

# Should Private Barns have political, legal and moral ascendancy over “Common Wealth?”

Canberra City Uniting Church

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Ivan, John, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for bestowing upon me the privilege of speaking at your forum today. I too would like to pay tribute to the wisdom of those who have gone before, the elders of the Ngunnawal people, and more particularly the science and theology of Charles Birch. I would like to pay particular tribute to his book *On Purpose* which has been quite formative for me, and within the context of my address today, his annunciation of three systems that he says interrelate in human endeavour: *the economic system the environmental system and the production system*. Birch points out that our economy is totally reliant upon ever increasing production and it is this relentless production that impacts the environment. The point he makes is that politics always places the economy at the apex of the relationship between these three and as a consequence the environment comes last. That there is no serious attempt in public policy to balance the needs of all three is amply illustrated for us in international fiscal policy that has followed the economic crisis of October 2008. There has been a worldwide stimulus to the economy from world governments in the hope of increased productivity. Apart from its depleting impact on the environment, one of the problems of reliance upon production is that it assumes the capacity of consumers to purchase. In the last 10 years there has been an increasing divide between the prosperous and the poor, particularly at the high and low 10% of each category. The top 10% of wealthy Australians own a growing and disproportionate percentage of the country's wealth and have a disproportionate capacity to purchase consumer goods. In contrast, the poor of the world who live on \$2 per day do not benefit. Even in Australia there is frequent reference to a 'two speed economy'.

I contend that there is not simply one crisis but four. There is an environmental crisis, an economic crisis, a crisis of equity and by no means least a crisis of the human vocation. It is the latter crisis that has to be addressed if there is to be any chance of addressing the other three.

While our host has said I will be talking to the ethical implications of the environmental crisis, I will be only doing so in the light of comments about the economy and more particularly a focus on theology. It is from foundations laid in these two areas that I will draw some ethical conclusions.

## 1. The Economy.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism, Capitalism has had no rival; indeed it is assumed that the capitalist system is the saviour and bulwark of our free society.

(Now is not the time for a critique of communism, but to use the language of Charles Birch it was its diminishment of *purpose* in the lives of people that was its primary downfall). I want to argue that the world can no longer afford an unregulated capitalism and that the market is incapable, on its own, of delivering, outcomes necessary for the preservation of a healthy balance between the economy, the environment and production. The market is not capable of delivering equity and more particularly the market panders to a corruption of the human vocation in as much that it panders to power and greed. The failure of politics in Australia and in most countries of the developed world has been a total abdication of responsibility to set appropriate boundaries for the market in the vastly changed environment of the 21st century.

Yesterday a senior member of the Coalition, Andrew Robb, stated that if the three independents sided with Labour they would deliver the most leftwing Government Australia has ever known. Apart from the obvious motive of inducing fear, what did he mean? Presumably he meant that such a government would enact legislation, especially in relation to the environment that would protect "Common Wealth" and would limit the capacity of "Private Barns". Is this such a bad thing? I would argue not, indeed I would argue from a Christian perspective that such a realignment is morally essential for that which sustains health and wellbeing for this and future generations has to do with that which we hold in common.

Some years ago I had the rather painful experience of being sat next to Senator Bronwyn Bishop at a dinner function. All night she harangued me about her ideology that there is no such thing as society, only individuals, the position made most famous by the British Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher. I would beg to differ most strongly. The human vocation is not essentially about the strength of the individual vis-a-vis other individuals; it is about the health of the relationship that each individual has with every other individual, and with the totality of the created order. But I will return to this theme in a moment when we deal with a bit of theology.

I assume Andrew Robb's fear of a Labour Government influenced by Green policy is that there may be a movement towards what is called a steady state economy, or one that is not predicated on exponential growth. The desirability and practicality of such an economy is argued by people like Jeffrey Sacks, the American Economist, in his book *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* and Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey and advisor to successive British Governments on the question of sustainability and his book *Prosperity without Growth*. That economic policy based upon exponential growth cannot survive many decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not rocket science. It is not simply that there are now 7 billion people living on the planet with an expectation of nine billion; it is also that with every passing year there is an expectation that every one of the nine billion will increase its capacity for consumption. The Australian Conservation Foundation estimates that the global appetite is now running at 1.4 planets annually and that if every Indian and Chinese were to enjoy the standard of living that is enjoyed by most Australians we would need 7 planets. That it is the moral right of everyone to enjoy the same standard of living is

indisputable, that it is not possible places enormous moral responsibility upon those who currently enjoy a standard of living that the majority can never reach.

Clearly the current version of capitalism needs considerable overhaul if human beings are going to live in harmony with creation and indeed with one another for generations to come. That there is enormous resistance to change from wealthy lobby groups with investment in the status quo is obvious for all to see. We have recently witnessed the extraordinary level of unreasonable opposition that has been mustered against the proposed mining tax to understand the problem that we face. Those who have investment in the status quo will fight very hard to retain it.

Before moving to theology I would like to make a comment about the way a successful or healthy economy is judged. The measure is called Gross Domestic Product or GDP. This is very much an arbitrary measure and yet it is worshipped as the final word on the success of Government or the health of a nation. GDP neither measures declining mineral reserves nor the cost of pollution. GDP does not measure the value of volunteerism or the care provided in society by the army of folk who look after the vulnerable. GDP is geared to a particular measurement that does not really relate to human happiness and contentment. Most research indicates that once human existence rises above abject poverty, happiness and fulfilment is not related to material wealth, indeed there is some evidence that with increased wealth, and in some circumstances, the graph moves in the opposite direction. Why then is so much human activity geared towards production and consumption when the indicators are that human happiness and fulfilment is only marginally related to those factors? Perhaps now is the time to move to some theology.

