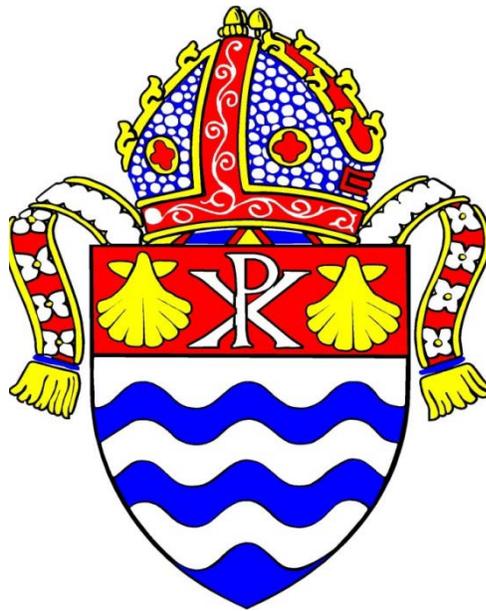


PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE  
FIRST SESSION OF THE 36<sup>TH</sup> SYNOD OF  
THE DIOCESE OF GRAFTON  
Friday 16 June 2017

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Bishop Sarah Macneil  
Anglican Diocese of Grafton

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE FIRST SESSION OF THE  
36<sup>TH</sup> SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF GRAFTON

Grafton, Friday 16 June 2017

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

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Acts 17: 16-32

Mark 4: 35-41

May our minds and hearts be filled and renewed by the presence of the living Word, Jesus Christ.

Welcome to you all as we begin the three year journey of the 36<sup>th</sup> Synod. As is only fitting, we begin with worship, opening ourselves to the presence of God, in whom we live and move and have our being, and committing ourselves to the task ahead as the body of Christ, gathered together.

For some of you this will be your first Synod – I hope that it will be a time of collegiality, of learning and of inspiration as you see a wider picture of who we are together as Anglicans in this beautiful region. For those who are old hands, welcome back! May our time in Synod enrich us all and draw us closer together as disciples of Jesus.

As we meet in Synod, through our conversations and our prayers, we are the living voice of the church and we seek to discern God's will for us and for the people we serve. And so, in our rich diversity, let us worship together, confer together, and lead God's people together.

The Diocesan Financial Challenge and Professional Standards

The first thing I want to say tonight is 'thank you!' I came to Synod last year bringing the news that we were facing a severe financial challenge. A number of factors had led to this situation but by far the most significant was the impact on the budget of approximately \$2.5 million that the Diocese

had borrowed in order to make restitution to the survivors of abuse within the life of the Diocese. The interest payments on this debt almost exactly matched the size of the projected deficit.

In the year since Synod 2016 I have visited the Parish Councils of the Diocese to explain the situation and to encourage them to contribute to paying off this debt. This immediate challenge also gave us the opportunity to look at a broader question: as our world changes, what will be lead in our saddlebags and what will be bread for the journey? What will be useful for us in the future and what is holding us back?

Both individuals and parishes have responded generously. At 31 May 2017, a total of \$1.18 million had already been received, as a combination of diocesan sales, and gifts from parishes and from individuals. Of this total over \$104,000 has been contributed by individuals. Further commitments have been made by parishes. At this stage we do not know the total amount that will be realised. It is dependent on the proceeds of some property sales which have not yet been finalised. I am, however, confident that the combined total of money already received and the proceeds of sales already committed to will be sufficient to pay off the loans.

We will not, however, have a buffer of additional funds to meet the costs of a national redress scheme and also of any future claims that may be made. Nevertheless, at this point, it is good to acknowledge just how much has been achieved and the scale of the commitment we have made as a Diocese to addressing this dark part of our history. The conversations I have had with the parish councils of the Diocese have, at times, been deeply moving and have shown the compassion and wisdom of the people of this Diocese.

At the beginning of the last Synod triennium in 2014, the Diocese faced a number of urgent questions. One of these was the Diocese's response to the legacy of abuse that had

occurred in some of our institutions and parishes. The financial challenge has been part of this response as we have offered counselling, apology and financial redress to those who have come forward and disclosed the abuse they suffered. The second part of our response to the legacy of abuse has been to work hard to make our church a safer place, where the risk of abuse occurring in the future is minimised, and a place where our processes are compassionate, appropriate and timely.

This work had started before I arrived in the Diocese in early 2014 and has occupied much time and energy over the last three years. In speaking about these matters, I would like to pay tribute to the work of our Professional Standards Director, Michael Elliott, the Professional Standards Board, and to the Professional Standards Committee, particularly its Chair, Canon David Hanger. As a result of the work that has been undertaken, the backlog of claims from the North Coast Children's Home has now been completely worked through. A number of other claims have also been handled in a compassionate and timely manner.

At the time of writing, there are no new claims before the Professional Standards Committee and only one being handled through a legal mediation process. The Committee is now able to focus its attention on policy matters and make recommendations to Bishop in Council on ways in which our policies and processes can be improved in the light of experience and best practice. Canon David has signalled that he will step down from the Committee at the end of this month. His work has been outstanding and has taken a considerable toll on him. The Chair of the Professional Standards Board, the Hon Moreton Rolfe, has also resigned. The Synod will have an opportunity to thank them both over the next 2 days.

