

GOOD TO BE HERE! PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2022
THE RIGHT REVEREND DR MARK SHORT

Anglican Church of Australia, Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn
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I acknowledge the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth and His ownership of all things. (Psalm 24:1) I recognise that He gave stewardship of these lands upon which we meet to the First Nations Peoples of this country (Acts 17:26). In His sovereignty, He has allowed other people groups to migrate to these shores. We acknowledge the cultures of our First Nations Peoples and are thankful for the community that we share together now. We pay our respects to elders, both past and present, and those who are rising up to become leaders. (Written by The Reverend Neville Naden, BCA Indigenous Ministry Officer)

Friends in Christ, it is good to be here. It is good to be here because you are here!

Over the past six weeks Monica and I have been on a learning journey as we've encountered different aspects of God's worldwide church. We've marvelled at the faithfulness of Christians who live and worship as a marginalised minority. We've visited grand medieval cathedrals but also heard of congregations gathering under trees and in refugee camps. We've been encouraged by stories of God at work as churches are planted and believers are disciplined so they can be salt and light in their communities.

Sometimes the great blessing of being away is a deeper appreciation for what you have at home. That has been true for Monica and me as we've returned to the Diocese that has done so much to nurture and encourage us. More than ever, we are convinced that under God our Diocese has a particular culture and history that can help us all navigate the challenges and opportunities before us in the strength and the grace God provides.

And so we gather as the Second Session of the 47th Synod; more importantly as members of the body of Christ called to serve God's people and God's mission through our deliberations and decisions. We gather mindful that although we have passed through the peak of the most recent wave of COVID infections we still need to care for each other; hence I ask that we might observe all necessary precautions at Synod including making use of the masks that have been provided.

Love and Truth in a World of Difference

It was three years ago when we last met as a Synod in this location. On that occasion I suggested that as God's church in this place at this time we are called to engage a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus.

"First, we are a world where we are increasingly aware that we differ from each other. As globalisation facilitates the movement of people, capital and ideas across boundaries it brings the diversity of human experience and worldviews to our neighbourhoods, workplaces and social media feeds. In that sense it creates a 'virtual' home where everyone and no-one feels they really belong.

Second, we are increasingly a world where we differ with each other. Sometimes alongside, sometimes in reaction to globalisation there is a reassertion of the local and the particular."

It seems to me that events since 2019 have only strengthened these conclusions. While the challenges associated with the pandemic saw the

formation of a National Cabinet this was accompanied by a diversity of policy and practical responses at the State and Territory level. At the most recent Federal election the proportion of votes received by the two major blocs was the lowest since World War II and afterwards a swathe of local independents almost held the balance of power in the House of Representatives.

As a whole Australia was spared the worst of the polarisation over COVID responses we saw in the United States and some other nations. Nevertheless, such disputes as did occur in Australia revealed the extent to which we differ over issues such as the relative importance of freedom and safety, the role of science in decision-making and the extent to which voluntary organisations such as churches can and should play a part in public health responses.

Love and Truth in a Church of Difference

Today, I want to press that analysis a little further by asking another question: how should we respond when the same patterns of difference evident in the wider society manifest themselves in the church? What might a commitment to love and truth look like here?

To begin with I note that most of us would regard a church where we increasingly differ from each other as a blessing. The more that a church, whether at the congregational, Diocesan or denominational level, reflects the diversity of its surrounding community the more it witnesses to the power of the gospel which unites people from all backgrounds under the loving Lordship of Jesus. Of course, genuine diversity pre-supposes that we move beyond a focus on welcome only to consider how we might positively embrace the gifts and the leadership insights of the different people God is bringing to us.

The more difficult question is how to respond when we differ with each other. Here the issue is less about diversity and more about disagreement. Sadly, we can all identify occasions when as Christians we have responded to such difference in the same ways as the broader culture – for example, by uncritically adopting polarised positions or by retreating from broader engagement to more local expressions of fellowship where we can be relatively confident of only having to connect with people who see matters as we do.

To consider how we might avoid patterns that mirror these aspects of our culture I want to draw on an image I introduced three years ago – that of low fences and deep waterholes:

The image comes from an unsourced preacher's illustration. A farmer from overseas is visiting an outback grazier and is amazed at the size of their holdings. "How do you keep your sheep from wandering off? You must have to build lots of fences!" says the visitor. "No" says the grazier. "We don't worry about the fences. We just take care of the waterholes."

