

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Herein is a response by Bishop Paul White to a paper presented by the Reverend Peter Corney on Saturday 15th July 2006 at St Barnabas’ Church, Glen Waverley. The version here has been edited in three ways and for three reasons. First, comments made in relation to a previous conversation between Peter and I have been deleted as a matter of courtesy. Second, material not presented on the day due to time constraints has been deleted. Third, I have added material for the sake of clarity. In my plea for “passionate faithfulness”, I had in mind faithfulness of Christians to Jesus as his disciples with resulting responsiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This was my intention and was implied assuming the hearers would make the connection. However, it may have been inferred by some that such “passionate faithfulness” may be directed towards areas other than “vital orthodoxy” such as dying structures, fruitless methods, or only inherited models of Church. This was not my intention so I have added a parenthetical comment in the text, which begins here.

PREAMBLE

I’m grateful to the New Cranmer Society and its sponsors CMS, EFAC and Ridley College, and our hosts today, the Parish of St Barnabas, for this opportunity to respond to the paper presented by the Reverend Peter Corney. I’m grateful to the Reverend Peter Corney for his paper and for his views expressed and the work he invested in laying them out for us. I’m mindful of the old saying about baby and bathwater. I’m not saying that Peter confuses the two or alleges that others confuse the two or that his paper has one without the other. I intend here to support Peter’s comprehension of the “baby”, endorse many of his helpful points, and leave any bath water to drain away or evaporate bearing in mind that the bathwater of today is the rain of yesterday and will no doubt come as rain again, some time.

Peter’s paper is a great start and I resonate with his passionate plea to make the gospel relevant and to live out our mission. I agree with his points about leadership – the more pressure any organisation is under, the greater the need for leadership.

I really like what he says about a Community enlivened by the Holy Spirit. But I think he’s sold his position short in numbers of ways by setting it in the context of generalizations about the “Broad Church”, and in an historical context largely around people, events and movements in Cambridge and Oxford centuries ago, and by presenting 3 out of 4 options which have no substance. I resonate with Peter’s continued plea for enthusiasm and passionate engagement, but equating “broad” with “bland” is too simplistic.

And it’s not just about narrowing your focus and maintaining boundaries – there are churches filled with people who have really orthodox theologies and very proscriptive boundaries but aren’t enlivened by the Holy Spirit. We need passionate worship, passionate evangelism and a passion for justice, inspired by passionate faithfulness, to fan the flame of the Holy Spirit in Communities of faith.

As I read this paper, I was more than ever convinced of my own emphasis on stimulating and enabling Leadership, Engagement, Celebration, Compassion and Growth as keys to the transformation or continuing conversion of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne.

DETAILED RESPOSE

In his paper, Peter puts to one side his concerns about dealing with institutional issues, but his passing analysis of such issues fails to take into account other realities bearing on Christian Mission in our present context such as, among other things, availability of transport and approach to “community”, “family”, “leisure”, “meaning” etc. His concern about our unwieldy synodical structure fails to note that this corresponds with prevailing expectations about democracy and laicisation.

Peter goes on to mention and discount “a choice” that has been put before us by those who he feels caricature his approach and in so doing caricatures their approach. This “either/or” set of monologues posing as dialogue goes nowhere. Is there room for a both/and approach, for Paul and Apollos?

Peter talks of the view that particular approaches to Church are selectively regarded as normative in Anglicanism. I suspect there is a natural rhythm here in terms of the history of the Church, something like breathing, something like seasons. At times, the Church looks through a telescope, at times a microscope, at times a periscope, while often needing a stethoscope. No epoch of what we call “Anglican” can be regarded as normative. Each has wheat, each has chaff, each has the baby and each has the bathwater.

In this either/or approach, Peter has a tendency to label one positively and another negatively. This can be an unhelpful and inaccurate generalization. He seems to be saying that all of a certain leaning are “uncreative” and “bland” while the other is “vital” (possessing vitality). Clearly, the “passions” Peter seeks with us, won’t arise from a “bland” anything, whether liberalism or orthodoxy. They will arise from, and in turn stimulate further passion, where there is vitality in a Church which Peter describes rightly in biblical terms as a community enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

Peter’s underlying argument appears to be that a broad Church becomes a boring Church. I can’t hold that all broad churches are boring or that the only broad churches are boring churches. Peter says that “Theological liberalism slowly sucks out the oxygen of classical belief that produces passionate faith.” So too can doctrinaire legalism.

