

Treasures old and new

Peter Adam

Thank you for the work that you do in your libraries, and for your commitment to this vitally important ministry.

I have been thinking recently of writing a little booklet on the ministry of theological colleges, and one of the things I am going to say is the three most important things for colleges are the faculty, and the library and their staff, and the students. Without a good library a college cannot prosper. So much of the work that you do is invisible to the rest of us. But the work you do is of vital importance. And I have received many benefits from the work of librarians around the world.

I am not sure how to address a group of librarians. So I consulted a book by James Lipton called An Exultation of Larks [Penguin 1977]. And it is a book about collective nouns for groups of people. So a Clutch of second thoughts, an Obsolescence of appliances, a Drowse of underachievers, a Pallor of night students, an Overcharge of repairmen, a Pontificate of prelates, a Clash of rhinoceroses. The two saddest ones are a Cancellation of trains and a Stack of planes, [my apologies to those who are travelling home some time soon]. Anyway, for librarians we have a Shush of librarians.

I first began to benefit from theological books in particular because I trained as a musician. H.A. Evans and Son had a wonderful bookshop in Swanston Street Melbourne. Upstairs was second hand music and I was often there finding musical treasures old and new. When I began to be interested in theology I found also there a great collection of second hand books. Mr Evans and his son and daughter were in fact neighbours of ours, and Bruce Evans had a diesel Mercedes and would kindly offer to drive the books home for me at the end of my shopping expeditions. That was very satisfactory so I did very well out of that.

Now I know of course that you are interested in more than books, for you are part of the IT generation. I might say that I do own a computer and know how to work it. And the thing I love doing the most of all is moving text around and watching the footnotes reorganise themselves at the bottom of the pages. While I was doing my PhD the agonising thing of moving a paragraph was that you had to move all the

*Dr Peter Adam is the
principal of Ridley
College in Melbourne.*

footnotes for the whole chapter. Now I watch them move themselves. Very satisfying. I am getting my money's worth from the computer. It is well worth doing.

Let me tell you about some 'ah ha' moments I have had in libraries. I remember going to the British Museum in October 1973 and walking into a room and seeing side by side *Codex Sinaiticus* from the fourth century, and *Codex Alexandrinus* from the fifth century. And I was thinking about *Sinaiticus* the other day because of Tischendorf famously found some pages of *Sinaiticus* in the rubbish dump at St Catherine's Monastery near Mount Sinai. He recovered them, precious documents and old treasures as they are.

Then I worked for a little while at Tyndale House which is a complete research library in Cambridge and a wonderful library for biblical scholarship. I lived in Durham for a number of years. One of the colleges I visited was Ushaw College out in the moors outside Durham with its very old and bleak buildings. Ushaw College had the library from the Douai College, and was the Roman Catholic training centre for the North of England.

I have been to Trinity College Dublin Library, which is the architectural inspiration for this library at Trinity College Melbourne. I suppose my favourite library other than the Ridley College Library is the British Library in London. 13 million books I discovered, which is a lot of books. I remember once arriving in England at 5.30am at Heathrow. By 9am I was in the British Library. The building suits the contents of the library so well. It is a brilliant brilliant place.

So those have all been 'ah ha' experiences. I have had one 'oh no' experience which I'll tell you as a cautionary tale. I was revisiting Durham after many years and there was a special display of the

Lindisfarne Gospels. These are an extraordinary combination of Celtic, Anglo Saxon, Roman, Coptic, and eastern art. It has not only the original text but also the 970s Anglo Saxon translation of the Bible written in the margin. A valuable example of marginalia!

It had been on loan from the British Museum to Durham University. I arrived just as the display closed. However a friend of mine from the University remembered me and invited me to go upstairs for the solemn handing over of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* from the University of Durham to the representatives of the British Museum. So we sat down at this table with the *Lindisfarne Gospels* in front of us. One enthusiastic person took out a magnifying glass, and unfortunately managed to catch a gleam of light coming in from the ceiling. As we watched the Gospels began to glow. Here were the experts burning holes in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*! That was my most painful moment in a library.