We have worked closely with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse since it began its work in 2013. A significant task for the Professional Standards Director and Committee over the next year will be

analysis of the Royal Commission's Report. This Report is scheduled to be handed down at the end of this year and will contain detailed analysis and recommendations concerning best practice for institutions in the prevention of abuse and the handling of claims relating to abuse. We are looking forward to the final report and believe it will be a landmark document for our society as a whole as we all seek to understand the breadth and depth of child abuse and its devastating impact on individuals, families and Australian society. In facing this issue within the Anglican Diocese of Grafton, we have lamented, we have grieved and we have repented, resolving to make amends where we can. Much good work has been done. There is, however, a risk of complacency. We must maintain our vigilance and never assume that abuse of the vulnerable among us is a thing of the past.

#### 2014 - 2017

At times over the last few years it has felt as if almost all of our time and effort in the Registry has been consumed with issues arising from the impact of historic abuse, particularly sexual abuse, in the life of the Diocese. During those times, which have been difficult, I have had the great privilege of regularly visiting our parishes and schools. You have constantly reminded me, in your faithfulness and compassion, of God's goodness. We are all broken and sinful, and relationships in Christian communities can be fraught, competitive and malicious. More often, much more often, they are grace-filled and generous.

If we look back over the three years of the 35<sup>th</sup> Synod, we can see that much has happened. We can point to particular achievements: improvements in communication, the stabilising of the Diocese's finances and administration, an effective and engaged Bishop in Council, increasing capacity in many of our Boards and Councils. Undergirding it all are prayerful communities of faith wrestling with the challenges facing them and thousands of hours of voluntary work by

people giving of their skills and experience for the good of the people of God.

From where I sit, and acknowledging that each one of us has a different perspective, it seems also that there has been a cultural shift with greater trust between ministry units and the Diocesan leadership and administration, a stronger sense of the Diocese as a whole and a deepening of understanding about the need to be open to the change that God is leading us into.

### Where we are now

For the Gospel Reading tonight I have deliberately chosen the passage from Mark's Gospel which recounts the stilling of the storm. Jesus, fast asleep in the stern of the boat as the disciples panic around him in the midst of a storm, wakes up, calms the storm and then asks, 'what are you afraid of?' An annoying question, with an obvious answer: 'Well, what do you think!' The wind was howling, the waves were crashing all about and swamping the boat.

The digital and technological revolution we are all living through constantly unsettles the way in which we live. It has brought great benefits and great frustrations. Rather than turning to our elders for advice, we all turn to the under 15s to work out how to access Netflix or reset the microwave after a power outage.

Over the last few years the geopolitical balance in our world has been shifting quite rapidly. China has emerged as a major power, the United States is, under President Trump, taking a more confrontational foreign policy line, and there are deep divisions within Europe. Terrorism, whether fired by religious fundamentalism, mental illness or profound social alienation, increasingly occupies our attention. Our climate is warming leading to changing patterns of agriculture and an increase in extreme weather events. As we try to find our own footing and to be the church in this environment, it can feel stormy. Resources may seem slim, we may feel too few, too old, or too disorientated by the

rapid change in the place of the church in our society to know what to do or what to say.

Why are we afraid? Many are afraid because we are caught up in a storm of change – technologically, politically, sociologically. But this is not the first time something like this has happened.

This year, around the world, Christians are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. It was a watershed moment in Western religious history. The 95 Theses attacked the Roman Catholic Church's practice of selling 'indulgences' and also promulgated two central beliefs, namely that the Bible is the central religious authority and that people gain salvation only by faith, not by their deeds. These were not new ideas but Luther drew them together at a moment in history that was ripe for religious reformation. His action that day is often seen as the spark which ignited the flame of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and his writings changed the religious, political and cultural landscape of Europe.

If Luther's action was the spark that lit the fire, however, one of the larger logs on the fire was the technological advance in printing. Books had become lighter and cheaper. New ideas could spread further and faster than had been imaginable even 50 years earlier. The way in which information was transferred and the society was structured would never be the same again. Religious reformation was intimately linked with the other seismic changes that were happening in European society.

The society in which we live is increasingly unfamiliar with Christianity. I used to be surprised and a little shocked when I came across people who had never been in a church. Now it is usual. The increasing marginalisation of Christianity in our society is one of the profound changes we are all living through. We are, in many ways, in the position of the early disciples. Tonight's reading from Acts 17 recounts Paul's

strategy when he went to Athens. His natural audience was the Jewish population. He was coming to tell them that the Messiah had come, that in Jesus God had honoured all the promises of the preceding centuries. Jesus was the fulfilment of all their hopes. It was a powerful and challenging message for the Jews but it built on their conceptual framework, on their existing knowledge and understanding.

Paul, however, did not limit his preaching to the Jews. Today's text tells us that he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. And so, as well as talking to the Jewish population, he went to the marketplace every day to engage in debate with all the philosophers who gathered there.

