

March 6 , 2001

Obituary

Bruce Leslie Smith (1932-2001)

by Peter Jensen

We have lost an extraordinary man. The death of Bruce Smith on Saturday March 3rd from leukaemia takes from us one whose ministry of 45 years was conducted with passion for the things of God, eloquence of the highest order, a broad erudition and a deep humanity. Perhaps the highest tribute we could give him would be to say that he was one of the handful of people whose students regularly found him to be a great and inspiring teacher.

Bruce was born in 1932, and grew up in the Eastern Suburbs. He attended Sydney Grammar School and was part of the fellowship of St Michael's Church Vaucluse. He entered Moore College in 1952, eventually graduating Th.L, Th.Schol, Moore College Diploma, and BD. He was ordained in 1956 and served curacies in Chatswood, Willoughby and Beecroft. Even more significantly, he was one of that group of talented young men who were recruited for theological education by the then Principal Marcus Loane and others, and who formed the basis of the Faculty in the later decades of the century. Apart from a time in England (1963-1966), he taught at the College full time and part time from 1955 until his death. In 1999 he was made a Visiting Fellow of the College in recognition of his services and as a way of inviting his frequent - and cherished - presence. He was equally valued at Sydney Missionary and Bible College where he was likewise a visiting lecturer from 1993.

He taught many subjects over the years, but specialised in the area of philosophy and theology. He was at his best in introducing students to the great thinkers, Christian or non-Christian. He had a remarkable way of empathising with the situation of an historical person, whether Socrates or Schleiermacher or Barth, and enabling his hearers to understand what they were concerned about, and why they spoke as they did. He thus inducted generations of students to a sympathetic and yet critical appreciation of thinkers as diverse as Tillich, Brunner, Kant and Feuerbach. But it was not just theology and philosophy: he had reading groups studying Milton and Homer and modern literature as well. He could equally - and with equal success - also have introduced students to music and to the visual arts.

Higher degrees eluded him, although he began doctoral studies at both Oxford and Cambridge. There were a number of reasons for this, but in the end it was a matter of temperament, and a reminder that degrees are a poor test of the things that really matter in a person or a teacher or a Christian. He was educated to a point where academic awards are of little consequence. In this respect, although he wrote some articles - and published two books of poetry - we have no major work from him. His genius lay in teaching. In the period 1966-1973 he was at the forefront of the public witness of the Diocese of Sydney, as an impressive spokesman in university debate and in the public media, especially television. His distinctive cultured accent and attractive voice, together with his capacity to analyse an argument and put the whole matter in a persuasively Christian way, were invaluable on the public stage at a time when the secularisation of Australian society was becoming more and more apparent.

The collapse of his marriage to Joan caused immense pain to all involved and was the ultimate reason for his withdrawal from full-time lecturing at Moore in 1975. It was a devastating blow, not just for Bruce, Joan (d.1979) and their three sons, David and Robert and Andrew, but also for the evangelical cause of which he was so effective and eloquent a champion. For then on he was lost to the larger arena of public ministry. But his remarkable work at Sydney Grammar School where he taught classics, and his frequent speaking ministry in churches, house parties and conventions continued. In later years, after leaving Grammar, he devoted himself to lecturing at Moore and SMBC in particular.

Towards the end of his life Bruce got to know Newtown bookseller and anti-censorship campaigner, Bob Gould. Given the activities of the two men on opposite sides of some of the great debates of the 60's and 70's, this was, perhaps, a strange confluence. For those who know both of them, however, it was a natural outcome of their many shared human interests. More importantly, it reminds us of the perennial significance of minds shaped by classical thought in a society whose values have shifted so markedly in a relativistic direction. It was also very typical of Bruce's gift of friendship, which was not enclosed by narrow ecclesiastical bounds.

He was an extraordinary man, and so to us there is a mystery in all this: why did God remove him from the public ministry in 1975 at a time when he was so greatly needed? We are forced to ask the question, and yet it is not for us to know the answer. There were those at the time who were quick to point out the flaws in character which no doubt contributed to the situation - and of which Bruce himself was very conscious. But the inner story of his struggle to come to terms with the loss of family, job, home and ministry belongs privately to the story of God's dealing with him as a sinful human being and his transformation into the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. All we can say is that it helped shape a man of deep and wide sympathy, quick but never cruel humour, an understanding of others, a preacher who had poetry forced out of him by pain, and eventually a person whose ministry to others, even from the sick bed, had all the marks of one who had drunk very deeply indeed at the wells of the grace and mercy of God. In the end, his greatest work was no different from any other Christian's: it was to point away from himself to the Saviour whom he loved so well.

Bruce is survived by his three sons and their families.

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The funeral for Bruce Smith will be held at St Andrew's Cathedral at 10am on Wednesday, March 7. Two former Archbishops of Sydney will participate in the service: the service will be led by Bishop Donald Robinson and Archbishop Sir Marcus Loane will preside at the committal. The preacher will be the Bishop of North Sydney, Dr Paul Barnett, and a eulogy will be given by Canon Dr Peter Jensen.

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