SYNOD CHARGE, SERMON, BIBLE STUDIES & TESTIMONIES 2017

Anglican Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn Bishop Stuart Robinson's Synod Charge Friday 6th October 2017

Synod Charge 2017

Bible reading: Colossians 1:1-14

Prayer

Our Lord and God, May the words of my mouth Be in accord with your word and your will For Jesus' names' sake

Amen

Introduction

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Custodians of the meeting place upon which we gather and in so doing honour the Elders past and present.

Welcome to this the First Session of the 46th Synod in the 154th year of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. It's been quite a journey!

In terms of milestones – and this is slightly indulgent – I celebrate the 30th anniversary of my Ordination to the Priesthood a couple of weeks hence, and the ninth anniversary of my election to this Office.

And there is another significant event we need to acknowledge.

It pertains to the ordination to the Priesthood of a courageous and faith-filled group of women who were set apart as 'Priests in the Church of God' – 25 years ago. To mark the occasion, I have asked one of those dear sisters – still actively involved in church planting and evangelism – the Reverend Canon Gill Varcoe, to be our preacher at this evening's Synod service.

Further, as a way of recognising that the events of last century have borne much fruit - from which we all *currently* benefit, I've invited two recently Priested women to lead the Bible studies on Saturday and Sunday mornings; the Reverend Judy Douglas and the Reverend Emma Street – who with Gill, are people passionately committed to the advance of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All the teaching for this weekend is drawn from St. Paul's letter to the church in Colossae.

The Dream

With the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:3ff, 'I do thank God for you, beloved: your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and your love for all God's people is widely and warmly reported'.

I can say with great confidence that my dream, our dream, to see the love of Jesus transforming people and communities has become a reality in so many contexts. In accord with Colossians 1:6, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

So by way of encouragement, before we get to essential legislation and necessary debate, prior to us hearing of God's mercy to the dispossessed and the marginalised across our communities through agencies and other parish initiatives, I want to share some stories of personal transformation, conversion really, from across our great diocese. I report these accounts with the permission of those to whom I am referring – though some names have been changed.

Stories of faith

Sally

Sally needed to get her kids out of the house. Her abusive marriage was exacting a heavy toll. Sally reasoned that taking them to a local church might possibly provide a sanctuary of sorts. The Reverend David McLennan (real name!) – Rector of St. Mary in the Valley – the place they happened to select, reports that as Sally listened to the children's talks at church she experienced the love and presence of God. Even though there have been some very dark days –and family court was no exception, Sally has felt upheld and sustained by our Lord Jesus. Sally attends the afternoon service and is growing in faith. Dave says that Sally wants everyone in her purview to come to know her friend and helper, the Lord Jesus.

Ben

Ben was an atheist - *and a church warden* in the branch church his grandfather built. Ben was in his mid 80's. Archdeacon Carol Wagner reports that when Ben had a heart attack and was whisked off to St. Vincent's hospital, God gave her the opportunity to speak to Ben about God's love for him in Christ. Carol boldly said on one occasion, 'Ben I suspect there is more going on for you spiritually than you let on; would you like to give your life to Christ?' Ben thoughtfully considered Carol's question and responded, 'Yes, I think I will.' Carol prayed with Ben and he placed his life in Jesus' hands. The next day Ben reported his conversion to his son (a convinced believer) and there was much rejoicing. Carol notes that Ben died not long after and she adds, 'But I look forward to catching up when we next meet'.

Amity

Amity is 13 years of age and is a Year 7 student. Amity attends the Anglican Church in Harden/Murrumburrah with her mother and siblings. Amity is also a member of the 'Connect' lunchtime youth group in her local high school. The Reverend David Rajasekaram sent me this direct quote from Amity: 'I have decided to follow Jesus because I've come to realise that I need forgiveness. It is only through Christ dying for me that I can have a [real] relationship with God. One of the youth group leaders at church and at school, Rachel Rajasekaram – and my mum, has helped me understand faith.' David reports that Amity is keen to be baptised (when the weather gets a little warmer).

Bill

Bill and Elinor moved from Sydney to one of our coastal parishes. Elinor knew and loved the Lord and quickly became the rector's right hand helper. Elinor had been praying for her unbelieving husband, Bill, to come to faith in Christ for 30 years. Elinor was then diagnosed with bowel cancer. A few days before she died, Elinor and her rector were speaking about her hope and trust in Jesus. Bill was present and listening intently. The rector then turned to Bill and said, 'you know you can have this hope too, Bill – would you like to give your life to the Lord?' He looked at his dying wife and said, 'What do you reckon, El – should I?' Elinor could hardly contain her excitement, but wisely told Bill it had to be his decision. Bill nodded and they all prayed together. After

Elinor's death Bill grew in his faith and became a warden and a parish council member before he himself went to Glory.

Mark

Archdeacon David Ruthven reports that newcomer Mark really stood out one Sunday morning *because he was under 60*! Mark attended church as a result of a tooth abscess. His pain was chronic and he could get no relief. He was unable to swallow and his whole throat was swollen. Mark said it was the lowest point in his life, 'I was almost finished', he said. In this dark state Mark thankfully recognised his need to get serious with God; it had to be, on Mark's reckoning, 'an all or nothing decision'. And so he came with his partner to St. John's Wagga. Says Archdeacon David, 'the irrepressible Lorna Ireland found Mark and his partner and has helped them become a part of our church family'.

