



Inaugural Address

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Address presented at the National Launch of the Centre for an Ethical Society,
Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, 21 November 2006

Today we gather for the launch a new venture – the Centre for an Ethical Society, a group of Australians inspired by the Christian message. This is a public gathering and a public venture, but it is not a political gathering, nor is the Centre affiliated in any way with any political party. The purpose of the Centre is to offer some views and some values that are fundamental to our national welfare.

Why bother, you may ask. Recently, both Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd have been speaking about the importance of Christian values. Isn't it sufficient that such influential members of the main political parties are alive to the importance of Christianity and are themselves believers? The answer lies in the nature and purpose of the Christian message.

Christianity is not primarily concerned with politics. It is concerned with the hearts and minds of men and women. When a lawyer, anxious to get Jesus to define His propositions, asked what was the first and the greatest commandment, he received an unequivocal answer. “[L]ove the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.”(Mt 22:35). To respond to that commandment, however, the spark of faith is needed. Jesus went on to define a second commandment which is like the first: “[L]ove your neighbour as yourself”.

One commandment covers our relationship with God; the other covers our human relationships. We are concerned today with the second of those commandments, which is at the heart of the Christian message. We live in a pluralist democracy but we know that the command to love your neighbour as yourself resonates with every man and woman of good will, whether they be Christian or not, religious or not. That commandment has universal appeal, but it is not primarily a political appeal – it is an appeal to the mind and the heart of each of us. It may be suppressed by avarice or self-interest but it lies deep in the mind and heart of every person of good will.

To love your neighbour is a simple admonition. It has both a negative and a positive application. On the one hand, it forbids self-aggrandisement at the expense of others. And, affirmatively, if we must love them as we love ourselves, our concern must be for their welfare equally with our own. That has a profound significance for public policy because, if individuals respond to that appeal, the values of the community change.

Well, that sounds all very well and good. We can accept that, for we live, do we not, in a civilization that is essentially Christian. But do we? If we want to find out what really motivates us Australians, we can look at our media and the advertising they carry. So we see pages of what we “must have”, we are shown delights that we “deserve”, we are advised to take care of “number one”, each of us is asked whether we would like to “create wealth” for ourselves.

Our attention is directed to the world's or the country's wealthiest people, to stars whose extravagant lifestyles are the cynosure of the media's eyes. We have grown so accustomed to this focus on material possessions that we tend to judge people not by what they are but by what they have. We rate our own success not by the humanity we display but by the wealth we possess. We live in our nuclear families, avoiding those who do not belong to our socio-economic group. We know that there are the poor, the marginalised and the disabled but we may not be greatly moved by their plight.

To the extent that that is the public mindset, it will be reflected in our public policy. But it is not the Christian mindset and, for that reason, the Centre for an Ethical Society has been formed with the support of the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches to invite attention to a different set of values. That is why the Centre for an Ethical Society is concerned with the minds and hearts of the Australian people, not directly with the platforms and policies of political parties or the programs of special interest groups. Its purpose is to affect the values that inform our public life.

No human society is value free; each society reveals and gives effect to its prevailing values in its laws and institutions, in its political and economic policies, in its art, literature and architecture and in the manner in which its people relate one to another. In a democracy, government looks to the contemporary values of the community in creating, fostering and organizing the social order and politicians embrace and extol these values in advocating their political goals. In a pluralist, democratic society, the social order is not necessarily shaped in accordance with Christian values but Christians are entitled equally with others to contribute to its shaping. No false modesty, no deference to non-Christian or anti-Christian values should deter the charitable exposition of the Christian message.

Of course, the Christian must accept that others who, in good conscience, hold different views are equally free to advocate those views. But the Gospel calls us to be an example to others in our mutual love and in our lived and professed commitment to the values we find in Christ's life and teaching. So the Centre for an Ethical Society is concerned with a discussion of the values that are inherent in the second great commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Why must we love our neighbour as ourselves? Because we are all members of the human family, each with a dignity to be treasured by the individual and respected by others. The Christian attributes that dignity to the fact that we are all children of God¹ with an eternal destiny to know, love and be with Him. Before God, each individual is equally precious and is equally loved. Each person is entitled to the same respect². Those who do not share the Christian faith may attribute individual dignity simply to our common humanity. But whatever reasoning may underlie the value of human dignity, the implication for public policy is profound. It dictates that we treat all people equally. Race or colour, class or creed, physical or mental perfection or defect afford no warrant for attributing varying degrees of worth and dignity to human kind.

If I have a genuine (and not narcissistic) love of myself as a person, I am a person of human dignity. If I am to love my neighbour as myself, I must want him or her also to be a person of human dignity – to be able to live in dignity, to be free to form respectful relationships with others, to have an opportunity to develop capacities and to contribute usefully to society. Then I must do what I reasonably can to see that my neighbour, in his or her situation, enjoys in like measure to me those social benefits which are essential to personal dignity.

For my neighbours in this country, those benefits include not only monetary and material benefits but equality under the law, freedom of religious belief and practice, freedom from the exercise of arbitrary power, freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex, race or ethnicity, an opportunity to obtain an education and a means of livelihood, an opportunity to found a family and an opportunity to employ gainfully their capacities. If these were the values of our society, social phenomena would change. Public policy would be directed to achieving the common good – a society in which every person would have an opportunity to develop his or her capacities and to live in dignity – freely, peacefully and with the ability to participate in social life.

