

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

Opening Dinner, 12 January 2007

Keynote speech by Bishop George Browning (transcript):

"The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" Isaiah 32:17

It is a privilege to be speaking to you tonight. Thank you so much for the welcome. I'd like to pay my respects to the indigenous people of Melbourne. I come from the country of the Ngunnawal people and the Wiradjuri people of Canberra and respect very much their contribution in the past and in the present. Delighted to be in the presence of the Mayor. I think that some of the most important people in Melbourne are the taxi drivers. They never let you down. When I got a taxi from the Melbourne airport tonight he asked me what I was going to do. I said that I was going to speak at a dinner. He said "are you a professional spruiker?" I said "No, no, no, well, sort of ... I'm a professional God botherer." It is a great privilege to be here. And it is true that I've come out of my holidays to do this, but that's out of great affection for Peter Thwaites and Andrew Lancaster and a number of other people who I hold dear and I'm sure you do too.

I come from the Christian tradition, as you obviously are well aware, and within that Christian tradition I belong to a very large group of people, part of whose spirituality is to read the Bible every day and to use a "lectionary", which provides readings for each day, and if you were in Asia or Africa or Europe or Australia, people are using the same reading. And on New Years Day I went to my Bible for the reading for the day and it was from Isaiah Chapter 32, and the verse which took my eye on that day as I was thinking about this talk was "The result of righteousness is peace and the effect of righteousness is quietness and trust forever." My talk tonight is about righteousness.

A week ago tonight, two new administrations were formed in the world: one in Fiji as the result of a military coup; the other in the United States of America as the result of the democratic process which put the Democratic Party in power both in the Congress and in the Senate. One government a hugely influential one, one a relatively small one. Both have the same task: that task is to enact policy and to govern for the common good of all their people, for their security and wellbeing, while at the same time having the weakest and the most marginal in mind. Now I believe that is actually a description of *righteousness* – it is to do with right relationships: righteousness is the relationship a community has with an individual and an individual with the community. It is the relationship that exists between people of other nations. And it's the relationship that people have with God. And we live in a world today where the relationships are very different to the ones that used to exist in my parents' or grandparents' time. Today relationships are global, and the failure of relationships will be catastrophic for the world community. For Isaiah's words to be true will take an enormous amount of effort by the world community. Failure to do so, in the 21st Century, will bring disaster really for the whole of humankind. I don't want to be a doomsdayer, but this particular virtue of righteousness is not optional. It actually is now of such significance that we cannot and must not fail in our relationships with one another. And the responsibility for righteousness, or right relationships, is always with the stronger and not with the weaker.

Always with the wealthy and not with the poor. Always with the powerful and not with the powerless. Those who have those ingredients have a greater responsibility and in Australia as a neighbour we are both powerful, we are wealthy and we have influence. And so we cannot and must not neglect our responsibility in this area.

Those of you who come from other nations, I hope, tonight in the brief word that I have to say, will excuse me if I use Australian examples for my talk. But I am an Australian although I was born in Britain. I've barracked for the Australian cricket team ever since I arrived because I believe you need to wear the guernsey of where you live. So my examples are from within Australia.

Some of the people who know me best know that I have been quite a strong critic of the Australian Federal Government, both the outcomes of some of its policies – some of which I've been quite ashamed of: the "children overboard" – I was terribly ashamed of that – the war in Iraq – I won't go through the litany of them all, but my greatest argument is with the ideology that lies behind the policy. And the ideology, both explicitly argued at times and more often implicitly assumed, is an ideology of "individualism". Individualism is the enemy of righteousness, because individualism does not take into account the relationships which undergird the wellbeing of all humankind. There are many examples of it in Australian economics. We have privatised most things. We have taken for granted that the user pays in everything, including some of the social fabric including health and education. And we have assumed an economic ideology that if the wealthy get more wealthy the poor will automatically come up with them. And that blatantly and clearly is not the truth. The gap between the very rich, or even the moderately rich, and the people who are quite poor is growing all the time. In this year, 2007, the projection is for maybe 3% or 4% growth in Australia. The very wealthy may in actual fact achieve 100% growth or more. The moderately wealthy may achieve 10% or 5%. The poor will be well below the 3% or 4% so that the disadvantage they currently have is exacerbated as we go along.