Leanne

In 2006 the Reverend Judy Douglas made friends with Leanne. They had much in common including pre-school children. Over time Judy spoke about her faith in Christ and prayed that Leanne would respond to the gospel. Then Judy hit upon the idea of inviting Leanne to a Christian women's retreat. Let's hear from Leanne (and I quote), 'It has taken me a long time to find the way home. I thank God for my friend Judy because she could see that I was searching but not getting anywhere. I was nervous about going to the retreat last year because I knew very little about God and Jesus and was going to be with good and devout people for a whole weekend. I really wanted to go but I was worried that I might say *some or many* dumb things. But I went anyway. For the first time I really understood and felt in my heart that I belong to God. I was totally overwhelmed by this knowledge. Then I did Alpha this year - thanks again to Judy - and it was actually awesome to learn about Jesus; all of the things I had always wanted to ask and know about him but was either too scared or too embarrassed to ask. I was energised and inspired and ecstatic because of Jesus. I wondered, 'how have I lived so long without investing in the most important relationship of my life? I want to live for Jesus'.

That is why I can say with great confidence that my dream, **our** dream, to see the love of Jesus transforming people and communities has become a reality in so many contexts. Yes, as per Colossians 1:6, the gospel *is* bearing fruit and growing – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

Now I know that parish ministry is hard work – I'm still pastoring a church too. I also know that – citing Paul again, 'great endurance and great patience' is required (Colossians 1:11). And that is why – in the light of what we've just heard and in recognition of the fact that the ground is exceedingly hard in so many places, I want to re-emphasise the very simple plan or strategy I brought to the three sessions of the 45th Synod; the '3 D's'.

Deployment, Debt and Development.

The Three D's revisited

In the course of this Synod you will hear more on this matter, so I'll be brief.

Deployment

Over the past few years we have been blessed abundantly by God's provision of women and men, lay and ordained, who have grasped with clarity and thankfulness that God has 'rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves in whom there is redemption and the forgiveness of sins' (Colossians 1:13ff) and are actively and sensitively promulgating those truths – as evidenced by those wonderful stories of transformation we heard a moment ago.

So *in the last five years alone* we have ordained **56** clergy into a range of roles and situations: chaplains, church planters, rectors of parishes, pastoral carers, and so it goes. Some are remunerated, some are self funded. They vary in age from their 20's to their late 60's. Their common aim – as they work along-side parishioners, lay workers and within community groups, is to see the love of Jesus transform people and communities. We are much blessed, I would opine.

Debt

Our Diocesan Services team - under the peerless leadership of Mr Trevor Ament and in concert with Bishop-in-Council - has been fearlessly addressing legacy and residual structural financial debt. And Mr Ament will speak to this in due course.

One 'debt' to which I have made reference in past years, and to which I now turn, pertains to historic child sexual abuse in our Diocese. As you know, we have – over time – received disclosures of historic child sexual

assault. And the 'Royal Commission' has been a fillip for some people to make known (to us) the impact of the abuse that all too often they have carried in silence, fear and pain.

Our Professional Standards team works diligently and carefully with those who have come forward to disclose abuse. The way in which we provide care varies according to the needs of *each individual*.

Help includes pastoral support, counselling, enabling independent legal and financial advice, and the provision of financial 'care and assistance packages'.

We also seek to be what is termed a 'model litigant' if survivors of abuse go to law. This is important as our witness to Christ is seen in the *manner* in which we interact with people as well as the *outcome* of these interactions.

From the beginning of 2016, we have been providing care to **22** survivors of child sexual assault.

In addition, we have also drawn alongside and supported a number of family members connected with survivors.

And there is no quick fix.

We'll be engaging with these families – in some cases – for the rest of their lives.

As I have reported previously, we have consciously and carefully used historic assets to facilitate redress procedures and to offset outgoings as they pertain to this kind of historic debt.

And it is ongoing.

We must continue to be responsive to those who have been abused. This is for their sake and ours; how can we hold out the gospel of Christ without acknowledging our failures and assisting people in moving towards wholeness?

We aim – with the saints in Colossae, 'to live a life worthy of the Lord and to please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good way'. (Colossians 1:10).

The impost – to date – is around two million dollars.

Let me put this in its fuller context: there are 15 alleged perpetrators associated with disclosures made in the last 2 years. These alleged perpetrators have served in positions of trust in parishes across the Diocese.

As a result of courageous people coming forward, two of those perpetrators are now in prison and one is awaiting trial later this year.

For some survivors, there is no opportunity for justice to be done through the criminal system, as alleged perpetrators are deceased.

I encourage anyone who has been harmed, or has knowledge of people being mistreated, to make contact with our Professional Standards team.

I apologise unequivocally for sexual and other abuses that you or those known to you have endured. Such activity is unconscionable and reprehensible.

Development

It follows, I would opine, that the debt we owe those who have been mistreated whilst in our care must be addressed via an income stream generated by the development of our historic assets.

Last year Bishop in Council agreed to the *Property Development Ordinance* which created the Property Development Commission – ably led and chaired by Mrs Meg Brighton. Their charter, in short, is to identify sites and buildings that can be redeveloped in order to address debt and deploy gospel workers.

Ground will be broken in the course of this coming year on community housing projects in Campbell and Deakin.

