

## Second Sunday after Epiphany: CCSY 15 January 2012

*1 Sam 3:1-10; Ps 139:1-14; Rev 5:1-10; John 1:43-51*

The Christian Academy: 'Come and see'

One of the dot points on our Parish Vision & Mission Statement, as found on the website, refers to providing Christian education.

We set about meeting this goal in a number of ways:

- in worship, through the orderly reading of Scripture, preaching, and the music and prayers which shape us;
- in the regular fellowship and facilitated inquiry of groups like *Explorations*, *ArtSearch*, and *Education for Ministry*;
- through seasonal study groups, such as in Lent;
- religious education and chapel services provided to the children of our Parish School;
- by preparing adults and children for first communion, baptism, confirmation, and other rites of passage;
- encouraging vocations to lay and ordained ministry;
- through the work of Supervised Theological Field Education, which enables people like Jill and Linda to progress towards ordination;
- by supporting curacies, in which the recently ordained may continue to learn and grow in ministry skills and experience;

We also contribute to Christian – or, more broadly – theological education by supporting lay and ordained members of the Ministry Team who are involved in postgraduate study, ministry formation, teaching, and research.

- Philip, Jenny, Paul, and Marilyn have all undertaken further studies in recent years;
- Paul has taught in Trinity's Ministry Formation program, and Philip has led seminars in the wider church on the ministry of music;
- Jamie assists the Diocesan Director of Theological Education;
- Jill has been accredited as a Spiritual Director;
- Marilyn runs a Clinical Pastoral Education Unit at the Alfred Hospital;
- Dorothy, who has just published another book, is Dean of Theology at the Provincial Theological College;
- even Yours Truly has managed to eke out an article or two in between football seasons;
- and, as you may have read in *The Australian*, Peter Sherlock, currently Dean of the United Faculty of Theology, Australia's oldest ecumenical theological consortium, has just been appointed inaugural Vice-Chancellor of Australia's first University of Specialisation: the 'MCD University of Divinity'.

Now, in case you think I've confused the sermon with the notices, let me say something about the significance of this historic development, as a way of reflecting on that almost throw-away line of Philip in today's gospel reading, when Nathanael asks if anything good can come out of Nazareth: 'Come and see'.

Philip doesn't offer Nathanael an argument, or refute his premise; he doesn't give him a treatise on messianic origins in the Hebrew Bible; instead, he issues an invitation: 'come and see'. This same invitation is at the heart of the ministry of theological education; because it's at the heart of the Gospel.

The Melbourne College of Divinity was established by act of State Parliament in 1910, and is the second oldest degree-awarding body in Victoria. It exists because of a particular understanding of secularism that was applied to education in the new colonies, which meant that Australian universities were not free to teach theology; something of an irony, given that theology – once dubbed 'queen of the sciences' – was a driving force for the establishment of the earliest universities in Europe.

So the very fact that the Melbourne College of Divinity has just become the MCD *University of Divinity*, represents quite a momentous sociological shift. That one of our own is to lead this peak body of the national Christian academy gives our community of faith all the more reason to celebrate.

But, now that we have one; what is the role of a University of Divinity, in the Church and in the world? What, if anything, is particular to the *Christian* academy, as compared with the academy more generally?

I know that Peter himself has been reflecting on these questions, and on the Gospel invitation – or is it an imperative? – to 'come and see', and a recent conversation with him has helped to frame these few thoughts.

First, the Christian academy has a responsibility to ensure that theology is a public and not a private transcript. Religion may be deeply *personal*; but it is never *private*. The study of it therefore needs to take its rightful place alongside the other humanities disciplines, and demonstrate all the rigour demanded in the marketplace of ideas, as did the great figures of the tradition: Augustine, Hildegard, Aquinas.

Following on from that, theology, as – literally – words about God, must have flesh, as Christ, the eternal Word of God, took flesh. Theology needs to be incarnational and contextual; it needs to be in the world God loves, as Christ was in the world.

This means theology is never abstract; theology is in the service of faith that is not based on intellectual assent to a series of disinterested propositions. Theology is in the service of a Gospel which demands something of its hearers: 'Come and see'; come and test, and explore, and investigate – even interrogate: ask hard questions – bring all of your critical faculties, but *come*. The study of theology is a profoundly existential exercise; it will change you.

A few months ago Jill shared with us the conversion narrative of Sarah Miles:

One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, [she writes] I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine . . . This was my first communion. It changed everything. [It] led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. . . . What I found wasn't about [ ] going to church or trying to be 'good' . . . It wasn't about arguing a doctrine – the Virgin birth, predestination . . . I was, as the prophet said, hungry and

thirsting for righteousness. I found it [writes Miles] at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honoured . . . Faith, for me, [she concludes] isn't an argument, a catechism, a philosophical 'proof'. It is instead a lens, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act. As the Bible says: 'Taste and see'. (*Take this Bread*, xi, xii-xiii, xvi)

Or, we might add today: 'come, taste, and see.'

Theology must be a conversation that takes place at such a hunger-sating, thirst-quenching, and inclusive table; which is why – please, God – theology must not be yet another discourse dominated by westerners, and men. And here is a challenge for the Christian academy; for Peter, and for all of us: how can we ensure that all voices are heard, *and* that our very public conversation remains coherent? There's a difference between conversation and cacophony.

Part of an answer may have to do with the material core of our faith to which Miles refers, and Christian theology's consequent empiricism: that is, with the conviction that wisdom is known by her children, that it goes to character, and to action.

One of my own theological influences, Stanley Hauerwas, puts it this way: "Contrary to much of the reigning thought about universities, truth is not something we learn simply by perceiving or analyzing further . . . To know the truth [he says] requires *correspondence* to the truth" – an openness to being changed by it, changed *to* it. (*Christian Existence Today*, 230)

The Church, Hauerwas argues, has a stake in the university – Christian or otherwise – because we exist as a people formed by a Gospel that assures us we have no fear of the truth; indeed, that the truth shall set us free (see *CET*, 234). As a local manifestation of the Church catholic, or universal, we share in that stake; we do so especially in a tradition which prizes reason, and in a parish that is committed to the mission of theological education, one in which the Vice-Chancellor of Australia's 40<sup>th</sup> university – a university of divinity, no less – happens to sing bass in the choir!

In this new year, how will you respond to the invitation to 'come and see'? How might the Parish's educational programs and resources inspire and encourage you to look and listen for God's call on your life? And how can we, as a household, best support and grow this ministry in which we all have a stake?

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