

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY

**OCCASIONAL ADDRESS AT THE GRADUATION OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND AT THE CONFERRAL OF THE
TITLE OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF CHARLES STURT
UNIVERSITY**

BY

THE REVEREND PROFESSOR EMERITUS JAMES HAIRE AC

**ST. PAUL'S ANGLICAN CHURCH
CORNER CANBERRA AVENUE AND CAPTAIN COOK
CRESCENT, GRIFFITH
CANBERRA, ACT**

MONDAY, 14 DECEMBER 2015

10:00 AM

Deputy Chancellor, Mr Peter Hayes, members of the University Council, Emeritus Professor Ross Chambers, fellow members of the Faculty and of the School, staff of the university, both academic and administrative, distinguished guests, graduates, family and friends of graduates,
ladies and gentlemen:

I speak this morning on behalf of all who have received titles and awards. I congratulate all the graduates and all those who

have received diplomas and other awards today. I count it a great honour to become an Emeritus Professor of this University, which, in recent years, and so quickly, has so well fulfilled the call of a university in civil society, in terms of quality teaching, innovative and relevant research and community service.

Today I ask the question: why should theology, specifically Christian theology, exist in a university?

But what is this Christianity? The theological basis of Christianity is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with those initially unrelated to God, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might

through him come close to God. At the heart of the Christian faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity and the creation. From this, ultimately, all the perceptions, meanings and ethical stances of Christianity come.

So, from the point-of-view of Christian theology, it is important that theology interacts in the total marketplace of ideas, whether expressed directly or indirectly, whether even consciously realised or not. In an inter-disciplinary university, this should easily be able to be done.

From the point-of-view of the university, it is appropriate that Christian theology, this significant factor in human life, should be addressed. In the past thirty years in particular, universities throughout the world, and specifically in Australia after John Dawkins' reforms, have embraced subjects of study which in the past were quite unrelated to university discourse. Charles Sturt University (CSU) has been at the forefront of this.

Accountancy, business systems, policing and design are examples of areas which were not related to universities in the past. Moreover, the practice of these subjects, and not simply the so-called impartial observance of them, has become part of the life of universities, especially in CSU. If these subjects, accountancy, policing, and so on, are to be part of the life of a university, then equally theology, and the practice of faith, should be there too.

There is a further reason. Our societies around the world, and particularly in Australia, have been deeply influenced by Christianity, far more than we are often aware, or are prepared or willing to admit. Moreover, over one third of the globe's inhabitants, around 2.2 billion people, follow Christianity, and they have their personal and communal perceptions, meanings and ethical expressions largely guided by Christianity.

Christianity's history is both long and sustained, and its presence in sheer numbers is growing globally. It would therefore seem incredible if such an understanding of the world

was to be bypassed in any communal enterprise, such as a university, which seeks to understand the world and prepare its citizens to participate in it. Moreover, theology must speak in its own terms, not simply in the terms of other disciplines - for example, sociology, psychology, economics or political science. It may be a subset of other disciplines, but it must also speak on its own terms. This means that in a liberal democracy such as Australia there may well need to be space for Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and other theologies to speak in their own terms too in universities - again not simply in the terms of other disciplines. This has happened in CSU with the study of Islamic theology, alongside the study of Christian theology. For Christianity, this study is not simply with the aim of it being understood, but, far more important, with the perception that, if Christianity is so large and significant along such a long period of time, then it needs to be heard 'for the common good'. It is not just that those who refuse to listen to the past are condemned to repeat its errors. It is much more that all those who look for

a better communal future may well be advised to look at Christianity's long and sustained experience.

This leads on to another aspect of Christianity and Christian theology in the university. It needs to be there. But it does not need to be protected. It does not need in any way any special pleading. It needs to point to its best and to its highest. It also needs to be open to its past failures, even to its communal criminal behaviour. At all times it needs to be open to its 'cultured despisers', and a good representation of them live in Australia! It is a poor presentation of Christian theology to confine it at all times to the seminary. The seminary has its place. However, Christian theology needs at all times to be in the public space, and to engage in robust discourse with those whose assumed and untested ideologies, or even at times sheer vacuousness, are assumed to be watertight. Why? The answer is: simply for the common good, because indeed Christianity may have something to say. Our situation today in Western societies could be that much of the representation and

expression of human life, even in the universities, could become no more than part of the entertainment industry, doing nothing more than playing to part of the market. We need to be aware that part of the media and part of political life are little more than activities of an expanding entertainment industry.

Universities can be sucked into this understanding of the world. This perception can go further, so that human activity can end up as little more than the symbiosis of mutually attracting neuroses between provider and client. In these circumstances Christian theology has certainly something to say.

I certainly experienced this in my friendship with the late Cardinal Cahal Daly, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland. We were both born in County Antrim, and we were both caught up in the peace process in Northern Ireland, after years of violence. We were both teaching part-time in Queen's University in Belfast, he while serving as a bishop, and I on home leave from missionary service in Indonesia. Cahal was not a natural hero, by any stretch of the imagination. He was a

small, scholarly, introverted man who had been teaching Catholic theology in Queen's University for many years - an overgrown leprechaun, as he used to refer to himself! On this particular Saturday afternoon, we locked arms and we walked at the head of a procession through a mixed Protestant - Catholic area, showing our determination to seek communal peace. It was very painful for both of us. Protestant young people were jeering at me, hurling abuse, and stones, which fortunately missed, because I dared to walk along the road with a friend who was a Catholic bishop. A Catholic came charging over, waving a huge crucifix, and hit Cahal on the back of the head with it, at the same time questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth. He was able to express this concept with a single word beginning with 'b', which he kept on repeating, as though the two of us were slow on the uptake. Cahal fell to the ground. I asked him if he would like to sit in a shop doorway for a moment or two while we sorted him out. He looked at me with steely eyes, which I shall never forget, and he said to me, "James, put your hand into my pocket,

get out the handkerchief which you will find there, wipe the back of my head with it, clean me up, and up we get and on we go.” He was over seventy at the time. He went on, “If at this point we fail, if at this point we do not go on, then all that we spout from the pulpit will be shown up for the hypocrisy that it is.” He got up, and he went on, and I was happy to go with him, with arms locked together. It was he and people like him who began the movement that led to the Northern Irish Good Friday Peace Accords. He was a man of forgiveness and generosity and hope.

Mercifully we no longer live in a sectarian Australia. However, we live in Australia with great challenges. We are probably the most multicultural, and therefore the most multi-religious country, in the world. How are you and I going to behave in this new environment? Are we going to be sucked in by the loudest noises, in the streets or in the media? Are we going to have the grace of Cahal Daly in this new environment?

On behalf of all who have received awards in this ceremony,
and on my own behalf, I express my own, and our, sincere
thanks to you, Deputy Chancellor, and to my colleagues in
Charles Sturt University, for the awards conferred on us today.

14 December 2015