The Wider Church

This week Anglican Primates from across the Communion have gathered with the Archbishop of Canterbury to ponder a raft of theological, jurisdictional and relational matters. There is much at stake. Do please pray for a spirit of reconciliation and love.

Closer to home we are also experiencing a season of change and challenge. The dioceses of Adelaide, Newcastle, Bunbury, Perth, Bendigo and Gippsland have undergone or will experience imminent change in episcopal leadership and there are further retirements pending.

That season of challenge must also include our conversation around the definition of marriage and the national postal vote. Whilst this House will have many views on this matter, I do commend you – as a Diocese – for the way in which you have conducted yourselves as you've worked through material that we've provided and as you've graciously listened to, and sought to understand, different perspectives. Thank you.

I note, in passing, the most recent General Synod resolution (that I have sent to all members of this House) which both reaffirms the doctrine of our church, in line with traditional Christian teaching, that marriage is an exclusive and lifelong union of a man and a woman, and further, calls for the Doctrine Commission of General Synod to facilitate a respectful conversation in our church by means of a collection of essays on marriage and same-sex relationships that explores Scriptural and theological issues. A process in which we ourselves engaged creatively and cooperatively in the 45th synod.

There is much work to be done in this arena and my prayer is that we'll *continue* to conduct ourselves with – as Paul says in Colossians 1:8, 9 – 'love in the Spirit' and 'through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives'.

Closing comments

Thank you for being willing to serve as members of Synod. It is generally a thankless task yet your participation is a means by which the gospel is advanced across our diocese.

I do also wish to thank my Episcopal team for their support and friendship, Bishops Trevor, Matt and Stephen; the Archdeacons and Dean Phillip Saunders; the Anglican Diocesan Services team with Mr Trevor Ament at the helm; the Chancellor, Justice Richard Refshauge, and his colleagues on our legal advisory group; Bishop-in-Council; our Professional Standards Officers - the Reverend Peter Barnett and Mrs Celia Irving; the Reverend Dr Andrew Cameron and the staff at St Mark's; Mr Jeremy Halcrow and the Anglicare team; our diocesan agencies and commissions; my dutiful and faith-filled team of intercessors; my Executive Officer Ms Bev Forbes; my Administrator F5/West Goulburn Mrs Deb Walsh; and my unfalteringly joyful and effervescent wife, Jane; – all of whom subscribe to, and model, that love of Jesus which transforms individuals and communities.

The Lord be with you!

Synod Sermon St Saviour's Cathedral Friday 6th **October 2017 The Reverend Canon Gill Varcoe**

Synod sermon 2017

[Readings Isaiah 6.1-8; Ps 29; Colossians 1.15-29; John 12.20-28]

Let us pray: Father, glorify your name. Amen

In March 1966, a smart, self-sufficient, ambitious 15 year old atheist found herself sitting in the little Baptist church just down the road at an evangelistic rally. At the end of the service, she sat pinned in her seat. No idea what had happened to her cheerful self-reliance, except that she'd run into something huge, the only self-sufficient One: King of kings and Lords of lords, the creator of the universe, high and lifted up, holy and awesome.

And like Isaiah she was undone.

She was also called that night.

Twenty-one years later, that call found new expression in the Anglican church, as I was ordained deacon around the feast of St Thomas in 1987, and five years later, as priest in 1992. I like it that I was ordained on Thomas' day — I dare say we have all, like Thomas, had our share of doubts and griefs — but more than anything else nowadays it's not his doubt and grief, but his response when he does see Jesus that connects me to him. There's no indication in the story that he does what he says he wants to do, no indication that he touches Jesus, just that cry from a transformed heart: 'My Lord and my God!'

Has it ever struck you how very odd that is? It's clear from the resurrection stories that they encountered a man, flesh and blood. Much the same man that they'd walked with and joked with and learned from for three years; but Thomas doesn't greet him with 'Maaate!! You had us right scared! Great to have you back!' No. 'My Lord and my God'.

Thomas was a Jew. Worshipping a man as God was not in the script.

And that brings us to Colossians: listen to this!

'15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

And not only that, but 'Christ in us, the hope of glory'!

The only response I can find in myself to this is awe. Wonder that God himself should bend to come among us, wonder that we have been invited into intimate relationship with the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who holds all of creation together. I note that worship and awe isn't very much in our cultural script. The last thing we want to do is live flat on our faces before God! I was preaching a few months ago at an induction in another place and afterwards one of the priests wrote me an impassioned complaint because I'd preached on surrender, on being yielded to God. She was horrified that I could suggest such a thing. I do get that. It took me a very long time to unlearn my fear of surrender. Surrender is utterly counter-cultural, and I'd say most particularly for women who've struggled for a voice, to be seen, to be treated with respect, let alone treated equally.

But that is what God is after in us; in all that happens to us, he's seeking deeper trust and dependence. Jesus doesn't get to be our Saviour unless he's also our Lord.

And I'm eternally grateful that I met him as Lord well before I understood my need for a Saviour. I even declined on that night over 50 years ago to say 'the sinner's prayer'! I note, by the way, that God didn't seem to mind that I didn't get it: I'd woken the next morning with a joy I'd never experienced before, utterly transforming joy, and had gone back the next night, got out of my seat and gone up the front to make a public declaration of faith.