## 2. Theology

Christian belief and Christian living is predicated upon two foundational theologies, a Creation theology and a Redemption theology. Yet, many within the Church as well as many outside could be excused for believing that there is only one theology, namely a theology of redemption. A theology of redemption predominates in the preaching from most pulpits on Sunday, both Protestant and Catholic, and it is the judgement inherent in redemption theology that is predominantly heard by the outside world. It is my contention that redemption theology should be formed and influenced by creation theology and creation theology should be informed and influenced by redemption theology. Each needs the other.

Redemption theology has tended to make an almost exclusive emphasise upon the place of the individual within the plan and purpose of God to the neglect of the community and particularly to the neglect of the non-human creation. The question 'are you saved' is a question that is directed to the individual and implies a destiny that is separate from travelling companions. Most evangelical activity is based solely on a theology of redemption and as a consequence raises major cultural tensions; conversion can often means a cultural separation from the community which gives life and sustenance. In its apocalyptic form, redemption theology emphasises the corruption of the world, its transient nature and its destiny to pass away. This emphasis makes investment in it irrelevant and many Christian

communities see environmental commitment as a denial of trust in the God who is bringing this world to its appointed end.

I contend that unless Christianity can re-find its legitimate voice in its creation based roots it will at best be on the margins of the major debates and challenges facing modern humanity and at worst will be irrelevant. Let me say again I am not wishing to abandon redemption theology: on the contrary, I want each to be informed by the other.

The first reality that hits us through creation theology is our name, **Adam**; we are all *Adam*, male and female, indeed the whole human species. We are who we are in relation to one another and indeed in relation to the earth whose name is **Adamah**. Our destiny is not fulfilled as an individual it fulfilled in the health and integrity of the multitude of its relationships.

Secondly we note that creation is not crowned by humanity, but by Sabbath. On the Sabbath God rests, not literally in cessation from work, but rests or dwells within creation. In as much that God ceases from work, humanity is given responsibility to care for the creation and to further its harmony and completeness after the pattern set by God: for human beings are to find their vocation after the likeness and pattern of God. This pattern is observed in abundance, in beauty, in the cycles and seasons, in the relationality of all things, but most particularly in its limits. The sabbath “rest” of creation is recognition of limits, limits that protect its abundance and its capacity for regeneration. To live or to exploit outside those limits is to abdicate the human vocation which is to guard creation’s harmony and wholeness, and to protect a life giving equity. We have already noted that equity between human beings and between human beings and the non-human creation is dangerously out of balance. Natural as well as human history reminds us that such imbalance, if not adjusted, inevitably has a violent correction as some point.

To honour any relationship we know we have to accept its inherent fidelities, the boundaries or limits of acceptable behaviour and responsibility. At present we are living precariously outside the fidelities necessary for the preservation of life upon this planet. Science, so well represented by John in his addresses to us this morning, provides us with the necessary information upon which we can choose between continued behaviour which puts creation at risk, or behaviour that can enhance the natural balances necessary for preservation of life in its rich diversity and abundance.

At the heart of creation theology is the juxtaposition of blessing and cursing, the choice between life and death. Human beings are daily confronted with choice, choice between actions upon which the dew of blessing falls, or choice for activity which might appear in the short term to be enhancing personal life but which in the longer term carries a burdensome cost, a cost which may not be borne directly by the individual source of pollution, but either by current global humanity or by future generations. Although the cost of environmental irresponsibility might be borne by all, it is most likely to be caused by the prosperous who have the means to mitigate its effect, and to be felt most severely by the poor, who, while having made the smallest contribution to its effect, are burdened by its outcome with no

means of mitigation or adaptation. This is an unavoidable matter of morality about which all must make a choice.

Blessing has traditionally been associated with fertility. However fertility is not itself the end but only the means of achieving the desired outcome: continuity, the passing of the baton of life from one generation to the next. At 7 billion it is clear that humanity does not have a problem with fertility, ironically its very fertility may become the biggest threat to continuity. There needs to be a rethink about the desirability of population growth. The easiest way to maintain economic growth is through population growth. We have come to a point in human history on this planet when the nexus between population expansion and economic growth needs to be broken. Governmental treasurers should not be giving financial incentive to families to increase fertility. Religious communities must also rethink their position in relation to human sexuality and particularly to contraception.

Finally Margaret and I have done more than we probably should to increase the population. We have three sons; each of them has three children, thus we have nine grandchildren. Barely a day goes by that I do not ponder planned activity for that day and its possible effect upon their lives in 50 years time. What will I do today for which they will call upon my name in blessing and what will I do today for which they will think back with exasperation that I have left for them an almost unpayable environmental debt, a debt which has severely diminished the choices available to them and caused a severe diminishment of their lifestyle compared with my own. In the current debate about debt we are being tricked into thinking that Australia's monetary debt is the biggest problem we are in danger of bequeathing our grandchildren. At 6% of GDP it is small, almost miniscule, by international standards, and yet per head of population we are leaving an environmental debt that exceeds that of any other nation.

This is truly a moral dilemma that only the full hardy, the deaf, the blind, and above all the ill-informed can ignore. I would rather measure the success of today not upon the rise or fall of the GDP but upon the enhancement or diminishment of the choices it has left for our children's future.

**Bishop George Browning**