Peter’s use of “latitudinarianism” is an example of one season in the Church being given lifelong objectivity and efficacy and of its effects being interpreted selectively. According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, the term “Latitudinarianism” was opprobriously applied in the 17th century to folk who, while continuing to conform with the Church of England, attached relatively little importance to matters of dogmatic truth, ecclesiastical organization, and liturgical practice. Is it only one of these three that is of concern to Peter, or all three? Are there also signs today of “Latitudinarianism” in terms of ecclesiastical organization and liturgical practice in parts of our Church not known as broad liberal? The historic Latitudinarians stood between the Puritans and the High Anglicans and consistently advocated tolerance and comprehension within the Church, basing their demand on their conception that reason was the arbiter both of natural and of revealed religion. They judged that reason could judge the data of revelation by virtue of the indwelling of God in the mind, since, as one of them said, “the spirit in man is the candle of the Lord.” (B. Whichcote). Latitudinarians were said to have sympathy with Arminian Theology which reacted against the deterministic logic of Calvinism of the day, insisted that Jesus died for all and not just for the elect, and that both the Supralapsarian and Sublapsarian views of predestination were unbiblical. “Latitudinarianism” was it an error, a corrective, both or neither?

I now want to move on to what I regard as the key point of Peter’s paper – not the how, but the why of Christian mission. He says of some of his heroes of history, “They brought together the three great emphases that we desperately need today – passionate worship, passionate evangelism and a passion for justice.” I couldn’t agree more with regard to our need for these passions today, however, there is a passion missing from this list. What is missing is “passionate faithfulness” (to Jesus by his disciples with resulting responsiveness to the Holy Spirit), without which, the other three “passions” lose focus and may become ends in themselves.

Is it this loss of “Passionate Faithfulness” (to Jesus by his disciples with resulting responsiveness to the Holy Spirit), that led to the decline in the Diocese of Melbourne so ably portrayed in Peter’s paper? In part, yes, but it would be wrong not to recognize among other things, changes in society, cultures, religions, communication, expectations etc evident not only in Melbourne.

To be the Church of today, Peter outlines “four ways of looking at where we are as a Church at the moment.” It seems he had the first of these in mind because the other three cannot be regarded by anyone as feasible options. So let’s stay with number one: “We are an institution /organization in serious decline and so we need renewal, revival, reform, radical transformation. Internally our core motivation is low and our current structures are proving ineffective for our core mission.” Agreed! But there are some very successful parishes – what makes them work?

Based on his metaphor of Rural Australia, Peter says that “Like rural Australia we must enter the ‘New Pioneer’ phase or continue the slow painful decline.” He adds: “The Diocesan framework has a variety of

roles but its priority role must be to revitalize parish ministry. It can no longer be ‘business as usual’ we have to move to strategic action mode. If we want a different future we have to create it.” Agreed!

He then describes what that will look like for us in concrete terms. He gives us three main points which I think of in horticultural terms as propagation, pruning and flowering.

“First,” (propagation) “we must recognize that the Church” (I’m avoiding use of Peter’s term ‘militant’ as I find it unhelpful and perhaps that Christendom view and terminology has been part of the problem) “we must recognize that the Church only lives by continuing to reproduce its self in living people with a living faith. Institutions, structures and buildings are not unimportant but they can survive while the Church dies.” Agreed!

Peter then lists ten key areas we must address, to which I think few would take exception so I will not address them here.

“Second”, (pruning) “there are a series of ‘myths’ we must challenge if we are to go forward.” Peter lists nine myths and notes that “effective new paradigm churches have challenged all these myths”. A question might be: has challenging the myths made these churches effective or has being effective enabled them to challenge the myths? Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

“Third”, (flowering) “we need to become a church that lives creatively rather than defensively with the following tensions:”

Tension number 1: Between denominational distinctives and contextual relevance. Here, the overriding priority must always be the mission imperative not the preservation of denominational culture. Agreed!

Tension number 2: Between our distinctive Christian values and contemporary Australian culture. Peter says: “The future of the Christian community lies in our obedience to two imperatives - distinctiveness and mission.....We must live and work in the creative tension between the two commands – ‘Be holy for I am holy’ and ‘Go and make disciples.’” Agreed! However, a more fundamental imperative is that two part imperative given by Jesus to love God and to love your neighbour, underscored by the new commandment given by Jesus – love one another!