In this context the waterholes are the living presence of Christ, manifest at the heart of the Church's common life through word, sacrament and Spirit at the heart of the Church's common life. The people of God serve their culture well when they are attentive to and appropriately protective of this presence. In part, this will mean cultivating convictions and patterns of life which are distinct from those of the wider community. This is the particular 'good' of religious freedom – that it gives Christian and other religious communities space to embody their particular vision of faith, hope and love

(For an extended argument along these lines see Joel Harrison *Post-Liberal Religious Liberty: Forming Communities of Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

But what of low fences? These are the connection points between a church and its wider culture. The point of them being low is that they allow free and unfettered access so that those on the “outside” can enter and encounter the living presence of Christ for themselves. Those same low fences also allow people to exit when they no longer wish to be part of a particular church – that is, they mitigate against cultic or coercive dynamics.

At the recent Lambeth Conference bishops and spouses studied the New Testament letter of 1 Peter under the theme ‘God’s Church for God’s World’ (I believe this theme can be expanded to ‘God’s Church for God’s World for God’s Glory’). ‘God’s church’ highlights the distinctive nature of the people of God as explored in passages such as 1 Peter 1:14-16

(“Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”); ‘for God’s World’ recalls the missional dimensions of passages such as 1 Peter 3:15-17 (“but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.”) while ‘for God’s Glory’ points to the ultimate end or purpose of this way of life as outlined in 1 Peter 2:12. (“Conduct yourselves honourably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.”).

So what of disagreements? Often, but not always, they are most pointed when we are seeking to discern whether a particular conviction or pattern of life represents (a) a means of preserving the fresh waterholes that give the church its distinctive Christ-centred character or (b) an unnecessarily high fence that prevents people encountering the life of Christ for themselves. These discussions often arise when there are changes to the pastoral and missional context within which the church is called to witness to the love and truth of Jesus.

As one example: I and others believe the church’s received teaching that sex difference is of the essence of marriage is part of those deep waterholes insofar as it witnesses to the union between Christ and His Church and God’s ultimate plan to bring together heaven and earth and all things in Christ. For others that same teaching may be perceived as a barrier to people finding their place in that plan.

So where does that leave us? Let me suggest possible some ways forward:

First, we can seek to discern a common vision behind various positions. Might the image of deep waterholes and low fences be such a vision, not because it resolves every issue but because it gives us a framework for exploring how we might embody the call to both maintain a faithful identity and engage in effective mission?

Second, we can seek to pursue our disagreements in ways that are distinctly and observably Christian. British scholar Christopher Landau identifies four biblical principles to guide such a pursuit. I commend them to you:

‘Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.’ (Colossians 4:6).

‘Pursue godly speech, inspired by the Spirit’ (Matthew 10:19-20, Luke 12:12, Acts 4:31).

'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.' (Romans 12:18).

'Cultivate the fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22-23)

Christopher Landau A Theology of Disagreement: New Testament Ethics for Ecclesial Conflicts (London: SCM Press, 2021), p135.

Third, in facing the challenges of disagreement we must not lose sight of the blessings of diversity. Fellow members of the Body of Christ are always gifts to be received and people to be loved rather than problems to be solved. I thank God for every member of our Diocesan family and encourage us all to do the same.

Next Steps

As a step on the journey of listening to and learning from each other we will be moving into Conference mode tomorrow to consider how we are responding to the changed pastoral and missional context resulting from changes to the Marriage Act to allow same sex couples to marry. The format will be similar to a conversation held at the 2015 Synod, prior to those changes.

The purpose of the session is not to debate whether or how the church should change its understanding of marriage. It is an opportunity to take stock on where we are now so we are then in a position to better explore how we might move forward together in engaging our world. I will have more to say on the format tomorrow but please be assured that your feedback matters to us.

Developments in the Wider Church

In what follows I outline some recent developments affecting the life of the Anglican Church of Australia and the wider Anglican Communion.

