



THE GREAT REPENT? ENGAGING A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD WITH THE LOVE AND TRUTH OF JESUS

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Welcome

I acknowledge the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth and His ownership of all things. (Psalm 24:1) I recognise that He gave stewardship of these lands upon which we meet to the First Nations Peoples of this country (Acts 17:26). In His sovereignty, He has allowed other people groups to migrate to these shores. We acknowledge the cultures of our First Nations Peoples and are thankful for the community that we share together now. We pay our respects to elders, both past and present, and those who are rising up to become leaders¹.

Welcome to this, the First Session of the 47th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn! I especially acknowledge those clerical and lay representatives who are joining us for the first time. Thank you for your willingness to serve Christ and Christ's people in this way so soon after Easter and during the School Holiday season.

We gather as Synod in a slightly abbreviated form at an unusual time in an unusual (but very welcoming) place. The ongoing need to comply with COVIDsafe requirements means that we will not be joining together in a shared meal or Eucharist during this Synod but I am sure there will be plenty of opportunities during the day for us to express our fellowship in Christ as old friendships are renewed and new ones established. As we do so, I would ask that we avoid large gatherings or bottlenecks inside the buildings.

This out of time/out of place Synod has created extra challenges for our Diocesan Staff, all of whom have responded with grace and dexterity. I particularly thank our Registrar Mr Trevor Ament, Deputy Registrar Ms Emma Body, the Bishop's Executive Officer Ms Bev Forbes, Ms Sue O'Brien in ADS and all who have worked with them to organise the program, arrange mail-outs, collate apologies and supervise our electoral process. I am also grateful to the Board of Canberra Grammar School for making their facilities available to us.

Re-set or re-pent?

It is beyond stating the obvious to say that the past year has been full of the unexpected! As the roll-out of COVID vaccines continue and we consider what a post-pandemic world might look like I invite us to reflect on that future in light of what we have learned from the recent past.

One of the more common images or terms being deployed in discussions about our national and personal future is "reset". In his recently released book with this title Australian economist Ross Garnaut² lists a number of initiatives, from a universal basic income to a renewed emphasis on carbon capture, that he believes will restore Australia to relative

¹ Written by The Reverend Neville Naden, BCA Indigenous Ministry Officer

² Ross Garnaut *Reset: Restoring Australia after the Pandemic Recession* (Carlton: Latrobe University Press, 2021)

prosperity and equity. The focus of the book is fiscal, but there is at least a hint in the title of the first chapter (“The Tree of Knowledge”) that more spiritual concerns may sit just below the surface.

Another, more tentative, vision for the future was articulated by demographer Bernard Salt in a recent edition of *The Weekend Australian*:

*I wonder whether on the other side beyond the mid-2020's, there lies a different Australia that is lithe and efficient, fairer and more equitable, sustainable or on course for sustainability – but also warier, wiser, more self-contained, less dependent on others. I wonder whether in coming to terms with our individual fragility, with the temporality of life, we might not also seek out the security and affection of home and tribe. And maybe this turning to relationships will lead to a rekindling of humanity's deep-seated need for some kind of spirituality. Perhaps we will seek out a fealty to a higher authority, to something that transcends the moment. Something that makes us feel safer and more secure in turbulent times. Who knows?*³

The time is ripe, it seems to me, for Christians in Australia to take up Garnaut's hint and Salt's wistful question. In this regard, I must admit to being underwhelmed by “reset” as a framework for the future. It at least implies that our fundamental challenges and opportunities are technical in nature, that in picturing our nation or community as a giant computer and hitting whatever passes for the ctrl+alt+delete button we can clear the screen and restore things the way they were. But what if the way things were wasn't the way they were meant to be? And what if we were to take seriously those intuitions that our fundamental challenges are not technical, but relational and spiritual?

Previous generations would have been more likely to consider our response to national challenge through the lens of repentance. There are reasons why we might avoid this term. It is unfamiliar to many in a less-religious society and might be misunderstood as implying a bargain with God whereby we exchange piety in the present for prosperity in the future.

The Biblical vision of repentance is far richer than the stereotypes. A paradigmatic passage is surely Mark 1:14-15, where Jesus inaugurates his public ministry as follows:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Repentance here is a re-orientation in the present and a re-imagination of the future in light of the in-breaking of a new era and reality: in this instance the rule and reign of God. Now the impact of COVID-19 cannot be equated with this, however, in its own way it did break into our world and it does offer us the opportunity for re-orientation and re-imagination

³ Bernard Salt ‘The great reset’ *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, April 3-4 2021, p27

before God. I believe those possibilities become clearer when we recall the experiences and emotions of the earliest days of the pandemic because it was then the sense of *dis-*orientation was most profound.

From the reality of vulnerability to a commitment to generosity

For many of us, those early days highlighted the reality of economic vulnerability. We contemplated, perhaps as we never had before, the possibility that we might have our hours reduced, or lose our job or be unable to meet our mortgage repayments.