Tension number 3: Between the prophetic role in politics and the active role. After listing some burning issues, Peter notes that “Our theology of creation, incarnation, relationships, reconciliation, justice, compassion, community and unity in Christ speak powerfully to each of these issues. The question we face is will we just take a so called ‘prophetic stance’ and only speak out or will we also become more practically engaged in the political process? Given that the interface between politics and religion is very much alive again in Australia it may be hard to avoid this question.” Agreed!

In his conclusion, Peter Corney urges us “to engage with God and His Word so that we will be empowered afresh by the Spirit - empowered to retell ‘The Story’ so powerfully and meaningfully that it engages and makes sense to this generation and delivers them from their world of fragmented meaning into the love and grace of Christ the Lord of all.” Agreed! But what is “The Story” we are to retell? What was Jesus all about? If you look closely, you will see the imperative invitation of Jesus to those he encountered was “Follow me!” This phrase is recorded 20 times in the Gospels. So “the story” tells of invitation to relationship with Jesus and participation in continuing the work He commenced. Put simply, “come, go, tell!”

In his comments on “the Story”, Professor John Fullenbach outlines two priorities for Christians:

1. Celebrate the presence of the Kingdom of God
2. As a community, radiate the Kingdom of God through service.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta, while living those two priorities, when accused of failure by a reporter because her helping a handful of dying people each day in the face of thousands dying daily retorted, “God didn’t send me to be successful, he sent me to be faithful.”

The Church must see itself in the service of the Kingdom of God meant for the whole world. The challenge in this is how to do it faithfully, passionately, with vitality and non-selectively. The added challenge is, can Christians with different views work together, encourage each other and pray God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth.

CONCLUSION

I want to return to the question posed for us today. "What sort of Church do we want to be need to be should be?" Here is my view.

I believe that the Mission of the Diocese is to proclaim Christ through being what God is calling us to be; and doing what God is calling us to do.

My Vision is that the Diocese will be a growing enterprise consisting of Parish Churches and Sector Ministries, trusted and recognized for its relevance, compassion and vitality.

I believe the Values that should underpin all that we do are: Faith, Hope and Love; Commitment; Respect; Integrity; and Accountability.

I hope that:

- Throughout the Diocese, we will truly value each other's distinctiveness, celebrate our diversity, and encourage each other to grow in Christ.
- There will be multi-staffed, flagship catholic and evangelical parishes in every Archdeaconry, offering distinctive and well-attended public worship and providing resources for the networks of parishes in their areas.
- There will be a variety of "doorways" into church (into relationship with God in Christ) – a range of parish and sector-based programs that enable us to reach out to the communities in which we live.
- Each key Diocesan position will be filled by the best person regardless of that person's gender or churchmanship.
- Leaders throughout the Diocese will deserve to be held in good repute and trusted by the community at large.
- Throughout the Diocese we will show generous hospitality to all people regardless of their ethnic, religious or social background.
- We will invest in the future rather than rely on the past.

For me, key areas for improvement include:

- Clearer, more accountable visionary leadership which people will acknowledge and support
- Confident celebration of being Christian
- Rebuilding the Church's reputation and standing
- A clearer public voice in the community
- More encouragement of unity in diversity
- More structured approach to ongoing professional development (for both Lay and Ordained ministry)
- Better promotion of basic Christian knowledge
- Better use of property and resources, including media and technology
- Strengthening the links between the Diocese, Parishes and Church Schools

The shape of the future will include:

- Celebrating and encouraging each other's growth and ministry as Christians
- No less diverse but more harmonious
- Proportionally less dependence on historical resources (greater dependence on live resources)
- People and groups aware of and engaging with compassion in areas of social justice
- Strengthened links between the Diocese and Anglicare, Anglicord, Benetas, BSL, and Lifeworks

- Lively partnerships between Parishes, Schools and Anglican Agencies
- Engaging worship and outreach leading to growth in attendance

To support our Mission and Vision we need to focus on five strategic areas

- Leadership
- Engagement
- Celebration
- Compassion
- Growth

Peter finished with a parable, “The Shattered Story”. I’ll finish with this:

A man walked into a shop where an angel was serving behind the counter. The man asked the Angel: “what do you have here?” The Angel replied: “anything you want.” The man asked for reconciliation, world peace, economic equity, social justice, and a growing church (in the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne). “Sir,” said the Angel, “you do not understand, we don’t stock the fruit, we only stock the seeds.”

Paul White, Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Melbourne