

Electoral Synod Sermon

The Right Reverend Trevor Edwards, Episcopal Administrator
8th November 2018

Philippians 3:3-8a; Luke 15:1-10

1. Introduction

The time of waiting and preparation is finally over and it now time for the Synod to assemble to elect our next Diocesan bishop. Tonight we gather in this Cathedral to worship God, to thank him for his many mercies to us in Christ in the past and to seek his help in prayer for the choices we must make in the next two days. Lest you think I have a particular agenda tonight, the readings are those set in the lectionary for today when we remember saints, martyrs, missionaries and teachers of the Anglican Communion. As you go about your task of discerning which of the nominees best fits our selection criteria, I want to remind you from our readings of two essentials for any bishop before concluding with a brief reflection about how I hope we will all conduct ourselves during our business.

2. Know Jesus

The New Testament reading reflects on the experience of the Apostle Paul. We need Christian leaders who share his attitude:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Paul's CV was very impressive. His spiritual pedigree was impeccable and his religious attainments were outstanding, but in dramatic accounting terminology he asserts that all he formerly considered as profit he now considers as loss. He deliberately uses the language of gains and losses. He has listed all his credits, item by item, forgetting nothing, omitting nothing, excluding nothing. All that he could put to his good account is there, his 'gains', each and every one. But when the accountant's eye travels down the list and the sum total is reckoned and the line is drawn beneath the completed sum, the answer is the uncompromising singular word *loss* (7).

After all has been said, there is nothing, indeed less than nothing for his efforts and certainly no grounds for confidence before God. When he met Christ he realised all his supposed credits were bad debts. He discovered them to be completely useless when he was forgiven by the risen Jesus. In fact, Paul later uses shockingly strong language to describe how useless were the things he once trusted in to secure a right relationship with God. He calls them *rubbish* (8b) or 'garbage' or more properly 'dung'. I hasten to add I have deliberately refrained from using the vulgar Australian word which captures the meaning almost precisely! As far as he is concerned the very best thing is to know Jesus which is expressed in an intensely personal sentence as he reflects on his radical conversion on the Damascus Road when the risen Jesus literally stopped him in his tracks. He is also reflecting on their fellowship and communion over almost 30 years. He is deeply aware that he has been claimed by God's grace and is sustained by God's grace. He is very conscious that he is a much loved and forgiven sinner. It is also obvious that he loves Christ in return. Note the uniquely used phrase *Christ Jesus my Lord*. In summary he has met God in Christ. He has listened to him. He has talked to him. He has served him. He has followed him. He is devoted to him. He has suffered with him. But above all he continues to trust him for the past, the present and the future.

We need a bishop who does not boast in outward achievements or rest on personal merits, but who regards these things as rubbish compared with having a vibrant, personal relationship with Christ Jesus as Lord as an absolute priority. As I reflect on 40 years of ordained ministry (including 14 years as a bishop) I have to say I have been sustained by my own personal relationship with Jesus. In tough times he has been there to give me peace and joy. In difficult times he has given me perseverance and persistence. In impossible times he has given me resilience, which I think is the quality most needed by a bishop in our contemporary culture.

3. Imitate Jesus

Our Gospel reading reflects on the clear priority of Jesus which any Christian leader worth their salt needs to imitate. The three parables in this chapter of Luke explain why Jesus was focused on

welcoming 'sinners' in a culture where shared meals was an offer of peace, trust, acceptance and forgiveness. The sincere church people of his day were offended by his actions. The two stories read tonight are about a lost sheep and a lost coin involving people the Pharisees regarded as culturally suspect: namely a despised shepherd and an inferior woman. If you have lost anything or something on a regular basis you can identify with the tension in both stories. Perhaps it is the car keys or the TV remote control or the mobile phone. As the finder in my family I was always very relieved when I unearthed the missing object after careful questioning about the last sighting and then actually looking methodically. Regrettably when my children were at home I gained a reputation and became the first port of call rather than the last!

