

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE FIRST SESSION OF THE 35TH SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF GRAFTON

Friday 29 August 2014

(Delivered in the context of the sermon at the Synod
Eucharist)

Ephesians 4: 1-7

Matthew 25: 1-13

May our ears and our hearts be open to the Word of God, dwelling among us. Amen.

As we gather here in Tweed Heads for the opening service of the first session of the 35th Synod of the Diocese of Grafton in its centenary year, it is a great pleasure to welcome the Metropolitan Bishop of the Province of New South Wales, Archbishop Glenn Davies. Archbishop Glenn will be worshipping with us tonight and leading us in a Bible study tomorrow morning before he needs to leave for other engagements. Thank you, Archbishop Glenn, for your commitment of time and for your willingness to offer us some of the fruit of your scholarship and wisdom.

The words from tonight's Gospel reading carry an urgency to them: some of the bridesmaids are ready for the bridegroom's arrival, some are not. Some have thought about the task at hand and equipped themselves well and sensibly, others have not. I cannot help but draw a parallel with this Diocese and where we are.

Last year, as part of the process of electing a new Bishop, you met in a Discernment Synod. You prayed together, shared your experiences and insights and sought God's guidance. You answered specific questions about priorities, about future directions, and about what you would most want a new Bishop to know. These responses were made available to those of us who were nominated.

Your feedback drew a picture of a Diocese which had looked squarely and honestly at the reality of your situation. You described yourselves as a theologically diverse diocese which was in trouble: financially, numerically and in your reputation. The financial crisis precipitated by uncontrolled debt, and the shame and distress that

followed the revelations about the inadequate response to victims of abuse in the North Coast Children's Home, had left members of the Diocese shocked and uncertain. This, combined with ageing congregations, demographic shifts and a rapidly changing society, contributed to an awareness of a need to change but uncertainty about how to go about that change.

You were very clear that faithfulness and doing what you always had done were simply not enough to communicate the great gift of our faith to the society around us. Many good ministries were happening and many connections made with people outside the church, but that was not leading into vibrant communities of faith. The laity and the clergy of the Diocese communicated a strong sense of the urgency of the task, an awareness that if we want there to be an Anglican Diocese of Grafton for another 100 years, or even another 20 years, we need to be open to change.

All of that is, in summary, what you told me. What have I found? In the almost 6 months since I became your Bishop, I have travelled across the length and breadth of the Diocese and been extraordinarily privileged to meet many of you and to share in worship and fellowship in many places. We have prayed, worshipped, eaten, and celebrated together. We have given Centenary gifts to the communities in which we live – wonderful, targeted gifts that help people at the grass roots. I have visited schools and delighted in meeting staff and students. A considerable number of us have sat on Boards and Bishop-in-Council together.

And you were absolutely right. The issues you identified at the Discernment Synod are indeed the challenges we are living with. Some of them are issues for the wider community of the North Coast, not just the Anglican Church. Just as we have churches where there are no longer communities to attend them (or only a handful of people), local politicians bemoan the fact that rapid population growth on the coast and depopulation in the rural areas mean that infrastructure is in the wrong place. There are whole towns where the 18-45 year old demographic is missing: people leave for their tertiary education or for work and come back when they are preparing to retire.

But we also face an enormous cultural shift. We believe that we have the words of life, we drink from the living water, we know Jesus. How do we communicate this? How do we offer this to others in ways which will touch them and lead them to God? Our society has shifted

radically just within my lifetime. We are moving from a print-based society to digital forms of communication at breath-taking speed. As this happens, so people's ways of absorbing and processing information change.

My children think I am quaint; their children will probably ask me if I had a pet dinosaur when I was growing up. I grew up with the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (not that I understood it as a child), and yet, a few decades later, the 1995 Prayer Book for Australia is now feeling old and clunky.

As well as these challenges we are also in the process of rebuilding the central administration of the Diocese. It has been a difficult few years and I would like to pay tribute to all of those who have worked very hard through traumatic times to ensure that the financial crisis was worked through, that victims of abuse had their claims handled compassionately and according to our policies, that the Royal Commission received the information it needed, and that the everyday running of the central administration continued. There are many of you who have contributed and your commitment, determination and sheer hard work have been given unstintingly for the benefit of God's church. Nevertheless, the difficulties of the last few years mean that there are some basic tasks which need attending to.

There is before us, therefore, a dual challenge: How can we, the people of the Anglican Diocese of Grafton, proclaim the gospel here and now, equipping God's people for their mission and ministry in the world? How do we 'do church' in the 21st century? And how do we run our central administrative operation in a way which is efficient, transparent and responsive?

