

The Episcopacy, the Diocese and the 21st century.

New Cranmer Society, Synod Breakfast 2015

A bishop is called to maintain the Church's witness to the resurrection of Christ from the dead, to protect the purity of the gospel, and to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

As a chief minister and pastor in Christ's church, you are to guard its faith, unity and discipline, and to promote its mission in the world.

These are the opening lines of the exhortation for the consecration of bishops in our ordinal and I think at the heart of the Bishops' calling.

And yet it is not an easy place to start in the pluralistic Western world of the twenty first century – which is our context here in the Diocese of Melbourne. In fact what Brad S. Gregory describes in his book *The Unintended Reformation* as 'hyperpluralism' – the overwhelming pluralism of preferred religious and secular answers to the Life Questions. Questions such as:

“What should I live for, and why?”

“What should I believe, and why should I believe it?”

“What is morality and where does it come from?”

“What kind of person should I be?”

What is meaningful in life, and what should I do in order to lead a fulfilling life?”

The closing line of the exhortation for Bishops is:

“You must, therefore, know and be known by them, and be a good example to all.”

‘The episcopacy, the diocese and the 21st century’. We could be here all day. So I am taking this morning as an opportunity, above all, for you to get to know me. What is important to me in terms of being a bishop in the Anglican Church at this particular point in time.

We are at a very particular point in time – whether I am talking as a bishop or we are thinking as a Diocese. When it comes to the Life Questions, there are many competing truth claims. Jesus' claim to be the way the truth and life, to be the resurrection and the life can be seen as the height of arrogance. Or worse. Haven't we tried that and found it wanting? Or worse?

Gregory's thesis is rather salutary for us who are heirs of The Reformation: the most important, distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism pertaining to the Life Questions is the Reformation insistence on scripture as the sole source of Christian faith and life, combined with the vast range of countervailing ways in which the Bible was interpreted and implied (p 92). That has led many to argue, one way or another from the seventeenth century up to including the present, for reason alone.

To argue that without the sober, dispassionate rationality that has transcended the arbitrary, ever-proliferating assertions made on the basis of the Bible, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, new divine revelation, or reason still tethered to scripture, we might never have emancipated ourselves from the pre-Enlightenment labyrinth.

Not so much a band-aid but an amputation - an unblinking, uncompromising application of reason alone by modern philosophy and science: not God but Nature, not enthusiasm but empiricism, not revelation but reason would liberate human beings from the primitive practices and senseless stupidities of Christian conflicts - written in the blood of religious wars no less than the ink of theological polemics (pp112-113).

Gregory's conclusion is: modernity is failing partly because reason alone in modern philosophy has proven no more capable than scripture alone of discerning or devising consensually persuasive answers to the Life Questions. The natural sciences, on the other hand, have been an extraordinary success; but because of the self-imposed limitations that have made them so successful, by definition they can offer no answers to any of the Life Questions (p 377).

What remains in the absence of shared answers to the Life Questions is a hyperpluralism of divergent secular and religious truth claims in contemporary Western states, and of individuals pursuing their desires whatever they happen to be. ... The hegemonic cultural glue comes especially from all-pervasive capitalism and consumerism: scientific findings are applied in manufacturing technologies to make the stuff consumers want, whatever they want There is no shared, substantive common good, nor are there any realistic prospects for devising one (at least in the foreseeable future).

It is a rather bleak prognosis of western society. I resonate with Gregory's understanding of where we find ourselves. And yet we know that we have meaningful answers to the life questions. It is vital that I, we, maintain our witness to the resurrection. That I, we, promote the mission of the church.

When the Archbishop invited me to come to the Diocese of Melbourne last year, he asked me to give my response to the 5 Top Priorities for Strategic leadership. This response was for the Archbishop in Council which ratified my appointment. They were identified during the Diocesan Consultation process in relation to Mission shaped Structures – Oct –Nov 14. Let me remind you of what these 5 top priorities were. (It might be the first time you are hearing your responses synthesised):

Develop a culture of trust/ unity - evangelical/anglo-catholic

Effective communication of the vision

Manage Conflict effectively

Put the right people in the right places

Free up leaders to be missional.

Implicit within the thinking around mission shaped structures, implicit within these priorities and my responses is the recognition that we are in a time of great change.

I want to take the last priority first: freeing leaders up to be missional. I could be wrong but I wouldn't be surprised if what was behind this priority is thinking if we could just get on with the ministry rather than having to deal with all the necessary and ever increasing compliance and administrative issues. Very much part of our changing world.

As a leader, as a bishop in the twenty first century, I see this primarily as a pastoral issue. I don't mean – and the tragedy is this is a reality we often face – where we pick up the pieces when things have fallen apart. Rather pastoral administration – the setting of healthy relationships, structures and boundaries which enable people and groups to flourish. (It's what we are doing as a Synod when we grapple with legislation such as the bill to amend the Parish Governance Act for Authorised Anglican Congregations; when we grapple with how far we go with Police and Working with Children Checks).

We have a two-fold problem currently. Our structures are suited to previous times. Leaders and people are expected to expend huge amount of energy maintaining those structures in a time of increased compliance and diminishing resources. I know both as Archdeacon and as a Bishop, when it comes to putting the right people in the right place as an institution we can feel the pressure to simply fill vacancies which so easily be setting up people – clergy and parishes – to fail.

We therefore have a third problem that we need to address: how to bring about change in a caring and healthy manner in order to free leaders up – clergy and lay - to be missional. The irony is as a church we are very slow moving when it comes to change. I was at a NSW Provincial Standing Committee a few years ago now in which the then Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, invited someone to speak to us about Shared Services. Tongue in cheek, Peter made the point that here we were as Dioceses in the 21st century, with a lot of our practices belonging in the 19th century and the 20th century seeming to have passed us by.

We struggle with change in our parishes. When the Archbishop of Canterbury met with the bishops of the Australian church last year one comment he made was a great blessing of the parish system is its generous hospitality. I think following on from that we have to ask ourselves: "What does that mean when the community the parish is a part of has changed - dramatically at times?" "How does that translate into changing networks not just defined by geography?" The English church grapples with the same issues (minus the challenge of distance.)

The flip side of the generous hospitality of the parish system is it was as much about economic realities or economic pride - a community, a village, a suburb being able to say we can afford to be a parish. We can afford a font ...

As the Archbishop also said, it is not for the church to survive but to proclaim Christ. If we do that the church will survive. Part of the reality of change is conflict: people inevitably have different ideas as to the best way forward. And change often plays on people's deep fears and insecurity.

You may or may not know Sister Eileen Glass. She is a very experienced spiritual director and retreat leader as well as being vice president of the international organization of L'arche. She led a Diocesan Retreat a few years ago and, speaking on the Emmaus Road, made the point: we live in a world choking with unresolved grief. Particularly in our society where life is very busy, periods of mourning are really a thing of the past. We live with constant change. Grief is not just limited to loss of loved ones. It's loss of what we have known whether it's a place, a way of life, friendships, security, a job. We see it on a personal level. We see it with reactions to world events. And we see it in the church.

In fact I think it is why as a church we often find change so hard. People resist change because they are wanting to hang onto what was. E.g. The golden era – if we keep on doing more of the

same just extra hard and extra well, we will get it back – we will have the big congregation, the big SS or YG. But that thinking forgets how society has changed.

Part of it is wanting to hang onto what we know, what feels safe maybe, where we call the shots - so power is mixed up there as well if we are honest. Conflict is often inevitable as we grapple with what change is truly needed, what change will truly mean, even maybe as we grapple with questions of truth.

In grief we experience the fragility of our community. Something in the normal course of events, in the normal course of living we can easily be blind to, tend to forget. Yet that experience of fragility, that disillusionment is important. It is as we are stripped of our illusions about reality, it is that disillusionment which leads to being open to a new reality.

We can so easily get stuck on anger. Angry because of the death of our dream, our hopes as to what might have been. The answer is not to deny those dreams, to repress them, to never let them be voiced. Rather it is finding the space, granting the space where this dimension of their story can be told. To see how it is part of a bigger picture.

As a bishop in the twenty first century, as a bishop in a time of great change, I ask myself where do we need to honour grief? Give ourselves time to grieve loss. Where do we need to give others the space to grieve, to name what they are feeling? It is important because the way we live grief is the key to moving to the new – to experiencing the resurrection. A typical pattern with grief is stick with our story. But with the resurrected Jesus, to whom we witness, you cannot hold onto what was.

One of the things I have to accept with the move to Melbourne, having moved full time into my Episcopal role is, I am no longer at the coal face, the grass roots so to speak. Or to use Richard's image from the Synod Eucharist, courtesy of Tony Payne (?) as a bishop I'm working a lot with the trellis. If it is at the grass roots that real change happens, and I think it is, the question for

me becomes how can I foster grass roots change from the top, especially in a world where movements mean far more than institutions?

Of course as you identified, this involves effective communication. Specifically this priority was around effective communication of the overall vision to parishes. Effective communication will always be a two way exercise, listening as well as speaking. Effective communication must involve a high level of ownership by the parishes themselves of the vision. At its heart I think, this is the motivation, the drive around Mission Action Plans. At their worst, they are just another piece of compliance. At their best they are an opportunity to engage parish people directly, an opportunity to encourage their input into the vision of making the word of God known.

As we look to the future in terms of mission in our secular culture, what we have in common will be seen to far outweigh our differences. I think it is interesting that developing a culture of trust, a culture of unity – evangelical and anglo-catholic (and I would throw in broad Anglican where I come from) was identified first as a priority. It tells me you don't want to be fighting the battles, internal battles, of the past. I think trust / unity develops through genuinely valuing individual people and their diversity: the different insights and contributions which come from evangelical, anglo-catholic and broad church perspectives.

There is no shortcut. But here you get to one of my key priorities as bishop. One of the things I really care about. And I will be drawing on the insights of two other bishops in the Australian church. Developing a culture of trust will come through relationship and mutual care with dialogue as a first step. Last year we had the privilege in Wagga of having Bishop Stephen Pickard participate in an interfaith dialogue. One of the points he made was Interfaith dialogue as a counter to fear and anxiety because it opens up the pathway for the renewal of trust and deepening of friendship across difference and diversity within society.

Whenever people of different faith traditions meet for the purposes of greater understanding they are making an intentional decision to open themselves to each other. I think this is true whenever people of different Christian traditions meet for the purposes of greater understanding. To make an intentional decision to open ourselves to each other involves a certain vulnerability and recognition that following the exchange things will be different.

In dialogue you may come to a different position, you may have to think a new way. Bishop Stephen was distinguishing between dialogue as I have described it and debate and discussion – which tend to begin – and therefore usually end from fixed points. Let's begin with dialogue especially in transitional, uncertain times – even amongst ourselves! We may have things to learn. It is costly. But as Bishop Stephen made the point – there is no cheap friendship. As Jesus - the one who sacrificed his life for his friends - knew to his cost. Thinking back to the vine and the trellis – Jesus the true vine commanded us to love one another (I have John 15 in mind).

How do we dialogue? Have the conversations we need to have rather than avoid them. Bounded space is a phrase Archbishop Jeff Driver uses in his recent book *A Polity of Persuasion*. He gives the particular example of the ordination of women debate: what is significant about the ordination of women debate in Australia is that the primary national instrument, the General Synod, struggled to bring clear resolution over more than thirty-five years of debate Yet there is a counterpoint to be made that, for all its weaknesses, the 1962 constitution still functioned to hold all the member dioceses together. While there was little doubt that much of the conflict was difficult and damaging, at its best the constitution provided a way of containing conflict and the space of considerable time for its processes to continue and conversations occur. (p 99)

What he is exploring in his book with the concept of bounded space is opportunities to move beyond the containment of conflict to its creative expression and resolution within ecclesial integrity. (p126)

I take it that is New Cranmer's commitment to working in this Diocese through Synod and other committees - commitment to change the conversation, to use these examples of bounded space well. Developing a culture of trust, of unity also comes from a leader who can draw people together where they are safe and comfortable with each other.

One of the things I did as Regional Bishop in Wagga was call together a small group of people, clergy and lay, an intent group. From the four parishes in Wagga – which were all very different including in terms of church tradition and people who between them also had a strong knowledge of the four different agencies. I called them together for what I called a Wagga City Conversation. The focusing question was: How can the Anglican Church in Wagga be effective in our mission, our ministry? We set 2030 as a marker – far enough away to mean we could be more courageous in our thinking, we didn't need to be thinking how it would affect people now - 2020 feels a bit too close now!)

Of course it was blindingly obvious change is needed. But the point I want to make here is when it came to putting down ideas, any idea, for the way forward. (And that was after naming the issues, research including listening conversations etc., etc.) At least 50 were written down without having to try which just showed how much people have been thinking about it already. What the Wagga City Conversation did more than anything else is to give a space to air those ideas safely. And come to a decision as to the way forward, which could be owned by the intent group and then the wider church of Wagga.

Where I was up to when I left was communication, communication, communication. It was a great gift the conversation was able to be facilitated by someone who specialises in change. That is where the bounded space of the conversation process became an opportunity for the creative expression of conflict and resolution within ecclesial integrity. To be honest I think we need to get better at applying that sort of thinking and skill in a number of different contexts and issues.

To put it another way and tapping into some of what I spoke about earlier - it's living hospitality - welcoming the other - making space for their story. Allowing people to be who they are versus refashioning, reshaping others in my own. And I think in all seriousness that is how as a chief minister and pastor in Christ's church: I am to guard its faith, unity and discipline and promote the mission of the church. In the context of our secular culture, how we speak with each other, shapes how we speak into our society as a voice, not the voice.

And I want to finish by saying prayer is so important, so powerful, in all that I have been talking about. In prayer we are able to bring together two people, two groups, two sides. Holding opposites in tension - building unity in Christ. We can hold together in prayer people that maybe for the moment can't even be in the same room together.

That is living the reality of the resurrection now.

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As a chief minister and pastor in Christ's church, you are to guard its faith, unity and discipline, and to promote its mission in the world.

You are to ensure that God's word is faithfully proclaimed, Christ's sacraments duly administered, and Christ's discipline applied justly, with mercy.

You are to lead and guide the priests and deacons under your care, and be faithful in the choosing and ordaining of ministers.

You are to watch over, protect and serve the people of God, to teach and govern them, and to be hospitable.

You must, therefore, know and be known by them, and be a good example to all.