

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

Port Macquarie, Friday 12 June 2015

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

Acts 11: 22-26

Ps 98

Matthew 14: 13-21

May our hearts and minds be transformed by your love, O God of our salvation. Amen.

Five loaves and two fish – not very much to feed a crowd of over 5000 people. The disciples clearly thought it was an impossible task.

Sometimes it can feel as if we are facing a similarly impossible task: fewer people in church, families with large mortgages and little spare time, a society which is becoming more suspicious of any institutions at the same time as it becomes addicted to shallow opinions conveyed in 140 characters or less. How can we 'sing the Lord's song' in what increasingly feels like a foreign land?

I overstate the case, of course, but there is no doubt that there is a seismic shift underway in our society: in the way people exchange information, gather together, and interpret the world.

In my Synod Charge last year I spoke of the challenge of being and 'doing' church in the 21st century. Given all that is happening around us, 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?

One year on, this question remains at the forefront of our minds. All around the Diocese parishes and schools are wrestling with this question. In my visits to our ministry units and to parish councils, we discuss how each community of faith, in its own particular context, can be true to its calling as the people of God in that place. How do we engage strategically with the wider communities of which we are part?

There is no 'one size fits all' answer: every community is different, every parish and school is different. What is appropriate in Tweed Heads will probably not be appropriate in Wauchope or South West Rocks, what is appropriate at Emmanuel Anglican College will not be so in Kyogle.

But if we keep on doing what we have been doing, we will become increasingly unable to communicate the Gospel. The resources we have at our disposal can feel as scanty as the 5 loaves and 2 fish of our Gospel reading tonight. But we are not without resources as we embark on our journey of change.

Tonight I wish to speak of 5 loaves and 2 fish that we have.

Loaf #1 Faith

Our first loaf is Faith. Grounded in prayer and scripture, inspired and nurtured by worship, Christians have the great gift of faith. We believe in God. This is not some quaint delusion: the scriptures are not an old book with no relevance today and prayer is not a technique for making ourselves feel better. God is the creator, the redeemer and the giver of life. There is nothing greater. God is God and has, in Jesus, walked this earth as one of us and wrought our salvation.

Reading and studying the Bible, praying alone and with others, and worshipping the fullness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: these things are the bedrock of life. They nurture us, form us and equip us, as individuals and as church communities. Faith flows as a natural reaction to

the experience of God's great love for us as we have known it in Jesus Christ.

Faith is much more than intellectual assent to a set of propositions about the nature of God. The heart and the spirit are also involved. Faith is both destination and journey. It is something we practise, something we learn as we go. It is in being faithful that we become more faithful, just as a child learns to walk by walking.

And it is not something that we do alone. Although we tend to think of our spiritual lives as intensely personal and intensely private, they are deeply rooted in the life of our church community. We are accompanied on our spiritual journey by other Christians who teach us, encourage us and pray for us.

Loaf #2 : Telling the Good News

Our second resource, our second loaf of bread, is telling the good news. Jesus said to his disciples 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21). We are his disciples today and if we don't tell people about Jesus then who will? We have a wonderful gift to share.

This means talking about our experiences of faith, about our encounters with the presence of God. You may have been blessed by an answer to prayer, or a sense of Jesus' love supporting you through a rough time in your life. Perhaps you have a deep knowledge of God's love for you and an overwhelming gratitude for Jesus' sacrificial gift of his own life. Many people can point to particular moments when they have been very aware of the presence of God. These are grace-filled, humbling moments.

Bishop Stephen Cottrell, who will be visiting our Diocese later this year, has written, 'the ministry of evangelism is our sharing with others the good news of what God has already done in Christ and the transformation it can bring to the world and to our lives here on earth and in eternity'.¹

¹ Transforming Presence, p. 4

There are many things that stop us sharing these experiences. Some of these reasons can be based in fear: fear that people will reject us, or think we are 'religious nutters', or that our own faith is 'not good enough'. Sometimes we simply just don't know how to share these things without it feeling very awkward.

There are some people for whom evangelism is their particular gift from the Holy Spirit – people who can inspire, who can communicate, who can connect people with God and help them form a relationship with Jesus. We are not all like that – the gifts of the spirit are many and yours may be different. But we can all speak with utter authenticity about our own lives, our own experiences of God. And sometimes those very personal stories are the ones which touch people's hearts and open the door to understanding and belief.

Earlier this year Bishop-in-Council, the Licensed Lay Ministers and the Clergy in conference, all identified 'equipping our people for their mission and ministry in the world' as a priority for this year. Archdeacon Gail Hagon has been working with the LLMs on some tools to help us 'gossip the Gospel' as Bishop Stuart Robinson of Canberra and Goulburn calls it: 'evangelisting' and '3 story living'. If you want to know more, talk to your LLMs or to Archdeacon Gail.

Let us learn how to share our stories and encourage each other to 'gossip the Gospel'.

