

Feast of Pentecost

Ezekiel 36.22-28
Psalm 103.13-22
1 Cor 12.1-13

This is a rather unusual, if not unique, occasion it being a university graduation taking place in St John's Cathedral. Today is also the Feast of Pentecost, a highpoint in the church's year. These factors coincide to beg a question first asked by Tertullian around the end of the second century 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Academy with the Church?' (Fudge, 2024, 47).

In his recently published monumental account of the conservative evangelical take-over of Armidale Diocese from the 1960s, Professor Thomas Fudge, of the University of New England, traverses responses to this conundrum: the 'relation between religion and the university'; 'Does faith include reason?' (ibid).

In the 4th century St John Chrysostom was in no doubt. 'No!' he said -
'For where there is faith, there is no need for investigation. ... Investigation is the destruction of faith. For he that investigates has not yet found. He who investigates cannot believe. [Chrysostom concludes on the basis of 1 Tim 1.3-4 that] Paul therefore advises us not to engage with investigations, since if we investigate, it is not faith; for faith puts an end to reason.' (ibid).

But in the pastoral epistles Paul actually says more than Chrysostom here gives him credit for. Paul also – enjoins believers to study to show themselves approved (2 Timothy 2:15), to strive to be able to provide reasons for the hope that Christianity offers (1 Peter 3:15), to recognise that God is not the author of fear but instead of sound minds (2 Timothy 1:7), and [in Romans] that existential transformation is linked to the renewal of the mind (Romans 12.2) (ibid).

1000 years after Tertullian first pondered the question, and 600 years after Chrysostom, Anselm of Canterbury insisted that theology was precisely faith seeking understanding. Professor Fudge (2024, 47) agrees that 'faith should be intellectually robust' and requires more than blind assent to unexamined tenets. 'The strongest faith ... [is] the examined faith.' And he approves of Mother Teresa of Avila who taught her nuns that 'No matter how fertile soil may be, if left untilled it will yield thorns, thistles, weeds, and chaff. It is the same with the human mind.' '[D]ogmatism born of ignorance' does no one any good (Fudge, 2024, 51).

Of course, in today's 'cancel culture' we are painfully aware that 'Too often when there is an exchange of ideas authentic dialogue is absent, and instead one witnesses a collision of monologues wherein positions are asserted and each side is staggered to learn that his or her arguments which seem watertight [to them] do not persuade the other side.' (Fudge, 2024, 450).

Recent events on university campuses around the nation leave no doubt about the corrosive impact of such behaviour on intellectual integrity and social cohesion. Last month Melbourne University cancelled a presentation by Israeli aerospace engineer, Professor Tal Shima, to a small group of staff and students of the engineering faculty. There had been 'a number of threats to disrupt' the event and the University's response was to cancel the speech by the world recognised scientist (Lunn, 2024).



Two noteworthy exceptions to this toxic cultural norm are Peter Carnley's recent books: *Arius on Carillon Avenue* and *The Subordinate Substitute: Another Wrong Turn on Carillon Avenue*. In the first Carnley exposes inherent contradictions in the attempt to hold together the ontological equality of the three persons of the Trinity while simultaneously asserting the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father. This paradox, asserted by Carillon Avenue theologians, is said to provide theological grounds to base distinctions in social roles for men and women, including the headship of men in family and church, while supposedly insisting on their fundamental, ontological, equality as persons. Carnley very carefully and painstakingly draws out the inconsistencies of these theological gymnastics for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and the disastrous implications. In the second book Carnley how this same fundamental error renders penal substitutionary atonement theory inconsistent with orthodox trinitarianism.

That Carnley disagrees with what he calls Carillon Avenue theology comes as no surprise and is not noteworthy in itself. What is so counter-cultural in his work, to my mind, is his deep and comprehensive listening to his opponents. His grasp of the scholarly work of those with whom he takes issue is evident and impressive and his engagement with them thorough, respectful and compelling.

Here then is a model of scholarly endeavour which reveals the significance of knowledge, learning and reason for theology, certainly, but also for human relationships in both church and wider society.

The happy coincidence of this graduation occurring on the Feast of Pentecost underlines this insight. We know from John's gospel that the Holy Spirit is given in order to lead us into all truth (John 16.12-15). Serious theological study is one way in which we may collaborate with the Spirit as we journey more deeply into truth.

We also know from John that truth, in Christian understanding, is about more than knowledge, learning and logic, more than ideas and propositions no matter how coherent.

Rather, as Soren Kierkegaard (1967, 201-202) pointed out, he is the truth who stood silently in the face of Pilate's question 'What is truth?' (John 18.38). He is truth who said 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14.6). Thus, we come to know the truth only when it becomes a life within us. We cannot know more of the truth than we are of the truth. (And Kierkegaard went on to say 'hence one sees what a monstrous error it is, very nearly the greatest possible error, to impart Christianity by lecturing.' UD staff take note!)

Our grasp of truth deepens and grows insofar as the Spirit does his/her work within us graciously transforming us into the likeness of Christ; that is, insofar as our lives embody and manifest holiness, wisdom and the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5.22-23).

The New Testament lesson on this Feast of Pentecost reminds us of the variety of gifts given by one and the same Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, ... discernment, ... interpretation. But each and every gift is given for the common good (1 Cor 12. 8-11).

Graduands, if, in the pursuit of your studies, you have truly more fully grasped truth, if the Spirit has led you more deeply into the truth that is Jesus Christ, then the manifestation of the Spirit will become more and more evident in your lives – enhancing the common good, building up the body of Christ and transforming the world towards the kingdom of God.



For your perseverance and achievements in your studies, congratulations. For all that you are and all you will be as the Spirit transforms you, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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