I do not have all the answers to these questions. But I have absolute confidence that together, trusting in God, we have the answers.

If we are confident in God's faithfulness,
if we are prayerful, and open to listening to God, even when we are
led into uncharted waters,
if we are prepared to change and to make way,
if we are generous,
if we can accept that perhaps our way is not the only way or even the
best way,
then perhaps we can offer a space within which the church of the
future can emerge and be nurtured.

It will be different, but if we are wise and generous, its Anglican DNA will be very evident.

We could draw a very grim picture of the future of the church. In his Presidential Address to the 16th General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia held earlier this year, Archbishop Phillip Aspinall outlined some of the structural, missional and spiritual challenges facing the national church.¹ There is no doubt that time is running out and that change is needed, both at a national level and locally.

But, like the wise bridesmaids in tonight's reading, we are equipped for the task ahead of us. We do have oil for our lamps. We have:

- ministry units with people whose faith and experience overflow
- a passion for Christ
- five schools offering excellent education and growing in their Christian witness to thousands of young people across the Diocese
- resilience
- a physical presence across the region – places where people and communities gather
- and, perhaps most importantly, we now have a more developed understanding of the challenges before us and a strong desire to see change.

We will never have the infrastructure of a large Diocese. An ecclesiastical bureaucracy with separate departments to manage mission, ministry to children and youth, property, workplace health and safety, financial matters and other aspects of our life together, is not a realistic or even a wise ambition for us. But we can aim for an efficient, transparent and competent infrastructure providing services to vibrant communities of faith. Some of these communities of faith will be traditional parishes, others will be new and different expressions of Anglican community, based on schools or meeting in pubs or other public spaces. Some will take forms that we cannot even imagine at the moment.

Discerning the way forward requires skill and wisdom, a deep knowledge of our traditions and structures and also an openness to the wind of the Spirit. The Report of the General Synod Viability and

¹ <http://www.anglican.org.au/general-synods/2014/Documents/President%27s%20Address%20-%20full%20text.pdf>

Structures Task Force has highlighted the need for strong leadership in all the dioceses of the Australian church.²

This call for good leadership is ‘not just about bishops, but about the whole people of God, clergy and laity - particularly those called, chosen, elected and appointed to leadership positions within a diocese, from parish council members, Registrars and General Managers to Archdeacons’.³

The Report identifies the following as some key elements of leadership:

- Understanding context
- Building a shared vision
- Having clear values
- Being able to think strategically

It also highlights that leadership in the church is about teamwork – it is not just the job of the Bishop, or the Registrar, or the parish priest or the chair of Parish Council. As the body of Christ we are equipped with differing gifts for the building up of the body and to serve as disciples of Christ in the world. No one person will have all the gifts that are needed. We are on this path together – with God and with each other. This is the meaning of the word ‘synod’ – it comes from the Greek words ‘syn’, meaning ‘with’, and ‘hodos’, meaning path. We journey together with each other and with God.

That journey will be a journey through change. If we try too hard to protect and maintain the church as we know it, we run the risk of stifling the very change that needs to happen. I am often reminded of the story of an elephant keeper in a zoo. He was cleaning out the enclosure and fell, severely injuring himself. The elephants saw he was injured and gathered around to protect him, as they would protect an elephant that had injured itself. But they would not allow anyone in to help the injured keeper and he died of his wounds. As we look realistically at the situation we are in, let us not be like the elephants who, from the best of all possible motives, prevented the intervention that was needed to save the zookeeper.

² http://www.anglican.org.au/general-synods/2014/Documents/books/Book%208_for%20website.pdf

³ p. 8-016

There will also be some rough terrain on our journey but we can take heart from the fact that the story of the people of God has often been a story of adversity and challenge. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament contain accounts of great hardship and great blessing. In the wilderness of the Exodus, the Hebrew people found their identity as the chosen people of God and a band of refugees became a nation. St Paul's often arduous travels spread the gospel across the known world. Jesus' agony and death on the cross brought resurrection and salvation.

If we, Jesus' disciples, cannot be courageous, who can? If we do not step out in faith, who will? We have nothing to fear: the victory has been won. We have oil in our lamps. In the encounter with Jesus, scarcity becomes abundance, the broken become whole, and the alienated are brought back into relationship. Our God goes with us, before us and after us. Let us, therefore, 'lead lives worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love'. (Ephesians 4: 1-2)

Bishop Sarah Macneil
29 August 2014