

The Real Sacrilege

JOHN CARTER

The Right Reverend John Carter, Suffragan Bishop of Johannesburg, delivered this address at a protest meeting at the University of the Witwatersrand on June 5. The meeting was called to protest against the actions of the police in breaking up a peaceful demonstration on the steps of St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town.

When I was invited to speak at this meeting, I thought it might be because of past associations with the University of Cape Town, where I was Chaplain for six years.

Last Friday, the Cape Town students said: "We are standing up for the freedom we want to regain for all universities in this country. We are protesting against the expulsion of students from the Black universities." I would have been glad to stand with them and to protest with them.

But, in fact, I was invited here to speak about the desecration of St. George's Cathedral.

I have no doubt that the police and their mysterious assistants were involved in an act of desecration. Canon Robert Jeffery said: "It was scandalous. It was an evil desecration of a House of God."

The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of "shocking sacrilege." These were immediate reactions — and many people must have shared them.

We rightly feel that a church should be a sanctuary. It should be a place where we all know that we stand under the same judgement, and where our instinct is not to project our guilt onto some other person or group, but to say "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

And yet, on reflection, I have to admit that there was a certain rough honesty in the actions of those who desecrated the Cathedral.

They were prepared to behave inside the church in the same way as they behaved outside.

If they believed that the way to deal with unwelcome ideas is to hit people on the head, then at least they were consistent. They hit people on the head outside the Cathedral, and they hit people on the head inside the Cathedral.

And the real sacrilege, of course, was not where they did it, but what they did.

I am not so much disturbed by their consistency as by our inconsistency. I find that this presents a challenge. There is a sense in which I don't want our churches to be sanctuaries. For too long they have been places of safety, and our religion has been a religion of escape.

The challenge is that we, also, should be consistent; that as we behave inside the church, so we should behave outside; that what we learn in the sanctuary we should live in the world.

I know that this is a hard saying.

Communism has been very freely invoked by those in authority. Let me say that the present South African Government, like the governments in communist countries, is quite happy to tolerate pietistic religion.

Both types of government are ruthless in the suppression of prophetic religion — that is, religion which refuses to be separated from life. But isn't this real religion, isn't this the real thing?

So, although there was a desecration in Cape Town last Friday, because a church was involved, I believe there would be a far greater desecration if the Church was not involved.

The Temple of God is not something built of brick or stone — it is the human person. And the Church is desecrated wherever man is dishonoured and wherever freedom is suppressed.

It seems to me, then, that the issues have been clarified. Force has broken into the Church. I'm not in favour of shutting the doors. I want to see some traffic in the other direction. Let faith break out into the world.

I believe that we are called to continue peaceful protest, and to remain non-violent — even in this violent society.

This may sound unrealistic and unreal. It may sound like asking the lamb to lie down with the lion.

There was a fair-ground once which had this as a side-show: "Roll up! See the lamb lying down with the lion!" The showman was asked, "Isn't it very difficult?", and he admit-

ted that it was. "It's certainly not easy", he said, "you have to get a new lamb every day."

I do not think for a moment that the call to live out our belief in human dignity and freedom is cheap or easy. There may be more lambs for the slaughter. Those who still stand for unity in a society polarised by mutual hatred may be despised and rejected. But we have the greatest of all precedents for believing that that is not the end of the story.

DAVID DE BEER

was banned

on May 31, 1972

which is why many of you received the last issue of SASH with pages excised. Nothing he says may be published any longer.

BLESSED ARE THEY WHICH ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE; FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

**237 people are at present
banned in South Africa.**

"THOSE WHOM I accuse are the real perpetrators of violence, those who, on the right and on the left, offend against justice and make peace impossible. For myself, I must go the way of a pilgrim of peace. I should much rather be killed than kill."

Archbishop Helder Camara.

The Black Sash, August, 1972



"IT SEEMS to me that when a government is very powerful, and has to use violent methods to maintain its power, this very power rests on great fear. It is as if, unconsciously, it realises that it is building a concrete edifice with its foundations in a swamp."

Baroness Gaitskell.

Die Swart Serp, Augustus, 1972