

NO BULL! – March 2006

"Why does your church worship a bull?" he asked.

The question just dropped into the conversation. Answering that question on the run wasn't going to be easy.

Did he mean Baal?

No way. Ancient (Biblical) history was way off this person's radar.

Was this an insult? People do think Christianity is 'bull'.

No, he was too polite. And as a new arrival to this country he hadn't had time to get acclimatised to Aussie slang.

Then the realisation dawned on me.

"Oh, that bull?" I pointed to a carving in the church grounds. My questioner nodded with approval.

The confusion which our church created was now obvious. How I wish a previous generation hadn't erected that particular monument. In gospel mythology Luke was occasionally represented by a bull, but to my companion and to the outsider, it was bizarre. A religion based on a bull? And we wonder why 'outsiders' find us hard to understand.

Why do we do these things?

Why do we sprinkle our church environment with mystifying images?

Take a walk around your church building.

What does it look like to the unbeliever?

Peer around the corners and examine the interior.

Having left parish ministry, I now find myself in different churches every week. I'm seeing things through the outsider's eyes. The good news is, so far, I haven't seen any more stone animals (apart from when I went to see 'The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe'!). The bad news is I am seeing stuff a blunt Aussie may well designate 'bull'.

It made me think how helpful it would be if we did an 'Outsiders Audit' of our churches.

- Does all the stuff on display detract from the central message about Jesus?
- Is our core concern immediately obvious?
- Is our building neat and tidy or is the same old junk still lying around?
- Are our facilities accessible and clean to all ages and sizes?
- Which photos, notices, signs and news sheets have been up more than a month?

It would be useful getting the most fastidious housekeeper in your church to go over the place as if it were his/her own home.

Obsessive compulsive personalities have their uses!

And let's create a society dedicated to getting rid of all those 'in house' organisational names and titles that mystify the visitor or newcomer. 'Acronyms Anonymous' comes to mind. If not, can we at least have a glossary of terms for the uninitiated? Encountering groups within churches called "FOSLs", "NOSTRILS", "CALVINETTES" and "VELOCITY" left me wondering what they were really on about. Even some church members did not know.

If we want people to come to our churches, or if we are planting a new one, we shoot ourselves in the foot if we allow the debris of previous generations to distract our message.

Maybe someone can do an Anglican version of Ian Kiernan's 'Clean Up Australia' with a title like 'Clean Up Anglican Churches'?

Just one would help. No bull.

