

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!