Now you will not be surprised to know that I've been reflecting on this 50+ years of discipleship, 30 years as a deacon, 25 as a priest. It's often routine under such circumstances to ask 'where have the years gone?' But I know where they've gone. There's been abundant blessing; by the grace of God fruitfulness even when I wasn't 'on the ball'. There are also regrets, both personal and on behalf of my generation. I am more and more aware that we — my generation — have been asleep at the wheel. I regret the state my generation has left the world in: greed, for example, (which according to Col 3 is 'idolatry') leaving the planet struggling to breathe; and our carelessness with relationships, our blind selffocus and pursuit of wealth and pleasure. We've lost our way (Tom Wright in his excellent small book on modern paganism and the church tells the story of the absent-minded professor who sends his wife a telegram: 'Am in Coventry. Where am I meant to be?'¹)

We need, I believe, to find our Way in Jesus once more, to see him as he is, and recommit to radical discipleship. The Church under our watch has been almost oblivious to huge cultural changes — we have accommodated ourselves to that change, and too often have missed how profoundly counter-cultural the gospel is. Note that there's warning in Colossians 1 too: warning about suffering for the sake of the gospel, and warning about the threat of loss if we do not persevere, and in chapter 3 the very clear statement of how we are to live as a consequence of God's grace and mercy. The way of the world we live in is very much the way of 'sexual immorality, of greed, anger, malice, and of abusive language'. How deeply attractive is the new baptismal clothing of compassion and kindness, humility and patience, peace and love.

The divide between the proclamation of the gospel and our culture has become for me sharply focused in recent months in the debate over marriage.

Now, first let me say that the one thing I am glad about is that at least and at last we are talking about marriage. But I have been deeply dismayed at how both sides, Christians arguing for 'yes' and Christians arguing for 'no', have often blindly followed the prevailing culture.

On the 'yes' side the thoughtless agreement that marriage is only about 'love' (so when one falls in or out of love, we just move on, yes?) rather than commitment and sacrifice for the sake of the other. And on the 'no' side, the careless talk from Christians that they are defending 'traditional marriage' as if it is the same as the Christian vision of marriage. Why would we defend something that has been often unsafe for women and for children (and therefore, I would suggest, for men)?

So what is the counter-cultural response? It is time I would say for us to look hard at ourselves and our relationships, to offer the world something undeniably beautiful, the New Testament vision of marriage, where wives and husbands treat each other 'in the same way' (1 Peter 3) as Jesus does in his self-sacrificing self-giving for the sake of the world. Marriages that demonstrate what true community looks like, and undergird fully inclusive communities of

¹ Tom Wright, Spiritual and Religious: The gospel in an age of paganism, SPCK 2017

faith, love and stability and mutual service overflowing to the benefit of all, including those of us who are celibate. 'Christ in us, the hope of glory' indeed!

We live in a fundamentally pagan society, a society where the worship of false gods is rife (the thesis of Tom Wright's book I referenced earlier). Like the early Christians we are also needing to throw off both the certainties and complacencies of being 'religious' (along with our idols), as well as the pagan lifestyle we are so accustomed to, and align our hearts with the radical transforming challenge of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our culture with its progressive certainties and aggressive dismissal of dissent presents us with new challenges. We're not used to rejection and dismissal. But let's get used to it: God continues to be at work calling us to account, cleaning us up, confronting us with our syncretism and accommodations.

He also calls us to look again at what he has put in our hands.

I love that moment in John's gospel when Jesus says to his companions that though they are indeed servants, he's now calling them friends. He invites us into partnership with him in bringing the coming Kingdom. He invites us to a new awareness of the wonder of our rescue from the power of darkness and welcome into the Kingdom (Col 1.13-14). He invites us, reconciled with God, 'holy and blameless and irreproachable before him', to join him as he works to reconcile others. With Paul, we are commissioned 'to make the word of God fully known'.

We live in a world where modern-day Greeks come and say to us 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Beloved, it is 'he whom we proclaim'.

Let us this night, renew once more our allegiance to this gospel, to this Lord, both for our own sakes and for the sake of the world.

Bible Study 1 Colossians 2: 1-9 Saturday 7th **October 2017 The Reverend Judy** Douglas (with comments)

Colossians 2: 1-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

2-For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. 2 I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Fullness of Life in Christ

6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives [b] in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, [c] and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily

**Jan's Story

Jan, a member of St James Holt has struggled with ongoing illness over the last few years. With Brett, the associate minister of St James she had prepared for her possible funeral. It was Jan's wish that Brett would speak and share the gospel with her family and friends. The importance of this wish became really clear over time. Brett went on extended leave and soon after Jan's condition deteriorated. We were wondering whether Brett would be back in time, but Jan waited. Brett returned and was able to see Jan. She passed away hours after. At her funeral, which I can only describe as inspiring and wonderful, Jan's wishes were met.

Brett clearly, sensitively explained that Jan, who was a very good person was in heaven but not because of her own goodness or achievements. She was in that place because of what Jesus had done, because of the forgiveness that came through his death on the cross. Brett invited more than 200 people present to respond to Christ, acknowledge their need for forgiveness, live their lives in Jesus and receive this assurance of life in eternity.

For Jan this was the most important news she could offer at the end of her life.

Take Away

Strive, work hard for what really matters; maturity in Christ for ourselves and in our brothers and sisters.