So individualism is seen in economic policy. It is also seen, tragically, in policy with the aboriginal people. It is because of this view, that an individual can apologise only for what the individual has done, that we have neglected one of our great responsibilities to the indigenous people of Australia. In actual fact that is not true. We are all the inheritors of both the good and the bad of the past. And the effect of a corporate sense of responsibility for what has gone before and the release that comes through apology for it has escaped many of the powerful leadership of our time, to the great detriment of our country. So I understand there is a section in your conference tomorrow about healing. And I encourage that section to do its work. Because there is a huge responsibility for us to hear the pain of the past in order that it can be sufficiently remembered so that it can be safely forgotten. Could I say that again: that we need to deal with the pain of the past so that it is sufficiently remembered in order that it can be safely forgotten. Whether it's in the Balkans, or the Middle East, or Northern Ireland, or with the indigenous people of Australia: if pain is not dealt with appropriately, it is forever remembered. And the remembering of it continues the violence and the perpetration of that violence from generation to generation to generation. And one of the enormous paradoxes and great tragedies of our time is that one of the peoples that suffered more pain than anybody else – the Jewish people – should, not as a religion but as a sovereign state, themselves be making their neighbour into a victim: the Palestinian people. And the Palestinian people then have pain which they themselves will continue to pass on. The dealing with pain is one of the major, major issues of our time, and must be dealt with in order that it can be put aside so that we actually can move on into the future. One of the great

doctrines of the Christian church, if I can speak to the Christians amongst you tonight, is that God Himself became victim in order that all humankind might not live in the past but enjoy the present and look forward to the future.

We are all of us inheritors of that which has gone before us, both good and bad. And as you heard in the introduction to myself I have become greatly involved in the environmental movement. I believe that it is the great social issue of our time. And I do believe that the time is running out. That we actually are at a point where we have to decide whether we want our children and our grandchildren to have a future or not. Every day when I wake up in the morning I have a mantra that I ask myself. I have six grandchildren. And I ask myself every single day: "What will I do today that my grandchildren will thank me for in 50 years time? And what will I neglect to do today for which my grandchildren will say: 'The silly old ... He had a voice and didn't use it. He had influence and didn't exercise it.'" It is an extremely important matter to me. Why is it? For at least four reasons. One is that I believe the environmental issue is one of the issues that unites all people of faith. It is our core business. We believe that all human life and every living thing is sacred to God – God is the creator. We have no right – no right whatsoever – to a standard of living that diminishes what we have received. For Christian people we believe that God redeems all in the Person of Jesus. And we need to be with the redeemers: we need to be with those who want to put right what has gone wrong. We want to be with those who make life possible for another generation.

Also, the environmental degradation of the world, like most other problems, affects people unequally and it affects the poor the most. Go to Africa if you don't believe me. And we must address the issue because we will not make poverty history in the world unless we deal with the environmental issue as well. It will not be possible.

And lastly, but by no means least, the environmental issue affects future generations. And as a person of faith I believe in intergenerational morality. I do not have the right to a way of life knowingly affecting the future.

So I would ask that those of you who are here as individuals should take seriously your responsibilities on the face of the earth environmentally, in relationship to others, to the poor and to future generations. That if you are person of faith that you make sure that your church or your mosque or your synagogue or your community acts responsibly.

And thirdly, that you put pressure upon government to act responsibly. I wrote a letter, for which I got into a bit of trouble just before Christmas, both to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition – who was then Mr Kim Beazley – and said I do not believe it is morally right for any Australian to vote for a political party at the next election that does not have a viable climate change policy. And I believe that our government must, with the rest of the world, price carbon. If we do not price carbon we cannot put the other things right. (When this is done, preferably on a global scale, we will all adjust. Some of us will adjust by using less. Others will adjust by choosing differently. A carbon price will automatically make sustainable technologies far more competitive.) We actually must price carbon.

So for those kind of reasons, I believe that individualism affects us both within the family, within the community, with the poor of the world, and with future generations. One of the great failures of "righteousness" is picked up by one single human being. He's known by everybody in Australia, his name is David Hicks. And the fact that we can

abandon what we would normally consider to be ordinary human rights for a cause puts in question the rightness of the cause itself. If that was ever to happen in your community, in your family, that you would abandon the right of an individual because you believe that a cause is more important than the individual, then you actually put into question the appropriateness of the cause itself.

I've given a bit of a broad brush. I was asked to keep it to more of a Catholic homily than a Protestant sermon. And I haven't mentioned anything to do with personal morality – euthanasia, homosexuality – and if you were to live in Australia at the present time you would have every reason to think that these were the main issues that related to righteousness. And it is strange that I have to make the point that matters of public morality, or public justice, or public ethics are actually core – the Bible assumes that they are core to righteousness. And yet in the world today we have to argue for their place. If you are a good student of the Bible then you would understand that these public issues are actually more to do with righteousness, or at least as much to do with righteousness as the personal matters of morality.

I want to conclude by coming back to the text. Righteousness is a virtue. We in Australia today are in a debate about values. And it is a strange debate really because we've named "a fair go" as one of the main Australian values. And when you think of David Hicks you wonder whether it actually is an Australian value. And yet it is probably a value which is held by all peoples universally – Asian people, African people, European people, Oceania people. A virtue is far deeper than a value. A virtue is an expression of truth. I believe that righteousness is one fundamental expression of truth that requires courage to live by. My hope and prayer for this conference: that you'll hear truth spoken through things such as righteousness as a virtue. That having heard it, you'll live it and have the great courage to make a difference in the world of which we are a part. That we may truly be, as Jesus asked us to be, good neighbours of one another.

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