In the first story a despised but nonetheless moderately wealthy shepherd is responsible for one hundred sheep, by which he earns his livelihood through wool and mutton. During a daylight count in an isolated place, he notices one missing. The story is silent about the ninety-nine (which presumably were looked after by a neighbouring shepherd who takes them back to the village), but instead focuses on the quest to find the lost sheep before it was permanently lost or attacked by hungry predators. The shepherd finds the sheep and lifts it onto his shoulder to bring it home, rejoicing despite carrying the heavy burden. In fact the shepherd then also throws a communal party and invites all the neighbours to celebrate. In the same way Jesus says:

I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

Jesus is of course speaking ironically about the ninety-nine because as we know all people need to be found. So whenever any 'sinner' turns to back to God, heaven throws a party. The prospect of such future joy (mentioned twice for emphasis in the story) keeps Jesus focused on 'sinners' or the lost, rather than on people who feel no need to change their ways because they think they are good enough for God as they are.

In the second story, one precious silver coin is lost by a woman. It was probably worth the equivalent of a day's wage for the average worker so is very significant for the family finances. As with any search the assumption is that it must be somewhere nearby. The woman diligently and carefully searches everywhere in the house until the coin is located. We can almost feel her relief. Like the shepherd the woman calls the community together to celebrate the recovery of the lost coin. Jesus concludes in a similar vein to the first story:

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Both stories make the same point even if the second stresses the search a little more; but the effort in both cases is worth it. The unconditional, gracious love of God is always seeking the sinner. He mercifully pursues lost individuals. After all he pursued you and me. God is therefore absolutely overjoyed when disciples diligently search for sinners on his behalf as Jesus did. This is precisely the reason he came to earth. As Jesus says in a few chapters time:

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

We need disciples, leaders and, in particular, a Bishop, who imitate the priorities of Jesus by diligently seeking the lost and rejoicing with us as a community whenever they are found. As I said in my September Synod charge:

The bishop will make it a first priority to guide, encourage and seek to ensure that the mission of God remains on the top of the agenda of every parish, congregation and agency in the Diocese.

4. Conclusion

Our readings highlight the need for all of us to know Jesus and imitate Jesus. This is essential for all disciples, including our new Bishop. I fully realise there are other criteria which are important and desirable for the person eventually elected to this office. These have been outlined helpfully in the papers you have received and read. As we move into a period of corporate discernment, I want to however remind you that God is just as interested in the way we do our business as in the conclusion we

make about the person best equipped to lead us in the next period of our spiritual pilgrimage as a Diocese. I have four things I want you each to be committed to do in our deliberations -

- a. In the first place, **listen attentively**. Although you might have already come to some view about your preferred candidate, it is still crucial to listen to God as he speaks through the insights shared by our sisters and brothers in Christ in this family of God. Discernment is corporate. It is far too easy to have acquired personal preconceived notions for a variety of reasons, so we must each be willing to suspend judgement and be open to having our views modified or minds changed. This requires careful listening to what is really being said in our discussions.
- b. In the second place, **speak respectfully**. We are very fortunate indeed to be able to choose between five people who have willingly exposed themselves to intense scrutiny in this exhaustive discernment process. Like us, none of them is perfect because we all have strengths and work areas. I have regrettably been in one Synod in the past where the character of one candidate was slandered in the zeal to see someone else elected at all costs. I know we have procedures to deal with this but sometimes slander is a fine line. Of course we must speak about perceived weaknesses which might affect someone's performance in the role, but my plea is that we do this respectfully recognising the other positive strengths of a particular individual which should also not be inflated to create unreasonable expectations.

In the third place, **assess soberly**. In these situations it is relatively easy to be swayed by prejudice and persuasive speech. As I have just mentioned, in their keenness to promote a particular candidate a speaker may resort, even unconsciously, to unhelpful exaggeration. You all need to weigh carefully what you have both read and heard to make a sober assessment of the person you believe best fits our needs as a Diocese. In that respect I do want to stress your assessment is ultimately not about what is best for your ministry unit or agency or your particular theological preference, but what is in the best interests of the mission of God in the Diocese as whole.

- c. In the fourth place, **decide prayerfully**. As I have said to the Chaplain, I want this whole Synod bathed in prayer. If you need wisdom please remember to ask God who gives generously and ungrudgingly (James 1:5). If you feel anxious let your requests be known to God and you will receive His peace (Philippians 4:6). During these days, in the words of our Psalm sung in this service :

*Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.*

With this homily and this advice I now commit you to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all that you need to do in the next two days.

+ Trevor Edwards

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