This led him to a quite different approach from the one that he might have used with the Jews. Rather than pointing to the Hebrew scriptures and demonstrating that Jesus really was the one they had all been waiting for, he met the Athenians on their own conceptual ground, drawing on their customs and literature to make connections with them and to talk about God and about Jesus in terms that would make sense to them. He did not expect them to come to him. He did not expect them to listen patiently and try to understand what he was saying. He met them on their own ground – both literally, in the marketplace, and metaphorically, in the way he packaged his message.

In the spiritual supermarket of Athens, he claimed to speak of a God who was qualitatively different from the gods they were used to. Paul's God, our God, is the source of all being, not some idol made of metal or wood and imbued with divine significance by human imagination.

Western society today is similar to the Athenian spiritual supermarket. Close textual argument is unlikely to convince many people about the Christian message. The context in which we live and into which we speak is one which has, by and large, forgotten that it lives, moves and has its being in, through and because of God. But it does and once we have

seen that, once we have understood it, then there is no going back – the world is transformed. We are like people who have truly understood the air we breathe, we are like fish who have realised the significance of the water in which they swim. Every action, every relationship has a different dimension to it.

To be disciples means to live as Christians, with each part of our lives touched and changed by our perception of the presence of God and the life-giving transformative message of Jesus Christ.

### Looking forward

In looking to the future, we need to engage with the world in which we live and, as Paul did, tailor our message of hope so that it can be understood. If the Apostle Paul were alive today I suspect he would be on Twitter and Instagram, he would be in the pub and at the football matches and shopping malls.

We are not without resources as we follow in his footsteps. Among us are people who are gifted at communicating to those who have no connection with Christian faith, gifted at bridging the gulf that is widening in our society between those who are Christians and those who have no knowledge of Christianity. To give you just one example, the chaplains in our schools and hospitals have enormous experience in walking alongside people who may have no other connection to Christianity and in helping them to see how their lives are touched by God. We need to recognise those among us with this gift and allow them to do this work. We need to learn from them, encourage them and support them.

If we are not intentional in our approach, we run the risk of doing nothing and being left behind by our fast-paced society. With this in mind and with the start of a new triennium for the Synod this year, Bishop in Council spent 2 days in February doing some brainstorming. We asked ourselves, 'What is the Diocese being called to be? or renowned for?' In the discussions that followed, words like

'courage', 'action', 'compassion' and 'hope' predominated, with 'faith', 'justice' and 'acceptance' also featuring strongly. To the question, 'What should the Diocesan priorities be?' the overwhelming response was 'leadership training', followed by 'new models of ministry' and 'restructure Diocese'.

These responses show an appetite for taking some major decisions and for following confidently where Christ is leading us. Over the next year, the new Bishop in Council will put in place a prayerful discussion process around the Diocese with the aim of bringing a vision and action plan to Synod 2018. Each one of us will have the opportunity to have input.

Leadership at every level is a key factor as we have these discussions and together seek to discern and follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. As we strengthen the clerical leadership of the Diocese, we will be collating two new Archdeacons tonight: Matthew Jones, who will serve the northern regions of the Diocese, and Stuart Webb, who will serve the southern regions of the Diocese. This enables Archdeacon Sally Miller to take on the new portfolio of Archdeacon for Schools and School Chaplaincy. This new appointment highlights the importance of our schools as places of Anglican mission and I am very grateful to the anonymous donors who have made possible the funding of this position for the equivalent of a day a week for the next 18 months. Sally will be working closely with our schools and the Grafton Anglican Schools Commission, whose work will be reported on at this Synod. The Rev'd Christian Ford has agreed to be the Mission Support Officer for the Mid-Richmond, taking over from Archdeacon Matthew. The Archdeacons and the MSOs will be working with the clergy and the laity in their regions and in the Diocese to develop sustainable and life-giving ministry across the Diocese.

Also of great importance in building leadership across the Diocese is our shared commitment to deepening our knowledge and our skills as the people of God. We will

continue to offer training and seminars that nurture and equip our laity and clergy on topics as diverse as biblical studies, theology, church growth, evangelism, media skills, safe ministry, and leadership skills. The Cursillo movement also gives an experience of Christian community designed to encourage people to exercise their ministry as members of the body of Christ.

The decisions that we will be making will be decisions that we make together. It is unlikely that everybody will agree with everything - as the old saying goes, you can please some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time but not all of the people all of the time. But it is as the body of Christ gathered together that we work best to pursue Christ's mission in the world.

### Conclusion

Strong in our faith in the triune God, we trace our identity back through generation after generation of Jesus' disciples to those who were in the boat with him that evening, and those who left their families to follow him, and those who stood at the foot of the cross. Being a disciple has never been a guarantee of easy times. With the issues that face the church in our society, we may feel we have set sail into a storm. We may even feel that we are perishing from time to time, as the disciples feared on the Sea of Galilee. But this is not the first time this Diocese has tackled large questions and sailed into stormy waters. Nor is it the first time the church has weathered significant social change. Knowing we are in the presence of Jesus, we need not be afraid. Let us move forward together in faith, hope and love. Amen.