Look out for distractions. Stay focussed and centred on the core of our faith. Jesus needs to be at the centre.

Maturity in our knowledge of Christ and the gospel is very important but maturity is also seen in our Christlike actions and character, in the amount of thanksgiving in our lives.

Commented [C(A1]: Contending, striving, working Hard What is the focus of your hard work in church life?

Paul's hard work is for a focussed purpose – the maturity of those who follow Jesus See 1:10 - so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully element of the purpose of the lord o

pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. Notice this is a two-fold maturity

•Growing knowledge and understanding - THOUGHT •Bearing fruit in good work and character – ACTION

The need for balance

Commented [C(A2]: One part of Xn maturity is growing in understanding of Christ Unpacking the mystery Spiritual wealth is in •assured, firm, complete understanding •knowing God's mystery The complex gospel, takes time to understand - like a diamond with many facets The simple gospel: do / done See **Jan's story

See note on vs 8-9 below

Commented [C(A3]: Xn maturity is also practical – living your life in Jesus

1:10 - bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God

True knowledge of God transforms us, changes us into people whose lives are fruitful in good works

Also internal strength of character emerges 1:11 - prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father,

Commented [C(A4]: Here and in 1:12. Thanksgiving is mark of maturity - generous amounts of thanksgiving. Abounding, overflowing, filled with thanksgiving

Commented [C(A5]: WARNING! Distractions! Don't be deceived by plausible arguments 2:4 We can get side-tracked into ideas and practices that inhibit maturity in Christ – Colossians has a long list of em! Bodily circumcision, food and drink laws, observance of particular days or festivals, self-abasement, worship of angels, visions from strong individuals.

What distracts us today from the core truths of our faith?

Vs 9 reminds us that even though it might be hard for modern people to accept; Jesus Christ was God – the whole fullness of deity dwells BODILY in Him

Bible Study 2 Colossians 2: 8-15 Sunday 8th October 2017 The Reverend Emma Street

Synod Bible Study, 8 October 2017 Colossians 2:8-15 Revd Emma Street

> By way of context: within the body of the Church my own calling is to help lost travelers - perhaps needing to meet Jesus, or perhaps looking for a casual understanding to grow into a solid relationship – by connecting them into the community of the body of Christ and conversely helping that community to go outward towards the traveler on the road. Thus I am looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, particularly vv 2:8-15, in the context of community.

As we have gathered together for this Synod we will have shared a number of encouraging examples of people whose lives have been transformed by the knowledge and love of Jesus.

Many of these people were assisted in their journey towards God through the offerings and outreach of a community of Christians. Some of these people ventured alone into our places of worship and gathering. Others began with a personal, individual connection with a believer who later brought them into the community - to worship, or an outreach group, a retreat, or an Alpha course.

In saying 'community' I am avoiding the word 'church' to avoid conjuring an image of a building or institution. Paul did not think institutionally, except to caution against it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides some words that clearly articulate Paul's idea of church, which I believe applies at both a personal and corporate level:

'Since the ascension, Christ's place on earth has been taken by His Body, the Church. The Church is <u>the real presence of Christ</u>. – We should not think of the Church as an institution, but as a person, though of course a person in a unique sense' (The Cost of Discipleship).

I start here because my point is that communities can evangelise and it is not only the task of intrepid souls prepared to head out alone, or in pairs, into perilous places. Also because, however someone comes to a relationship with Christ, they will most likely, we hope, join a Christian community. As this letter to the Colossians (and Ephesians, Galations ...) attests, that is where things get complicated.

Thinking of the 'almost' and the 'new' Christians among us. Thinking back to when each of us received that great profound sense of Jesus' presence in our lives. Paul is saying, remember this and don't let that wonderful moment be undermined by a kind of bondage to religious practice. I offer a few questions to reflect on as we look to Paul's guidance:

- a. What happens in their life the day after someone is drawn to Jesus?
- b. How does an established community respond and assist new members to become 'mature in Christ'? (Col 1:24)
- c. How does a group of people with different backgrounds, different secular roles, different notions of religion and faith, hold together as a united 'body'?
- *d.* How does the 'body' exist <u>apart from</u>, and yet simultaneously <u>part of</u>, a different world?

How do we read this letter from Paul and answer these questions as a community?

The pressing point of this Epistle for us TODAY, and particularly v2:8, is that we are not reflecting on historical issues. Like that early church, we hold Paul's charge in our hands and take responsibility for the strength of the church TOMORROW. We must not underestimate the weight of this short letter Paul writes from prison to a community he has never met.

Living 'in the World' (Col 2:6, 2:8)

In v 2:6 Paul exhorts the community to 'continue to live your lives'. We have joined this Christian community but we are still 'in the world'. As the '<u>real</u> <u>presence of Christ'</u> we must be actively engaged in the world.

Negatively - our presence 'in the world' leaves us open to influences that might pull us away from God.

The universal perils are outlined in v2:8:

'See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elements of the universe, and not according to Christ'.

It is generally accepted that Paul is here addressing ascetic practices, certain kinds of Jewish mysticism and pious behaviours, leading a church of new believers away from God before they were mature enough in faith to discern the right path. These practices have been brought into the church from the world and other religious influences.