I enjoy thinking about the problems of cataloguing. One of my trips back from England I was joined on the plane by a Vietnamese Student. He didn't speak English, I didn't speak Vietnamese, but we communicated in our amateur French. He was coming to Melbourne to study Librarianship a new system of cataloguing books. And so I asked, "What system do you in Vietnam?" He said "We use the French system." And I said "What is the French system?" He said, "Big books, middle books and little books". It is a great way to classify, you know exactly where you are. Big books, middle books, and little books.

A friend of mine moved to an archepiscopal palace. The removalists moved his library, and weren't quite sure how to organise it. They decided to do it by colour. So we had blue books there and black books there

and yellow books there. It was very attractive. He could never find any books but it looked very nice.

I am not a very organised person. I remember reading to my amazement that 'the purpose of filing is recovery.' I had lived with the idea that the purpose of filing is to get papers off the floor. But apparently it is to recover the piece of paper you are looking for. This hasn't yet percolated through to my consciousness but I have it as an ideal at least.

When I went as a student to Ridley College in 1967 the library was in a small room so the books went right up to the ceiling. My mother came to visit me in the College and we went into the library. And she said, 'You won't get your money's worth here. You'll never reach those books up at the top.' I assured her the most useful books were at the bottom

Occasionally when I don't sleep I make up titles of books with the idea of testing the cataloguing ability of librarians. Here are a few I thought of at about 3 o'clock this morning. Where would you catalogue, 'The Humour of John Calvin?' How about, 'The table talk of William the Silent?' Or, 'Mary Antoinette's recipe book for breads and cakes.' Or, Adolph Hitler, 'How to win a war?'

I particularly like books of detective fiction. Murders are my favourite. And when I retire, I plan to take up a profitable career writing a series of murder mysteries which I plan to set in theological libraries. I was inspired by 'The Name of the Rose.' And you can just imagine blind Jorge poisoning the top of the right hand page so every poor monk who licked his finger and picked the page then died of arsenic poisoning. A great way to die. You can always tell by the black tongue and the black finger.

Crime writers do need a theme for their books. You can't just write a book, you have to have a theme. Here are some idea for titles for my crime series: '*Throttled in Theology,*' '*Hanged in Hermeneutics,*' '*Persecuted in Pastoral Care,*' '*Nailed in New Testament,*' '*Dumped in Dogmatics,*' '*Choked in Church History,* and '*Pen-knifed in Preaching.*'

I read a number of years ago a great book by Asa Briggs called *Victorian Cities* [Penguin 1968], in which he writes about the great era of city building of the Victorian era. The features of Victorian cities included big public spaces, big public buildings, the Town Hall, the big post office, the big public library, and on a smaller level of course the Mechanics Institutes, and local libraries and public gardens. He chose a number of cities in England as you might imagine, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, London. He also chose Melbourne, I am pleased to say, as an example of a Victorian city. Of course one can see many of those features are in the cities of Australia and New Zealand. But the point of the book was that Victorian cities were designed for people, that is they were designed for the public to take part in the life of the city. So there are public spaces, they are public buildings, it is a public town hall, it is a public post office, a public library, and public gardens. And I think the ideal is an excellent one, because what it is saying is that knowledge is public.

I enjoy reading clerical autobiographies because they are so restful. They are the best things to read. And I have read *Memory B Green*, by Archdeacon W. Ashley-Brown. [Hutchinson 1977]. His first parish was in the west of New South Wales in the middle of a drought. He rode on his horse visiting these families. Let me just read to you and excerpt from that autobiography.

'In another tiny household I found a family that had always moved out to the edge of the advancing tide of civilisation. I stayed with them and at night had a little family service. When I finished speaking of the cross the old grandmother turned to the family circle and said, 'Fancy that gentleman [she meant Jesus Christ] doing all that for us and us not knowing it. It comes of not taking the newspapers.'

What about 'Treasures old and new?'

We often find that when people use a scriptural saying they actually change its meaning quite radically. You sometimes hear of a footballer that 'He has done a Lazarus.' - which means he has raised himself from the dead. However as you might remember Lazarus didn't have much to do with it really. He was dead and stinking and was raised to life by the Lord Jesus, and did not achieve his own 'come-back' himself.

We often hear, 'Wheels within wheels.' This phrase comes from that great vision of God in Ezekiel chapter one about the majesty and power of God. Rather sadly it usually used by us to describe human machinations within an office or organisation. This is a bit of a come down from a vision of God!

