, and let me end with remonstrance; a call to the Catholic wing of the church to abandon its policy of indifference, and to seize back the initiative from those who are putting the church, and the souls of those within it, in danger.

...

How, then, is the church in danger today? Keble in 1833 identified a threat to the church from without – from the State. Today, however, I believe the church is most in danger from within. For Anglicans in Australia, that danger may be characterized as Jensenism.

Muriel Porter, in 2006, published *The New Puritans*, a thorough-going engagement with the rise of fundamentalism in the diocese of Sydney. Charles Sherlock described his launch speech for that book as “an act of public repentance for not confronting more directly the reality that 'Sydney Anglicanism' is bad for one's spiritual health, making the 'food of the soul', the holy scriptures, indigestible.” Remarkable candour for a self-described “Son of Sydney”. Muriel has now written a follow-up volume, which is to appear under the arresting title *Sydney Anglicans and the threat to World-wide Anglicanism*. Muriel has been generous enough to allow me to preview some chapters of this book. I won't give too much away, other than to say that when it is released in August you should buy it and read it. What Muriel does in this book is to narrate the back-story for why Jensenism is a threat, why the church is in danger, but why it might just possibly be about to go horribly wrong for the Jensenist camp.

When Charles launched Muriel's earlier book he rightly identified the need for orthodox Anglicans to speak out against the errors and dangers of the Sydney experiment. A single sermon is insufficient to detail the problems even with one aspect of Jensenist theology, let alone the whole thing. So you'll have to settle for some dot points – and I would encourage those of you who are theologians to dig deeply into one or more of them, to identify the error, and to outline in print why it is so. Having prayed about these things, I am prepared to say the following: The Jensenist doctrine of God, which is subordinationist, is an error, and is a threat to orthodox Christian faith.

The Jensenist view of Scripture as its own interpreter, which removes the text from its context and disallows the work of the Spirit in the church, is an error, and a threat to orthodox Christian faith.

The Jensenist doctrine of the exclusive church is an error that drives people away from the Gospel of Christ, and is a threat to orthodox Christian faith.

The Jensenist doctrine of a differentiated male and female humanity is an error, is repressive of both women and men, and is a threat to orthodox Christian faith.

The Jensenist doctrine of human sexuality, which is obsessive about genital acts and labels love as sinful is an error, and is a threat to orthodox Christian faith.

I could go on, but that will do for now.

To describe something as an error is important language here – because that is a word the Jensenists apply when talking about any view that fails to be in complete agreement with theirs. Historically, though, the church has another word for theological error – that word is heresy.

...

The missionary success of Jensenism is one of the things about it that I find the most intriguing. I find the fundamentalist message so personally distasteful, that I find it difficult to understand how anyone, must less, for example, an intelligent young woman, might want to become involved in a form of religion that treats them as less than equal, and that seems to preach that God is to be feared more than he is to be loved. I had little understanding, that is, until I spent three years dealing with Oxford students, some of whom had been through the English equivalent of the Jensenist model.

What I learned from a number of undergraduates and postgraduates who had experienced the Jensenist-style Anglicanism that has infiltrated several Oxford parishes, was that bullying and spiritual coercion are at the heart of the Jensenist model of ministry, and a direct outcome of the false doctrine of headship. What is happening in many of the parishes where Jensenist clergy hold sway is – I am not afraid to name it – spiritual abuse. For me the issue came into clear focus when a student member of one of these churches began attending St Mary the Virgin, and was subjected to a barrage of emails, phone calls, even knocks on the door for impromptu chats, from fellow Jensenists warning him that to leave “the group” would mean damnation and, indeed, that going to a church like liberal St Mary’s would be worse than going no-where at all. When it became clear that he was indeed “lost” his entire peer-group for the past six years of his life cut him off as though dead.

This is spiritual abuse, pure and simple, and the example is not isolated. I dealt with this issue several times in England. And in Australia, in every parish I have ever worked, the back pew has been populated from time to time by people scared and scarred by their experience of church, almost inevitably of the Jensenist sort, often through youth ministry, who are, often years later, trying again in a place that they hope (but do not trust) might be more Christ-like than that which they had left behind.

...

And this brings me to prayer, discernment, remonstrance.

I outlined a short time ago a list of errors in Jensenism. One of the great problems within the more liberal end of Catholic Anglicanism has been our unwillingness, over many decades now, to claim for ourselves the opposite of error – the claim of truth. I would go further than unwillingness – it has been a fear. We have, over many decades, lost our collective nerve. We have, quite rightly, wished to remain open to a range of views, and accommodating of as many forms of understanding of God as might be helpful and demonstrably based on the triple witness of Scripture, tradition and reason. But the tearing apart of the Catholic party over the question of the ordination of women scared us. We became collectively unable to speak for fear of schism or even simply of misunderstanding. In the midst of it all, however, we still did what we do best – we prayed. And very many of us prayed very hard. Those decades of timidity, then, have actually been decades of prayerful discernment and, it seems to me now that in the Australian church at least, the Catholic party is close to achieving something close to full acceptance of women in the threefold order. The fight with ourselves is largely over, and those Catholic Anglicans who still oppose women in ministry are a dying rump – I’m sorry if that offends anyone, but it is true. According to their own website there are only three fully signed-up *Forward in Faith* parishes left in the whole of Australia – three. It is time, therefore, for us to gather our wits and regain the initiative. Because, having engaged in the sort of deep, painful self-examination that would scare the pants off the Jensenists, we are now in a position to do something we have not dared to do in years – to proclaim that our version of the church, of the Christian message, of the Gospel of Christ, is not simply one among many, but is one of the best on offer, and one worth sharing, promoting, even celebrating. Unlike the Jensenists, I would never want to claim exclusivity – that we and we alone hold the keys to the kingdom. However I would want to say that it is time for us to let go of the shackles of liberalism that bind us to a wishy-washing “never call heresy, heresy” sort of theology. We get many things wrong but, on the whole, the Catholic interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has more going for it than most, and it is time that we were prepared to stand up and say so, and to stand up for ourselves against the bullying attacks of the Jensenists. It is time to stop rolling over. It is time for us to become the evangelists.

Here is my moment of remonstrance – but it is a positive call. Because, unlike the Jensenists, I believe that the Catholic end of the church has done the hard yards. We have thought through and identified the many weaknesses in our position. We are able to be flexible, to accommodate difference, to make space for people to grow and mature in faith, rather

than simply telling them what to believe. We have proved that, battered and perhaps still a little bewildered, we have been able therefore to do something the Jensenists quite possibly cannot – we have survived a crisis.

And so, rather than simply complaining about the rise of Sydney, it is time for us to do something about it. It is time for theologians to write, for preachers to preach, for those who have been scared and scarred, to tell their stories. It is time for dangers to be identified and opposed. It is time for us to shift our focus of prayer from ourselves to the wider church, and to do what we can to keep Anglicanism Anglican in the face of the heretical threat from within. And it is also time for us to do what those who followed Keble, Newman and the rest also did – it is time for us to be evangelists for our cause.

So let us not be afraid – fear is the opposite of faith. Let us hunger and thirst for righteousness, that the people of God may be filled.

- Craig D'Alton