Loaf #3 Living the Christian life

Living our Christian faith is not only about reading the Scriptures, prayer, worship and about sharing the Gospel and our stories of faith. It is also intimately tied up with being accountable for how we live, as individual Christians and as church organisations. Are our ministry units blessings to the communities they serve? What values do they model? Do we witness to Christ? This may seem a 'no-brainer' but modelling, witnessing and being a blessing are core to our spiritual development, to our integrity and to our witness.

If we are irresponsible, duplicitous, callous and malicious, we are not living as Jesus lived. If we fail to treat other human beings as beloved children of God, we are not living as Jesus lived. If we turn our faces away from suffering, we are not living as Jesus lived. If we do not live prayerfully, we are not living as Jesus lived. We are called to be lights shining in a dark world.

Some of my professional life before I was ordained was spent in the Australian diplomatic corps. Sir Henry Wotton, an English author, diplomat and politician who lived from 1568 to 1639, is still remembered for his statement that "An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent abroad to lie for the good of his country." However, it quickly becomes apparent in international diplomacy that those who lie and are known to lie are not trusted. A country's best interests are not served by those who are not trustworthy.

We are, as St Paul tells us in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, ambassadors for Christ. (2 Cor 5:20) Those who do not yet know Jesus, but know that we are Christians, will judge him on the basis of their knowledge of us and of how we go about things.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in a sermon in China on Trinity Sunday this year, made a similar point: 'Christians who behave badly individually or as a community - by immorality, disunity, mutual attack and so forth - witness to people that God is bad. Christians who live with all the pressures of life and yet show that in Christ they find peace and hope give a witness to His truth and love.'²

Loaf #4 The freedom to re-imagine ministry

The 4th resource, the 4th loaf, is the freedom to re-imagine ministry. Despite all the jokes about Anglicans changing

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<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5560/archbishop-of-canterbury-preaches-in-china>

(or rather not changing) light bulbs, we are not locked in to how things have always been. The 39 Articles contain explicit provision allowing diversity and change to forms of worship.³ How we meet together as church has changed radically over the last 2000 years, and even now there are many variants: small house churches, large congregations of several thousand, cathedrals, religious communities, parish churches.

Gathered here tonight in St Thomas' we can see just what shifts there have been in Australia in the last 200 years. St Thomas' was built by convict labour under military supervision when Port Macquarie was a penal settlement. The foundation stone was laid in 1824 and the first service held in 1828. The initial worshippers consisted of the Chaplain, Camp Commandant, a detachment of British Infantry and the well guarded prisoners who stood at the west end of the nave. By 1840, this had changed and there were free settlers, farmers, merchants and government officials. At some point they erected these box pews, reflecting the fashion in church architecture at the time. This has now changed but, thanks to heritage laws, the pews are still with us and shall remain so. We can admire their beauty, be reminded of the past, and appreciate their capacity to keep small children under control, but the parish now also offers worship in the hall in an environment where it is easier for the worship leaders to connect with the congregation. Times have changed and the church has changed with them. Now is no different.

The dominant model of ministry in Australia for over 150 years has been the parish model with one or more stipendiary clergy leading each parish. There have also been chaplaincies in schools, hospitals and prisons and, ministry by religious orders. In recent years, lay people have been exercising ministry in areas that had traditionally been clergy roles, for example, pastoral visiting.

³ Article 34

This shift has been a reflection of a deeper understanding that ministry belongs to the whole people of God. We are the body of Christ and God's gifts of ministry for the church and the wider world are not given exclusively to the clergy. Thanks be to God!

As we respond to the seismic shift that is under way in our society, so we will also need to look carefully and wisely at the dominant model of ministry. Already there are 3 parishes in our diocese which are not able to support a full time minister, either lay or ordained. As society changes and populations shift, that number may increase. The situation is not stable and we need to be responding to the changing landscape. In some places the question is: 'how can we offer ministry in a place where there are few human and financial resources?' In other places the question is 'how do we most effectively offer ministry in areas which are growing?' What mix of lay and ordained ministry is sustainable and viable in each situation? There is both grief and opportunity here – grief at the loss of stability hand in hand with opportunity to prayerfully discern and embrace a different way of being disciples.

Re-imagining ministry also involves re-imagining our liturgical life. There is more to worship than p119 of APBA at 8 am on Sunday morning. Here in St Thomas', over its 190 year history, people have worshiped using the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, the 1978 AAPB and the 1995 APBA. Now some newer resources are also being used.

In order to offer worship services to a wider group of people we may need to experiment with different liturgies or move service times. If we talk to families who bring children for baptism, we may find they want to be connected to church in some way but that Sunday morning is impossible. A prayer and praise service once a month at a different time in the week may work better for them.

Let us be open to new ways of gathering, new ways of worship, new ways of ministering.