Sad too is the current use of Paul's great statement about his missionary plan to be 'all things to all people.' He meant that he would adapt his style and ministry to try and win people for Christ. However it is now taken to mean 'unreliable,' 'duplicitous,' 'pretending to be different things to different people in order to trick them.'

The saying, 'Treasures new and old' comes of course from the Lord Jesus. In Matthew Chapter 13, Jesus told a number of parables of the sower, the weeds, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price and the net and then Jesus asked the question of the disciples, 'Have you understood all these things?' He said to

them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

Now the scribes were the students of the law, the Torah. They were the teachers of the law and also the administrators of the law and when they are functioning as administrators they are called lawyers. So the scribes and the lawyers are the same group.

If you have read your gospels carefully you will know they don't always get a very good press. But Jesus is using the idea of a scribe in the positive sense. 'Every scribe' he says, 'who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven.' He meant scribes who are learning from Jesus the rabbi, who are being taught by him, those who have understanding like the disciples. 'Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven,' means a Jewish scribe who has become a believer in Jesus, a disciple of Jesus, a learner of Jesus.

'Every scribe who has been trained in the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' The picture is of the householder who has lots of treasures and is bringing out the treasures for the benefit of the members of the household or for her or his guests. And the point of the parable is the householder brings out of their treasure, is bringing out in their teaching what is new and what is old.

'The new' is Jesus' teaching and 'the old' is the Old Testament, Judaism if you like. So a scribe who is not trained in the kingdom of heaven will bring out of their treasure what is old. The scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, that is a follower of Jesus, is to bring out of their treasure what is 'new,' that is, Jesus' teaching, and also what is 'old.' So they bring 'new' and 'old,' Jesus' teaching and the Old Testament.

For earlier in the chapter Jesus has said, 'Truly I tell you many prophets and righteous people long to see what you see and did not see it and to hear you hear and did not hear it.' And later on in the same chapter Jesus quoted the proverb or psalm, 'I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'

So then why does Jesus refer to the new before the old? He doesn't say 'brings out of the treasure 'what is old and what is new,' but rather 'what is new and what is old.'

I think it is because 'the new' is Jesus' teaching and Jesus as a teacher explains the meaning of the Old Testament and part of Jesus' debate with the scribes and lawyers with the Pharisees with the Sadducees, was about the right interpretation of the Old Testament. A scribe rightly trained brings out of their treasure what is 'new,' and what is 'old,' and by the 'the new' they understand the meaning of 'the old'.

The scribes don't get very good press in the gospels. And I think that is because of a bad scribe makes things difficult for those whom he teaches; a bad scribe makes other people feel small, and a bad scribe stops other people learning and growing.

It is rather like the contrast Paul draws so clearly and classically in 1 Corinthians when he talks about the fact that 'knowledge puffs up' but 'love builds up.' He contrasts between the kind of knowledge that makes the person feel superior, 'knowledge puffs you up,' and the love that 'builds up.'

As Paul reminds us, gifts are for the common good. God has given you a gift,

and it is not for your benefit it is for somebody else's benefit. That is what a gift is. A gift is something God has given you for the benefit of somebody else. And 'knowledge puffs up' but 'love builds up.'

You and I in our different ways are like scribes. We have knowledge, we have skills, we have training, but the purpose of that knowledge those skills and that training is not to make us feel superior but to help other people learn. We are not here to make others feel small, but to help them grow. And the great skill of passing on information is to do it in a way which doesn't make the person feel inferior, but to sneak it in so they learn it and then think, 'Oh I can do that now.'

Within your libraries and within yourself you have a great deal of knowledge. The great challenge with that knowledge is to use it for the benefit of others. We are, you and I, on about information. But we are actually on about more than information, we are on about transformation, lives changed, lives enriched. We are about information, transformation, knowledge, that is the discernment of information and finally wisdom. Because the great danger of the information age is that you can know everything and know nothing at all, in the words of Oscar Wilde, 'the price of everything, and the value of nothing.'

My hope and prayer is that through our ministries people might not only know wisdom, but also know Christ 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' And my prayer for you is that you will find great joy in serving God and in serving people for God's sake.