A good deal of us who gather for a Synod are well established in Christ. However, we should not be complacent that the same perils are not near us. Many of the issues facing the Diocese and the world attest to that. However, for those feeling confident, perhaps the lesson of discipleship we should take from this text is to question whether we are examples of a Christ-centred life, or whether we are the false teachers. Are new believers safe in our hands? Do we offer the fullness of the body or a human tradition?

Positively – our calling to be 'in the world' brings us to know the influences which pull others away from God. Our brokenness and ongoing struggle to keep Christ in the centre equips us for the task of helping others with their struggle.

Thus, the perils must be faced:

Philosophy and empty deceit: The arguments of contemporary intellectuals. Those who seek wisdom and knowledge in the absence of God. Mysticism gone wrong. Humanist as opposed to God-centred philosophy. 'Spirituality without religion'?

Human tradition: matters of food and drink, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths (Col 2:16) Services, prayer books, vestments? Organs? *Ascetic practices as disguised indulgences of those very cravings they were supposed to kill (John Wesley).*

Our human traditions must be understood as in contrast with the truth we have received, not of man, but of God (cf. Gal 1:12)

Elements of the universe: (rudiments of the world): Self abasement, worship of angels (spiritual forces of the world, not God) (Col 2:18)

(Living) not according to Christ: Marcus Loane summarises Paul's sentiments, in a statement (chillingly) pertinent to the current condition of our society, and perhaps some parts of the Church:

'All pagan culture tends to degenerate at length because culture which fails to place the Son of God at its center leads to spiritual vacuity' (Three Letters from Prison).

Living 'In Him' (Col 2:9-11) United in Love (Col 2:1)

'in Him the fullness of the deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness (complete self-realisation) in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority' (Col 1:19, cf Eph 1:19).

Paul affirms that the foundation of discipleship is not strict observance with pious endeavour, but instead identification with the accomplishments of Christ.

The life of the disciple centers primarily around fellowship, expressed in word and deed, with God and with one another. The focal point of reference for Paul is not a book or a rite, neither a code (Judaism) nor a cult (Hellenistic), but a set of relationships (Banks, Paul's Idea of Community).

In referencing circumcision Paul addresses an area of conflict between the 'old Law' and new Christianity that is not so relevant to us except in its contrast with the Baptism we now enjoy. A new mark of being God's people that now applies to all: Jew and Gentile, man and woman. The mark of an intimate relationship with God. Circumcision establishes the context for the ultimate statement of v15.

In the act of dying Jesus was stripped of the flesh through which the evil powers of the world had been able to attack him, and rising in new life, triumphed over them. In their 'spiritual circumcision', believers can say 'in Him' they have put off the old self and put on the new. The old skin has been shed and a new life in God has begun.

For those who struggle to describe salvation to the non-believer Col 2:13-14 provides all the words you need. My sins were nailed to a cross and I walked away with Jesus (leaving them behind).

Our principal relationship is with Christ, and from this all relationships flow.

The knowledge of God's mystery that is Christ - Col 2.2 (Col 2:9-15)

I'll boldly label Paul's response to empty philosophy as mystic wisdom. 'Mystic' talk makes many of us uncomfortable. Is Paul not primarily addressing the error of 'mystic' practices?

Paul's aim is to guide us away from that mysticism which looks like a 'dream world' where words are confused with things, and symbols with reality, towards the true goal of 'attainment of universal truths' (Underhill, The Essentials of Mysticism). The treasures of wisdom and understanding found only in Christ (Col 2:3)

Paul's intensely spiritual language articulates our joining in Christ's death and resurrection [vv2:8-15] - '*spiritual circumcision*', in the '*circumcision of Christ'*, '*buried with him'*, '*alive together with him*'. This letter urges readers to <u>forsake</u> <u>pale imitations of spirituality for the wonder of the 'real thing' in Christ</u>.

Correct ascetic practice is simply, being still *and* knowing He is God (Ps 46:10). In this overloaded world, people will be attracted by our stillness, we need to introduce them to God.

The profound Christological centre to this Epistle in vv 2:9-15 clarifies the true wisdom. Salvation, as it is worked out in the Christian experience, is centred on the idea of a mystical union between Christ and believer. 'It is a union which is established by faith, spiritual in nature and ethical in its results'. (Scott, Footnotes to St Paul) I might suggest that the ethical results are addressed in part in Colossians 3.

It is through union with Christ that we are a complete person and in his union with us he remains present in the Body. Thus we are simultaneously 'in him' and filled with all *His* fullness (Col 2:9, Jn 1:16).

Paul's message: We are not complete in Church we are complete in Christ. When we are complete in Christ, we are a Church.

Synod Testimony The Reverend Andrea de Vaal Horciu

Dean Phillip asked me to talk about my vocation.

I have been on such an amazing journey that it is hard to know where to begin. On my journey of faith, I have been called with the love of God to work with families with children and youth. I think often in the church we view family and children's ministry as a place for training to get ready to step up for real ministry. But actually, I think this is the real future for ministry and a true vocational calling. Families, youth and children are the future of our church and often today we are learning to minister to them a little bit differently than the traditional churches used to.

In the Gospels, Jesus acknowledged the immense value of children. In Jesus' culture, children tended to be ignore or devalued, but he made it clear that he viewed children as people with great value in the sight of God. Jesus reached out to children, welcoming them into his presence and blessing them (Matthew 19:14-15).