Loaf #5 The gift of the church

Our 5th resource is each other. We are a community of faith, not solitary Christians. We are the body of Christ, serving God and each other, encouraging each other, growing in our faith and nurturing each other in ministry. In the family of the church, care is also offered, people are supported through troubled times.

The diversity of Anglicanism offers a richness that we discard at our peril. Diversity of view within the one denomination protects us, as individuals or as particular interest groups, from the certainty that we know the will of God and have all the answers. Divergent views, conscientiously and prayerfully held, confront us with the possibility that we might be wrong and lead us to explore more deeply God's will for us. In these changing times, we need to listen to each other and to the voice of God speaking among us.

The difficulties of congregational life are real and they are not new. We have only to read the Letters to the Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Galatians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians, the Romans, and indeed all the others, to get a sense that there have always been tensions, factions, disputes, sulks and sheer bad behaviour in Christian communities. Nonetheless, there is also love, compassion, encouragement, prayer, teaching and mutual support.

As well as being part of our local ministry units, each one of us is also part of a Diocese, joined together in mission and ministry on the north coast of NSW. We have a central administrative operation, the Bishop's Registry, which serves and enables the ministry units. As you know, there has been much to do to ensure the Registry operates efficiently, competently, courteously and transparently.

A great deal of hard work has been done on this front in the last year and I would like to thank the Registry Team

who have, under the Registrar's wise, prayerful and committed leadership, made significant improvements to our central administration. Some underlying problems are now becoming clearer.

As you will see in our Budget figures, the Bishop in Council has proposed a deficit budget for 2016. Changes in NSW government legislation have had a significant impact on the amount that can be billed to the schools, AFGD, Anglican Funds Grafton Diocese, continues to need to build its capital adequacy and the low interest rate environment has had an effect throughout the Diocese. There have been a number of changes in the Registry Office which have reduced expenditure. There may still be some small economies to be made but it is unlikely that we could make any significant further reductions without severely affecting the services offered. In addition, while most professional standards claims have been settled, there are two or three still going through our processes, and, while we believe that the vast bulk have now been settled, we have no way of knowing when or if a new claim might emerge.

All of this suggests that there is no immediate prospect of significantly increasing our income or of significantly reducing our expenditure. The Bishop in Council has, therefore, asked me to put together a small group of people to explore and consider the options that might be open to us. This group will report to BiC who will, in turn, report to Synod 2016.

Many people offer their gifts in service: in our local communities and in the Diocese. We are the body of Christ and the gifts, skills and experience of each member contributes to the well-being of the whole. We are God's blessing to each other and to the world.

As we look to the future, we have 5 loaves for our journey: faith, telling the good news, living the Christian life, re-imagining ministry, and the gift of the church.

And now for the 2 fish!

Fish #1 Hope

Many years ago, when I was a theological student, a sign went up on the student noticeboard in May one year. It read: 'THL 201 Christian Hope has been cancelled in second semester'. They meant the unit of study of course, but that wasn't exactly what had been said.

But Christian hope cannot be cancelled. It flows from our knowledge of God's love and faithfulness. In the presence of Jesus, in the presence of God, 5 loaves and 2 fish fed over 5000 people with 12 baskets of leftovers. That's a lot of leftovers! The disciples just simply did as Jesus told them. They could not have predicted the outcome. We cannot predict the outcome of all that we do. But if it is done prayerfully and faithfully it will bear fruit.

We hope, not because we are foolish and refuse to face reality, but because we trust God.

Fish #2 Courage

Literally hundreds of times the Bible tells us not to worry, not to be afraid or anxious. It is a reflection both of our tendency to worry and of God's desire for us to embrace wholeheartedly the love and forgiveness offered to us. Our God goes with us, before us and after us. We may not be sure of the way ahead, but we can be confident in God's care for us and of us. We can make mistakes and know that we are still loved. As St Paul so powerfully wrote: 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.⁴

Conclusion

In some ways we are like the Hebrews who left Egypt under Moses' leadership. They were unsure of their destination and had times of great uncertainty. Many grumbled and wished to return to Egypt – to all that was

⁴ Romans 8: 38-39 (NRSV)

familiar. There was much whingeing, grumbling and public doubting about the whole endeavour. But their future as the people of God was not in Egypt. Our future is not in a return to the past or in staying as we are in the present. The church of the 21st century is beginning to emerge in our parishes and our schools and our task is to use our resources to nurture it.

Jesus fed the crowds in that deserted place 2000 years ago: with his compassion, his teaching, his presence and, astonishingly, with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. A miracle occurred and in his presence scanty resources became abundance. We too have the resources to meet the hunger of our times. I have named some of those resources: faith, telling the good news, living the Christian life, the freedom to re-imagine ministry and the gift of the church. Knowing God's loving faithfulness, we can also have both hope and courage in full measure.

'O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things!'⁵

Bishop Sarah Macneil
12 June 2015

⁵ Ps 98: 1