

**LEA 2015 National School Pastors and Chaplains Conference**  
**Address by Bishop Greg Pietsch at closing service at Mooroolbark, 28/8/2015**

**Reading: Luke 19:1-10**

Well, it's been a great conference! Thank you to LEA and to Neville Grieger and to all who served us these days. It's been stimulating, enlightening and challenging.

I prepared this closing word earlier in the week, and am in the unusual position of finding that nearly all my thunder's been stolen by previous speakers – even down to one of the Leunig cartoons I selected for illustration! Perhaps the Lord is telling us that our minds as Lutherans – our theology even – might *not be so far off the mark for our times* and may even *be put to very good service for them*. I'm not saying that we are very strong in the in-breathing contemplative arts, but you don't have to look far in Luther's spirituality to find *experience* serving the formation of *identity*, albeit in very biblically grounded directions. What else does Luther do in his letter to his barber, Peter, on *A simple way to pray*?

So *what have we learnt and how do we leave here?*

Well we've been strongly reminded of the *changing Australia in which we live and serve* – and the need, indeed the *call of God even, to recognise this and face it honestly*.

We've been given some statistics – and here are some more... In the first census ever taken in Australia, in the Colony of New South Wales in 1828, not one of the 36,598 population identified themselves as atheist. In 1901, at Federation, 96% identified themselves as Christian. At the 2011 census this was down to 61%, but even more significant was that 22% put 'No religion' under this question and another 8% didn't answer it at all. More recent surveys suggest that only about 8% of Australians regularly attend worship (all from Roy William's 2015 book *Post God Nation?* p 9).

That's not to say people, and especially young people, aren't *searching for identity* and even a '*ground of being*', to use Paul Tillich's term – but we *do need to recognise the pervasive impact of the cultural revolution of the 1960s*, bringing to popular culture and everyday experience the results of the Enlightenment and Empiricism as it worked its way through the Academy, into the practical sciences, then into the Arts, and finally into entertainment, politics, commerce and the souls of everyday people. PJ O'Rourke, the American humorist and social commentator, eloquently expresses this radical change in the introduction to his book on the Baby Boom:

*We are the generation that changed everything. Of all the eras and epochs of Americans (and we can add Australians), ours is the one that made the biggest impression – on ourselves. But that's an important accomplishment because we're the generation that created the self, made the firmament of the self, divided the light of the self from the darkness of the self, and said let there be self. If you were born between 1946 and 1964, you may have noticed this yourself.* (Baby Boom, xvii)

But we now are educating Baby Boomer *kids and Baby Boomer grandkids* who don't have the luxury of the Christian roots and social mores – those identity foundations Rowan Lewis spoke about – which Baby Boomers had but rejected. We are giving our lives to young people who have been brought up with the *self-focused chaos and personal confusion* Baby Boomers created, and the consequent identity and spiritual vacuum we've heard about. Most of these kids wouldn't even get the biblical allusions O'Rourke uses.

Of course individuals have always *dethroned God and put themselves in God's place*, but we're in a time when Western society has done this *as a whole, as its core belief system and central organizing principle* – specializing in *distraction* when it fails – an experiment the results of which are still unfolding and in very unhappy ways.

Well, that's our context and we need to go from here *fully aware* of it and its consequences on young people. Here are some Leunig cartoons which paint the picture pretty bluntly...

[display Broken hearts, Isolation, Facing the future with a child on a stick, other cartoons...]

But above all we should go away from here *confident in the God who loves every single person in this self-focused society, and who passionately wants them to be freed from the prison it imposes, to be found as we wander lost in the isolation of our times*.

We've heard how these times bring a real *spiritual hunger* when people feel the emptiness of the *God-sized hole in the centre of our being*. As St Augustine so famously wrote at the beginning of his *Confessions*: *You, O Lord, have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

And *we know that* that God-sized hole has a *precise external referent* in our Lord Jesus Christ, the *Man for Others* – the one who bears the Image of God without flaw. Using theological language very much from Luther: *All sin is first of all sin against the first commandment* – putting something *else* in the place of God – fearing, loving or trusting something or someone other than the God who made us for his glory and our joy.

So your ministry is to *weave the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ* into the complexity of student lives and experiences – in ways that they can receive, even if this involves the *subversive arts* so well practiced by Leunig in his cartoons, and people like Tolkien in his epic myths. It means practicing that fine art of *properly distinguishing law and gospel* and *applying it appropriately* to the young entrusted to us, *weaving Jesus himself into the mix* – into the *character and culture of our schools* so that wherever staff, students and parents turn they hear and experience *another foundation* for life, one which is full of light, and truth, and goodness – and above all *sheer grace*.

In many ways what I heard in this conference is that God is *breaking people's spirits* by the interior poverty of the West – the hammer of the Law that we don't have to strike any harder. Instead it's time for the *gospel* – that wonderful promise of the Lord that, *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.* (Isaiah 42:3) Most of those students who went to David Tacey's course on spirituality – before the vice-chancellor snuffed *it* out – were indeed bruised and smoldering as he found out – suffering one kind of trauma or another – and consequently searching for a *'comprehensive, durative and stable sense of self'* (in Rowan Lewis's words).

Your ministry is to *receive and pass on in whatever way you can the identity we've all been made for* – and that means passing on *our Lord Jesus Christ himself*. *Only he has his identity in tact* as it's meant to be. *Only he is fully human* as God intends – in Paul's language, *the New Adam*; in John's, *the Alpha and Omega*; in his own language, *the complete I AM*. *What other twelve year old*, who without telling his parents spent three days in the Temple while they frantically searched for their so-called lost son, can chide his mother like this, *Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?* (Luke 2:49). *What other person resists Satan's attack on their identity as Jesus did* for 40 days after his baptism when Satan constantly tempted him, *If you are the Son of God...? What other brother* can so identify with us that he takes all our lostness *completely into himself, becoming sin itself for us*, St Paul says, so that we can have *his identity* with all its magnificence forever? – such even that Paul can say, *For me to live is Christ!*

Thank God our schools are such places of the church that you still have *full permission* and are *deliberately called to match up our Lord with the young people who attend*. And thank you for doing this.

So how do you go back to home and school and church? How do I go back to my first-year-uni daughter? *Only in Christ* and *only with Christ* whose love *never fails* and who alone *completes all being* as hearts begin to rest in him.

Leunig knows this and draws about this too, especially using Duck and Mr Curley... [show cartoons ending with flowers leaning towards the light]

Let me give thanks for you and pray for you in the words of Ephesians 3:14-21. [read...]