Editorial: Seeking a Witness to What Is Good

The past year has been full of the kind of ‘signs of the times’ to which a public theology responds. The most obvious has been the Covid-19 pandemic which has caught the whole planet in its grip. The storming of the United States’ Capitol on the 6th January 2021 left other democracies around the world stunned. For those of us in Australia the period immediately prior to the arrival of Covid-19 via a cruise ship was preceded by widespread mask-wearing in response to hazardous air, wildlife devastation and unprecedented fires. Now that has been replaced with unprecedented floods and all the while the climate emergency deepens. At the time of publishing NASA declared 2020 tied with 2016 as the warmest year on record¹ – though that status has been hidden away behind news of further Covid-19 surges and the politics of vaccine roll-outs. It was a year which also bore witness to the global flows of the #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter. This period of time was crowded with matters of concern for a public theology. It invites a consideration of how a public theology can bear witness to the good, variously construed, in such challenging times.

The first article in this edition is designed to reflect one on those contemporary events on the understanding that a public theology needs to be agile and able to respond quickly to what unfolds. It has a particular interest in right timing. Michael Earl has accordingly described the breaking of the global pandemic and the immediate responses of the World Health Organization. For Pope Francis, writing in his *Let Us Dream*, this time of Covid-19 is a time of ‘testing’ and ‘discerning’ and noting what is on ‘our heart’. For him this particular pandemic is a metaphor for other pandemics – the impacts of war and poverty – that disclose how the present global system is not working well and is in need of a new birth. Earl is not unaware of such matters but his focus was on the performance of Christian witness in a pandemic and its tone. Where the institutional church has been inclined to pass on health and safety advisories as well as advice on the practice of being a digital church Earl wondered what theological message should it be proclaiming to a wounded, fearful

1 NASA, ‘2020 Tied for the Warmest Year on Record’, 17 March, 2021 (updated), <<https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/2020-tied-for-warmest-year-on-record-nasa-analysis-shows>>, [accessed 20 March 2021].

world – clearly in need of good news. In order to examine this vocation he needed to take into account Tom Holland's thesis in *Dominion* that the liberal democracies of the west have largely taken over many of the once distinctive practices of Christian care. Earl argues the case for a 'gentle witness' to Christ which is expressed through a hymn set to the tune of 'How Can I Keep from Singing' – a rather apposite choice given the restrictions placed on worship and singing in particular. In terms of a public witness Earl suggests the praxis of care (along with other related practices) can serve the function of middle axioms between the Christian faith and public domain.

By definition a pandemic emphasizes the inter-connectedness of humanity. It is in the very nature of such to range across continents and not be confined to regions – like an epidemic. It places a test upon the capacity to work for a common good and a sense of global citizenship. **Peter Hooton** explores what this surprisingly elusive concept – the common good – may mean. The imprecision that the term attracts can often lead to a focus upon the quality of conversation rather than any substantive description of what actually is the common good. Of particular interest is how a reading of the common good might intersect with notions of human flourishing, shared solidarity and an explicit Christian theology – in this case with a Bonhoeffer-derived Christology. This latter challenge is considered in the light of those scholars of the common good who believe a theological definition of the concept is 'inappropriate and unwarranted'.

The papal concern for the poor in this time of Covid-19 resonates with **Rachel Muers'** enquiry into the category of the 'un/deserving poor'. The canvas upon which this exegetical argument takes place is the comment made by Jesus found at Mt. 26:11 – the poor 'are always with you'. The foil through which this saying is interpreted is the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with oil. The careless use of this episode can seem to give a 'divine sanction' and rationale for perpetuating poverty. Muers is deeply concerned with the way in which this 'bifurcation' of categorization – the deserving and the undeserving – lends itself too easily to moral judgement in the politics and practice of welfare and poverty relief. It releases a possibility of stigma and stereotype. Through her reading of texts Muers calls into question matters of gender and class in determining moral value. She does so mindful of how complicit Christian institutions have been in this categorizing of models of the poor and the need for a robust ethical critique.

Against a background of disquiet caused by democracies under pressure **Easten Law** examines the dilemma of how Christians should negotiate their religious and civic identities in between church and state. For this purpose he draws upon Schleiermacher's ethics. Unlike Hooton's argument there is no

reference to the common good – instead Law opts for a higher/ the highest good and how it lends itself to a conception of broadening action. This idea presumes extending the outer sphere, that is, expanding the reign of God. The underlying assumption is that the priorities of the church exceed those of the state which are confined to its internal orderings. The vocation and intention of this ‘prioritization’ is to counter the negative effects of nationalism. Schleiermacher is seen to be concerned with more than personal feeling and experience.

This emphasis on the good to be found in Hooton and Law – and implied by Muers – takes another form in **Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule** reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. The standard reviews of this work fasten upon the incidence of domestic violence and family relationships in the unstable times of postcolonial / independent Nigeria. Amaefule’s interest lies more in the sphere of corruption and tyranny as one military regime gives way to another. One of the most frequent tendencies of a Nigerian public theology has been concerned with the response of the Christian faith to Islam and the possibility of a civil society. Amaefule’s way into the discipline is different. His reading of the novel enables him to make connections with actual political events which thereupon provides the framework to consider the role played by the Catholic bishops in the birth of the new nation and successive coups. The effective question Amaefule poses is whether that response has been sufficiently prophetic and more than words. Has it been adequate for a nation that is sometimes dysfunctional and is held together in a fragile unity?

For **Lars Buch Vifrupt** and **Dan Grabowski** the link with the language of the good is bound up with the issue of what makes a good city. Their enquiry is specific to the city of Aarhus in Denmark. Their empirical research makes use of a survey of three discrete groups – the church, citizens and the municipality. The responses isolate eight particular functions that the church performs in the city in terms of being a point of reference, a source of identity, a collector of memories, a meeting point, an agent of social action, a source of experience, a place of contemplation, and a breathing space in the hustle and bustle of the city. The functions are essentially sociological: Vifrupt and Grabowski argue the case for these functions to be seen more as ‘connectivity points’ because of the way in which the intersection of church and city is not a binary one. The relation might better be described as the creation of a third space, an in-between space, given the way in which the church and city inform each other while retaining their otherness to one another. One aspect of that otherness for the church is not simply its life of ritual: it is its theological foundation whereby Vifrupt and Grabowski seek to establish a line of connectivity between Trinitarian language and third spaces.

For **Steve Taylor** and **Christine Woods** the explicit theological organizing idea is Christology rather than the Trinity. Through an allusion back to the pandemic they consider a variant on Pope Francis' *Let Us Dream*. In their case the future opens up the prospect of innovation and things being done differently. Rather than delve more deeply into poverty *per se*, the climate threat and the impact of war Taylor and Woods explore the way in which Jesus is (ir)responsible and how that might cohere with the need for change and transformation. For this purpose they strike up what might seem to others to be an unlikely interdisciplinary conversation between a wisdom Christology and the more economic world of entrepreneurship. They draw upon the work of the past Harvard economist, Joseph Schumpeter, to demonstrate how Jesus' actions led to 'recombinations' of behaviour and furnish a mandate for a 'wisdom economy'. An example of that is the Hughes Place garden in Taneatua where an indigenous people become actors in the wake of a history and legacy of colonization.

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