Very early on, when I first become a Christian, I had always had a heart of prayer for children and their families. Even now after many years of ministry I ask the same question: How can we reach out with Jesus' love to bless children and their families, in our homes, neighborhoods, churches and communities?

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is John 13:34-35. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." We are called to love each other - unconditionally.

I have been so blessed to have worked in with families, youth and children in many different countries and circumstances. In Romania I worked with abandoned babies with HIV and AIDS. I also worked with children who live on the streets and in the sewers of Bucharest. My time in Romania brought me to question my faith. I asked, "How can the God, whose great unconditional love I had experienced, I had been transformed and felt his presence, bring pain and suffering to these little people".

The love of one very beloved child of God spoke to me through her death. In the midst of sadness and grief I felt God's presence, strength and love. God showed me through the death of one precious little girl, that the greatest healing in life, is life with Jesus Christ either in heaven or here on earth. For these babies, the greatest healing was to be with Jesus. This was the beginning of an important part of my ministry in understanding God's unconditional love for all children.

My husband and I moved to North Wales, and I studied at Chester University as a youth worker and worked with young people with eating disorders. I also developed a program to support young mums to go back school. I helped develop Minnows, which was one of the first Messy churches, and developed a rural youth program for kids who were often isolated. When our oldest child Lulu turned 6 and Joshi was 3 we moved to Australia.

In Australia I had the blessing to work as a family minister at Holy Covenant and St James, were we still have many close friends. Then I worked as the Cross-cultural minister at St Philips with the African Dinka Community. This opened my eyes to the struggles of refugee families and opened my heart to walk an amazing four-year journey with a very special community of faith.

Alongside this work I work as a Scripture Union school chaplain. I love my role as a chaplain in Government schools. I worked in Black Mountain school for 5 years journeying with families and youth affected by disability. Chaplaincy at Black Mountain brought so many challenges but also so many blessings.

With the support of Anne Ranse and Jane Robinson and the others in the diocese, I recognised the calling to journey more deeply with the families affected by disability. "For God so loved the world" – sometimes we forget that this means the whole world – not just our little bit of the world, or the parts we like.

All people without exception matter to God! Our worth and value as human beings is not based on what we can do or what we can't do. It's not based on the education we have, how much money we make, the language we have or not, or the shape of our bodies or how we look.

The worth of a human being is rooted in the truth that God loves each and every one of us. He loves all people unconditionally because we are made in HIS image.

According to the Bible a person is not diminished by what they can or can't do, their ability or disability. There is nothing that we do that can make God love us any more or less. We all belong to God by HIS grace. God's love and God's grace are big enough to include all people.

It's because of this idea of inclusion that Embracing Ministries has developed. Through loving and journeying with families who have children and young people with special needs over the last 9 years I have come to realise that all people need the opportunity to experience the love of God and hear the gospel message.

The love of one family brought me to have confidence to listen to God's call, and work more purposefully in the area of inclusion as a servant of God within our diocese.

I journeyed with and supported a family with a child entering palliative care. For a number of years, I visited this little girl frequently at home - bringing activities and songs from school to home. The little girl became very ill and the family asked me to say prayers with her. They were not particularly a Christian family but felt that they wanted someone to acknowledge her and love her in a time that she was so very sick. I sang a blessing to this precious girl, and as I sang she opened her eyes and smiled. She began to get a bit better over the following weeks. It became a routine that I would sing a blessing every time I saw her. I know that this was God's gift for me and for her. The family where astounded by the way their daughter responded when I sang her the blessing. She would smile and open her eyes and really respond and enjoy the love of God at that moment.

A few years later, this precious, little soul passed away. A couple of weeks after the funeral I went to visit the family. I spoke to the little girl's mother, who confided in me that she wished her child had gone to Sunday school. She wished she could have experienced God and heard the stories. She told me that the only times her little girl had attended church was at her Baptism and at her funeral.

I came away from the house with such a heavy heart and soul. I reflected on so many families - how much I had grown to love them and how hard it was for them to go to church. It weighed heavy on my heart. All children, youth and adults regardless of their abilities needed to know that God loves them and to hear the gospel.

I would like to share to share a part of my journey with Embracing Ministries from the past 18 months through a power point presentation.

Synod Testimony The Reverend Yvonne Gunning

Hi my name is Yvonne Gunning and there are three words for my story.

I am Kamilaroi, my mother was aboriginal. The first word for my story is **PAIN**. I was Aboriginal and it was a secret, my nana was part of the stolen generation, and taken to an aboriginal mission when she was young. There was much pain in the family, I felt it but didn't really understand why. My parents tried to protect me from the racism and the possibility of being taken like my nana as aboriginal kids were still being taken in the 70's when I was growing up.