I believe that shared sense of vulnerability was at least one reason why initiatives such as JobKeeper and increased JobSeeker became politically viable. Unemployment was no longer something that happened to other people; it was no longer a problem that could simply be managed or ‘disincentivised’ through the right combination of carrots and sticks. It was now a reality that could befall anyone as a result of forces beyond their control and needed to be treated as such.

I fear that as the memory of those early days fades we are losing that insight and returning to an earlier, more punitive understanding of unemployment. Certainly, the decision by the Federal Government to set the ongoing base rate of JobSeeker \$50 a fortnight above the previous level of the Newstart Allowance is welcome, but the payment still sits well below the poverty line⁴ and in the absence of a renewed commitment to empathy and generosity the danger is the issue will once again slip from our collective consciousness. Repentance calls us to do better.

From the reality of isolation to a commitment to community

For many of us, those early days of lockdown highlighted the reality of social isolation. For those of us who share our household with others and who have access to secure, reliable and affordable communication technology this was challenging enough; for people living alone and/or without access to the internet it was even more difficult. Our very human desire to remain connected spawned a number of initiatives. Mutual aid groups were set up on Facebook, neighbours dropped offers of help into each other’s letterboxes and churches found ways to provide pastoral care over the telephone and by the delivery of pew sheets.

While some of these initiatives are ongoing⁵ the risk is that as life returns to something like normal we do as Salt suggests and retreat into “the security affection of home and tribe.” Late last year I spoke to a local community organiser who suggested people had become so distressed by global reports of political polarisation and conflict that they had lost energy for intentional involvement at the local level. True community is always messy and any

⁴ See <https://raisetherate.org.au/raise-the-rate-faqs/>

⁵ For example: <https://www.thekindnesspandemic.org>

neighbourhood, no matter how homogenous it might seem to the casual observer, will include a wide range of ideologies and life experiences. While a turn towards the predictable and the familiar might be understandable repentance calls us to live better.

From the reality of mortality to a commitment to the gospel

I recall some sobering conversations with clergy in the early days of the pandemic as we discussed how to provide pastoral care to the sick and dying and the possible consequences for those providing such care. As our nation contemplated grim projections about overloaded hospitals mortality, like unemployment, was no longer something that happened to other people. Google searches for terms such as “death” and “how to pray” peaked in March-April 2020 and many churches reported surprising levels of interest in online worship.

In those days I found myself reflecting on the opening question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism:

What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him⁶.

Since those days, and through the goodness of God and the diligent work of many, the worst scenarios have not materialised for those of us living in Australia. It would be a sad loss if we forgot that for all our achievements we remain children of dust dependent on the grace of God for every breath. Repentance, indeed, calls us to trust better.

National Church Matters

One of duties at this Synod will be to elect clergy and lay representatives to the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia, which is now scheduled to meet sometime in 2022. As always, the responsibility of those so chosen is to engage honestly and carefully before God with whatever matters they are called to consider, in company and in dialogue with other General Synod members. I have every confidence that those we elect will discharge this duty well and I look forward to serving in this way alongside them.

Most of you will be aware that a major item of business for General Synod will be to consider the implications of changes to the Marriage Act as it relates to marriages of persons of the same sex. In November last year the Appellate Tribunal of the Anglican

⁶ Copied from www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/lords_day_1.pdf

Church of Australia issued a majority opinion that a service proposed by the Wangaratta Diocese for the blessings of persons married under the Marriage Act (including persons of the same sex) is authorised by the *Canon Concerning Services 1992* and is not inconsistent with the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia. That same opinion stated that “General Synod is the place to draw disciplinary or liturgical lines if it is the will of the Church to have uniformity in this particular matter or in the matter of what may or may not be blessed in worship.”⁷

It is not my intention to comment in further detail on these matters, especially as I expect our September Synod will give us the opportunity to engage with them at greater length. Suffice to say that these issues need to be considered from biblical, theological and pastoral as well as legal perspectives. I will be working in the first instance with our General Synod representatives to engage with the issues and with members of our church most affected by them: as a first step I expect we will work through the pastoral principles for living well together established by the Church of England’s *Living in Love and Faith* process. I offer them here for your consideration and your prayers:

- acknowledge prejudice
- speak into silence
- address ignorance
- cast out fear
- admit hypocrisy
- pay attention to power.⁸

Living as a Repentant People

Earlier in this address I spoke a great deal about repentance and suggested that this sometimes maligned word and concept has profound implications for our national and personal life. One of our callings as the Church of Jesus Christ is to be a visibly repentant people, not because we despair of God’s goodness but because we are convinced that goodness is able to transform us into the likeness of God’s Son, for God’s glory and for the blessing of the world.

⁷ *Appellate Tribunal of the Anglican Church of Australia, Primate’s References re Wangaratta Blessing Service*, paragraph 226.

⁸ A further expansion of these principles can be found at www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/PAG-PP-website.pdf

So it is that we speak and hear this good news to the penitent:

Almighty God,

who has promised forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith,

pardon you and set you free from all your sins,

strengthen you in all goodness,

and keep you in eternal life,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen