

Rector's Introduction and Address

St Philips' Anglican Church, O' Connor — Parish Day of Reflection, 22 October 2022

Reverend Martin Johnson

INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 18 March 2020, I was at the Chapel at Duntroon. We had gathered to mark the Consecration and Installation of a new Bishop to the ADF. But there was an air of anxiety. A Pandemic was sweeping across the country none of us knew what would happen... what would be expected of us, what would be the outcome. I was told that I couldn't have a seat in the Chapel because of restrictions. I was given the role of vetting those who had come but were not part of the proceedings. I had to turn them away. It was a strange feeling.

During the service I sat in the Narthex and turned on my phone. I read the latest news bulletins and then an email appeared in my inbox from Bishop Mark, all congregational worship was suspended immediately. So began a lengthy period of uncertainty, few of us if any, had experienced anything like it.

We travelled on a roller coaster as we went through various stages of restrictions and when we finally emerged we were cautious, careful in each other's presence, some didn't want to return to church immediately, we were a smaller congregation.

So the Greenhills Day as it became known was an opportunity for us to gather again, enjoy each other's company, pray and reflect together, express our hopes and dreams for the future and celebrate all that we love and appreciate about our community of faith.

The day was facilitated by Dr Leanne Beagley who at that stage was a member of the Parish Council and the CEO of Mental Health Australia. Leanne skilfully guided us, asked questions of us, helped us clarify our thinking. Thank you Leanne. This short paper is a summary of what we did on that day. It is not exhaustive and I apologise if you feel something has been missed.

Two things have emerged initially. One, a plan developed by the Parish Council which will be presented at the 2023 AGM and two, an initiative whereby we are exploring what it is to be 'Missional' in a journey of understanding a 'Missional Spirituality.' This project will be undertaken between February and September 2023 and led by The Revd Tracey Matthews. It is my hope that in this project we can begin to see how we can make a reality some of ideas that we prayed and dreamt about at Greenhills. I draw your attention to the words of Dr Colin Dundon in his address to the gathering: Mission is first a spirituality and then a strategy. Strategy cannot bear the burden of mission by itself. I hope you find this booklet encouraging and helpful.

Blessings, Martin

OPENING ADDRESS

Nearly fifteen years ago I joined the Army. There were a number of reasons for this. There was no doubt that I wanted a change from Parish ministry, but I wanted to remain within the Church. I think I was looking for an opportunity to stand outside the Church to minister in a different context and see the Church from a new perspective, I wanted to see what it looked like! I wanted to see what others saw, those outside the Church and those in different denominations and traditions.

I arrived in my unit, completely untrained, having no military experience whatsoever, I was ushered into the CO's office - Lieutenant Colonel Simon Stuart. He was warm, friendly, I felt at ease, but he also exuded a presence which commanded my respect. He wasn't really interested in whether I knew the finer points of - warfare, or even how to salute — I knew neither, let alone the jargon! His expectations of me were simple, direct and uncompromising: look after my people, care for each one of them. The unit was the 8th/9th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment. It had been disbanded after the Vietnam War and it was his role to re-establish the unit. Resources were scarce; we were part of the creation of an ethic within the army that said our most valuable resource is our people. I was to be the first full time Chaplain of the re raised unit.

Over the coming weeks I began to realise that we lacked the resources of many of other infantry battalions. We were being called back to basics, to the fundamentals of soldiering. I was the first Chaplain in the Brigade not to have a car; I got around on pushbike! The CO was unflinching in his project to rebuild this unit. His message and mantra were always the same — and remember we are dealing with a largely young, male, cohort. Simplicity and consistency were key. His message at the weekly 'boozer parade' was always this: Do no harm, do the right thing, do things right, do what you can with what you've got. The unit successfully deployed under his command to East Timor and equally successfully under his successor to Afghanistan. He is now Lieutenant General Stuart, the Chief of Army. I feel privileged to have served under his command.

Why am I saying this? There is a saying in the Church which is attributed to St Augustine: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, The Church must always be reformed. It has been adopted by differing wings of the Church, Catholic and Protestant, and has been given a different spin by both. What I am taking from it is a need always to be returning to the basics, to the core, for the essence to be revived.

We have stepped outside the Church today as it were, to enable us to look at it from a different perspective and to ask ourselves 'what does it look like?' It is so familiar to us that we tend to forget that for others new to us it is incredibly unfamiliar, daunting even.

There is clearly a sense in which we need to be revived, renewed, the COVID pandemic had an impact, it's true. The ramifications of the Royal Commission are still being felt, yes. And there are other issues that distract us. Many of them we share with the wider Church. But the Church faces some fundamental issues that have been coming for years, decades. We are a small parish, yes, and we lack the resources of some of our larger neighbours, but clearly our greatest resource are the people of our parish, and in an age when community is often dispersed or virtual we need to be intentional about gathered community, how we nurture it and how we express the faith that binds us. It is my hope that today we can consider 'what is the essence of St Philip's?' Is there a simple mantra that gives voice to who we are, and which calls us back to the centre, to the essence? I have rarely been convinced by mission statements and grand plans. Hence today is an opportunity to reflect on where we have been and where we are being called. I hope that together we will enjoy this short journey today.