Of course there are differences in natural endowments and in the environments in which people live. These differences account for or contribute to dissimilarity in the position, especially in the economic position, of individuals within society. But the common good does not demand that policies be

¹ Romans 8:15; Gal 4:6

² Mt 6:29-30; Luke 12:7, 25, 28.

designed to redistribute wealth equally among all. That would be an unrealistic goal; and it would destroy individual initiative which is the wellspring of developments that promote the welfare of humankind. Such a policy would in fact diminish human dignity. The liberty to employ initiative carries the right to garner its fruits. Thus wealth can be accumulated and then the owner is free to apply it in the accumulation of more wealth. That use of property is, in a capitalist society, an essential element in the economic progress of the community. But economic power can be used to oppress others – employees, competitors, creditors – or to operate against the common good, so there must be controls on economic action to achieve the common good.

That is why Church leaders sometimes comment on industrial laws or other matters relating to the conditions of employees. They are concerned, and rightly, to ensure that men and women who do not have the same economic power as their employers are sufficiently secure and enjoy sufficiently adequate conditions to maintain themselves and their dependants in dignity. In contemporary Australia, when the economic power of corporations – including international mega-corporations – is immense, industrial laws are important not only for protection of those with less economic power but for the maintenance of the authority of government itself. If laws simply facilitated the maximizing of corporate profits rather than maintaining the common good, government would be abandoning its authority – an authority which is conferred upon it in order to advance the interests of all Australians. In saying this, I do not venture an opinion on whether the current industrial laws strike the right balance between capital and labour. What I do wish to say is that such laws are of great importance in determining the common good and that it is entirely appropriate for their provisions to be subjected to analysis in the light of Christian values.

Where gainful employment is not available or where age or infirmity prevent the earning of a livelihood, it is the function of government to provide the means by which those who are unable to support themselves can live a life of dignity. Social security is not a mere budgetary item to be adjusted according to political exigencies; it is not reducible merely to secure an economically satisfactory bottom line; it is a mandatory safety net to prevent fellow citizens from suffering a degrading loss of dignity – a loss of dignity that would be a reproach to society and ultimately a threat to its stability. Nor should the services of government be limited to providing money that is merely sufficient to keep body and soul together. In particular, health and educational services are essential not only to assure one generation of adequate opportunities to enjoy the benefits of social life but also to cater for their children who, like all other children, are entitled to an opportunity to develop their physical and intellectual capacities in order to participate as equal members of the community.

We cannot boast that, in this country, we have achieved these aims. I have been told that 20% of all Australian households have an income of less than \$400 per week and more than 600,000 children live in jobless households. And this while we have a very large budgetary surplus. The members of those households and those 600,000 children are our neighbours and our Christian duty is to love them as we love ourselves – to do what we can to secure their dignity. A society is weakened by fractures along lines of wealth or opportunity. But if wealth were prized only insofar as it is needed to sustain a lifestyle of dignity in reasonable comfort and if genuine opportunities existed for the poor, the marginalized, the disabled and the outcast to participate as fully as they can in the benefits of society, we would have a strong, a prosperous and a united nation.

Material poverty can destroy human dignity; so can social poverty, which strikes the marginalized and the outcast. The social isolation of many Aboriginal people, of many refugees, of many who are poorly educated and many who suffer from a mental illness erodes the sense of self-worth and deprives them of hope. Yet, like the Levite passing on the other side of the road, we oftentimes seem to ignore their plight or, worse, regard them as a threat to our own well-being. Our laws and policies do not reflect the Christian value of the good Samaritan. The outcasts are, by definition, denied their dignity. When have we troubled about the pressures on our jails, the standover prisoners who assault young offenders or pressure them into the drug trade or the problems of rehabilitation on release? And see how we have tolerated, for five years now, the barbarous treatment of the Australian David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, still waiting to be charged, it seems, with an offence under a law yet to be

specified and tried by a process which mocks the civilized sense of justice. Do not blame governments alone. This could not have happened if our society were infused with Christian values.

What do Christian values have to say about foreign affairs? Quite a lot. The horrific suffering of war and internal violence is the very antithesis of Christian values. Christianity is a force for peace, for peace is essential to human dignity. The command to love one's neighbour cannot be squared with a policy that sees force as the primary or only answer to national and international problems. If peace were the primary aim of our public policy, we would not now be confronted by the tragedy which is Iraq.

The neighbours to be loved as ourselves are not only those closest to home. They include those in developing countries and in countries destroyed by war and internal conflict. If all have an equal right to live, States and individuals are under the basic duty of doing what they can to ensure the supply of goods and services needed to sustain human life whenever and wherever it is threatened, whether by natural disaster, mismanagement or sheer poverty. The equal right to life of all humankind imposes on us the duty to proffer aid to other countries that cannot themselves sustain the lives of their citizens in dignity. When we are reasonably able to do so, we must seek to give dignity to the people of every nation, not as imperialists imposing our culture and our values but recognizing and respecting the culture and traditions of people in the lands and in the circumstances in which they live. Yet we note that the percentage of GDP devoted to Overseas Development Aid has dropped from 0.48% in 1970 to 0.40% in 1980, to 0.32% in 2000, to 0.26% in 2004-2005. And this while six million children die each year from hunger, thirst and preventable diseases and a billion people live on less than \$1.30 a day.

Today is the first step in a long march. It is a march into the minds and hearts of the Australian people. It is a patriotic march to build a free and confident nation, for it is a march born of a love of Australia, of a belief that we have a destiny that is more noble, more visionary, more satisfying than the hoarding of wealth or the living of luxury. Perhaps none of us has recognized the truth of the statement attributed to St Basil the Great:

The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in the wardrobe is the garment of the one who is naked; the shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.

But if it is possible to bring into the market place of ideas the notion that the true purpose of public life is the achievement of the common good – a common good which creates benefits for the rich and poor, the powerful and the underprivileged, the strong and the disabled; a common good which recognizes the equal dignity of all people and presents every person with the opportunity to live a truly human existence, the Centre will have achieved its purpose. Please God it will.

November 2006