

## **EDITORIAL**

### **SIGNS OF THE TIMES**

From its biblical origins (Matt 16:3-4), the term “signs of the times” might seem to refer to the approaching end of the world. Some people would prefer that sense of the term. However, today the term “signs of the times” is often used to mean any authentic signs of God’s purpose and presence in our age. The Second Vatican Council mentioned specifically the ecumenical movement, the recognition of freedom of religion, and the growing solidarity of all peoples as “signs of the times”. Now, 30 years after the Council, we might well consider what are the signs of God’s purpose in our age.

In His day, Jesus accused some of the religious leaders of failing to read the “signs of the times”, especially the sign of God’s love and judgment in relation to the kingdom of God. For us, too, the “signs of the times” help bring to mind the importance of being alert for new developments. How is God speaking through the Spirit in our day? In what way is God challenging us through the events of our contemporary history?

Papua New Guinea has been going through a time of crisis, politically, economically, and spiritually. Surely, God has not abandoned the people at this time. If that is so, then how can we interpret the events of history, in the light of the gospel?

God continues God’s saving presence, through the Spirit working in the world, with its grief and anxiety, its joy and hope. So, we look, not so much for signs from heaven, or from the past, but, rather, for God’s presence in the challenges of the here and now. The theology of the “signs of the times” can be of assistance here. On the one hand, the gospel must be shared in ways that respond to the problems people face, and the questions they are asking. On the other hand, people should come to a deeper realisation that life and love, peace and violence, justice and freedom, are faith issues. Faith commitment means witnessing to Christ in the ambiguities of daily life. The Word must shed light on the changing realities of today, so that we can be challenged to respond as Christian

communities. With the eyes of faith, we can find, in these worldly events, the signs of God's promises coming to fulfilment.

The papers published in this volume illustrate some attempts to reflect, in the light of faith, on the contemporary context in Papua New Guinea. Though many of the papers treat "secular" matters, the writers have attempted to relate these events to God's design for the world, and in so doing they point to a dimension that might otherwise be overlooked.

James Downey questions whether the Melanesian experience of the supernatural is being taken sufficiently into account in theological reflection today. Failure to integrate that worldview and Christian faith can easily lead to dualistic thinking, or a form of religious schizophrenia. He argues that proper attention to the Melanesian worldview, with its belief in spiritual powers, may lead to a creative encounter with the Christian message, and, perhaps, the rehabilitation of neglected aspects of Christian doctrine – as he shows with examples from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Catherine Nongkas addresses the issue of the influence of the mass media on the spiritual lives of young people in PNG. The media offer great educational possibilities, yet they can also create obstacles to healthy spiritual development. So, it is important to have education programmes to help people develop critical skills for evaluating the values presented by the media. Nongkas maintains that progress will be made, only when there is a collective effort, with participation of government, churches, and communities throughout the nation.

In his paper, John Koran points out some Christian moral principles relevant to the situation in Bougainville. Plans for peace will come to nothing unless human dignity can be restored. Thus, Christians must look for structures that will promote human values, and basic human rights, for the people of Bougainville. Koran holds that the only true peace is God's gift of peace, which is based on love. The source of that love is to be found in the Word of God, and in listening to people of good will.

Bruno Junalien, writing before the "Sandline" affair, sees a widening gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" in Papua New Guinea. He is

concerned that this may develop into a class structure, which will block many people from equal access to the resources of the country. He says that one must get away from the formula: material expansion equals progress. Economic and social marginalisation are contrary to Christian principles, and so the church has a political responsibility to bring this issue before the public and the government of the nation.

Bill Kuglame tackles an issue that is very relevant to the present situation in PNG – elections. He is concerned with voter responsibility. Through elections, people freely choose and empower a person to represent them in the national parliament. But, unfortunately these days, the election resembles a “gold-rush”, and the custom of the “hand-out” is perverting the electoral process. Kuglame holds that the state and church cannot function independently of each other. Thus, the church must speak the truth, and help educate people to recognise their dignity, as free and intelligent persons.

Finally, Philip Gibbs presents a report on a theological conference that was held in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to commemorate 50 years of the Faculty of Theology at Otago University, and also, sadly, to mark the department’s dissolution. Delegates from Melanesia included Vasi Gadiki, Secretary of MATS, and Samuel and Judith Vusi of Vanuatu. It was not a conference of grand academic papers, but rather a forum for “conversation” about key theological issues in the Oceanic region. Delegates left convinced that there are rich sources for theology in Oceania. Thus, it is important for theologians to be in touch with the pulse of society beyond the churches.

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