One of my favourite childhood memories was going to Kids camp. I wanted to cheer during the Synergy presentation, as I loved camp. My mum worked fulltime and rather than leave me to my own devices and home alone I used to go to camp every school holidays. I loved camp. It was a special part of my life. It was a model for Christian community. It was where I met Jesus. When I was 12 years old I had a leader that was a Christian, and one evening she shared with me that Jesus was Gods son and that he came to earth to die on a cross for my sins so that I could have a relationship with God. I had never heard this story before as my parents didn't go to church. I am rather a passionate person and so I argued with my leader saying God did not have a right to be in charge of my life. BUT I didn't sleep that night and decided I needed to know more, after all I wasn't baptised and was worried that I couldn't go to heaven. The next morning I want to my leader and asked her more questions and decided Ihat this was the path I really wanted to take. I prayed with her on the spot and I asked Jesus to take over my life. I went home and announced to my family that I had become a Christian.... and that I was taking myself to church. So I did. I caught the train each Sunday. Meeting Jesus was the best thing I had ever experienced as I felt His unconditional love. The second word is LOVE

I had a hunger to learn about God and read my bible I loved being with others who had a relationship with Jesus and I learned from them. My parents told me it was a phase and I would get over it..... Long phase! I never ever "got over" what Jesus did so I could have friendship with God....

The hunger to learn about God and share His love never left me and At 32 yrs of age I felt called by God to serve Him in a more formal role. This began a few days a week at first and grew into fulltime ministry roles as my daughters got older. I trained with Church Army served as an evangelist & worked as assistant minister for just over 20 years in Sydney diocese. Five years ago I began to pray that God would move me, I was working in a very large church with 6 part time staff on my team and I longed to be able to preach and see God at work elsewhere. Each morning as I prayed I began to get the sense that I was to be ordained. I kept seeing a picture where I was kneeling with someone laying hands on my head. Whilst serving on mission in New Zealand after the earthquake I knelt for communion and I heard Gods voice clearly telling me that I would lead a church not long after the mission in New Zealand my husband Jeff came home and told me he was being made redundant. When he asked me how I felt I cheered, as we both new God was moving us to serve in another diocese....... and here I am leading... and serving God in the parish of Gundagai & Tumut. My final word is **HEALING** My journey has been one of healing since I met Jesus, he continues to he.al me, a Kamilaroi woman, and I have that to share with those I meet! The good news of Jesus that has transformed my life!

Synod Testimony The Reverend David McLennan

Called to Ordination – Beginning with the end in mind

'Tomorrow you will turn you back on every other human ambition, and commit yourself to living a cross-shaped life.' These words, spoken by Bishop Trevor the day before my ordination, were bracing, to say the least. But getting to this point was not entirely straightforward.

Early in life I'd felt a call to ordained ministry. So when I moved from Queensland to Canberra to begin work in the public service, I thought (like many new graduates do), that my Canberra experience would just be a short rest-stop before theological study.

But leaving aside lots of minor detours, including a stint in the Army, my move to Canberra signalled something far more significant. It marked the beginning of a long period in which two seemingly contradictory lessons grew up alongside each other.

The first was just the sheer value and goodness of so-called 'secular' work. I found there was work to be done that was fascinating and stimulating. There were positive relationships to be enjoyed with colleagues - not simply as a means to sharing the gospel (although of course this privilege came up from time to time), but as good things in themselves.

I began to notice, with alarm, how little Christian teaching I'd received about 'work'. The workplace is, after all, the arena where much of the Christian life is lived out as an offering to God. I came to deeply appreciate the richness of the Biblical testimony on the goodness, the joy, the value – and yes, the frustrations – of regular work. On the whole, it felt good to be in the thick of it.

After a decade in the public service I found myself as a senior intelligence analyst in the Office of National Assessments. It was interesting work, there was a healthy travel budget, great colleagues, and even a half-decent coffee machine.

Yet there was a second lesson that was dawning on me at the same time, which threatened my sense of comfort and professional satisfaction.

In Stephen Covey's classic, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the key habits he identifies is 'beginning with the end in mind'. That is, our lives should be lived in a way that makes sense, given what we value for the future.

It just so happens that the New Testament has a great deal to say about the 'end' we should have in mind. However much we are inclined to avoid or soften the New Testament's language, it's testimony is clear enough: that *we all*, in St Paul's language, *must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Dr Johnson famously said that the man who knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight finds that it concentrates his mind wonderfully. So too does honest reflection on our accountability to Christ for the way we have used the gifts we've been given. It certainly

began to concentrate my mind in an increasingly uncomfortable direction, exposing how prone I was to finding my status and identity in my work and middle class comforts.

Eventually I began to count the costs. The financial costs, of course, but more significantly, the more existential costs. If I put myself forward for ordination, my carefully crafted niche within the social economy of Canberra would be no more. (People basically know how to talk to a middle-manager in the APS. But what do you say to a priest?)

Telling my colleagues of my decision confirmed my intuitions. I don't think their responses would have been much different if I'd told them I'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer: a momentary loss for words, clarifying questions, awkward expressions of well-wishing, all mingled with looks of concern and puzzlement.

And yet since making that break, 8 years ago now, I've never had reason to doubt the fundamental rightness of that call, nor to doubt the abundant provisions of God at every step along the way. On the other hand, I've had every reason to be confirmed in my conviction of the utterly vital role in human history that is played by Christ's church; that despite its often scratchy appearance, when all is said and done there is no public service department, or institution of any kind, that matches the cosmic significance of the Christian church – the place where Christ, the Son of God, is proclaimed.

To 'begin with the end in mind' will look different for each of us. But whether the implications are behavioural, vocational, or fall into some other domain, I'm quite certain that none of us will be hurt, and many of us will be helped, by more extensive reflection on the fact that we shall all appear before the judgement seat of Christ.

Rev'd Dave McLennan Rector, St Mary in the Valley Anglican Church, South Tuggeranong.