In May this year the Eighteenth Session of the General Synod met in Adelaide. Much of its business will be reflected in our Synod Agenda, including amendments to safe ministry and professional standards legislation, responding to domestic and family violence and establishing national standards for professional development, professional/pastoral supervision and performance appraisals for those in licensed ministry. We also passed a motion noting the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood; this is of course a story in which our Diocese played a key role not least through Diocesan leadership and those women who courageously responded to God's call.

Most media coverage focussed on debates on two statements on marriage, sexuality and human relationships. In the first statement Synod members were asked to affirm that the faith, ritual, ceremonial and discipline of this Church upholds marriage as the exclusive union of one man and one woman arising from mutual promises of lifelong faithfulness, and hence the solemnisation of a marriage between a same-sex couple or the blessing of a same-sex marriage is not in accordance with the teaching of Christ and the faith, ritual, ceremonial and/or discipline of this

Church. This statement was passed in the houses of laity and clergy but narrowly lost in the house of bishops.

In a later motion General Synod overwhelmingly affirmed "that marriage according to the rites and ceremonies of the Anglican Church of Australia is the voluntary union of one man and one woman arising from mutual promises of lifelong faithfulness".

(Resolution R108/18. The context of the resolution was the need to articulate

this teaching for the purpose of seeking religious exemption clauses from anti-discrimination legislation).

The next major event in the Anglican Communion was the Lambeth Conference for Bishops and Bishops' Spouses held in England from July 27 until August 9. I wrote some initial reflections for the August Anglican News and will have more to say in this month's edition. Suffice it to say that Monica and I, Bishop Carol and Jay, were blessed to meet many Christian leaders who are faithfully witnessing to the Lord Jesus in circumstances that are more complex, contested and chaotic than anything I have experienced. As one example, it was inspiring to hear Bishop Elizabeth from Rumbek Diocese in South Sudan speak of her 'strategy' for church planting. As she was shifted from one refugee camp to another, she would reach out to any Anglicans present, invite them to her home and plant her next church!

Closer to home, some of you will be aware that later in August a group of Anglicans called GAFCON met in Canberra. During the conference GAFCON announced their intention to create a new entity called 'The Diocese of the Southern Cross' and it was subsequently announced that a priest and some members of a parish in the Diocese of Brisbane will be joining the new Diocese, having reached the decision they are no longer able to accept the leadership of their Archbishop and Synod. The former Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Glenn Davies, has been commissioned as bishop overseeing the new Diocese.

The Diocese of the Southern Cross will not be part of the Anglican Church of Australia and as such is not connected to the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. I encourage you to pray for them and the Diocese of Brisbane, remembering they are members with us of the church universal and sisters and brothers in Christ.

In describing the developments above I have refrained from detailed commentary, not least because I do not want to test Synod members' endurance beyond what is reasonable! However, if any of what I have said raises questions or concerns for you please be in touch with me. Most importantly, I remind us that as followers of the Lord Jesus our choices are determined neither by the tides of history nor by the decisions of others. We have the opportunity and the honour of hearing God's call to us, individually and corporately, using our God-given gifts for God's glory.

Love and Truth in Ministry and Mission

As I mentioned earlier, COVID has cast a heavy shadow over our churches and other ministries over the past two and a half years. Even as restrictions on meeting have lifted, the need for volunteers and paid workers to isolate when infected has placed extra burdens on those who serve in our churches, schools and welfare ministries. I am particularly grateful for those in leadership who ensured that programs have been able to continue, even as I am aware of the cost many of you have paid.

It therefore particularly appropriate that our next season be one of personal and corporate renewal, focusing on the importance of sustainability and wellbeing in ministry. One expression of this has been the pilot program we have entered into with City to City Australia and six of our Parishes to engage in a process of review and revitalisation in ministry and mission. In the year ahead, I will be working with our Senior Leadership Group to explore other pathways to parish renewal, including analysis of data from the 2021 Census and National Church Life Survey.

As the responsibility of leadership is shared more broadly between clergy and laity, especially in rural Parishes, it is vital that we provide opportunities for faithful servants to nurture their own relationship with God so that they can minister with joy. This year, for the first time, Bishop Carol has organised two retreats for clergy, each with a different style. It is my expectation that all licensed clergy will avail themselves of one of these, or a similar retreat experience, each year. There is more to be done in providing similar opportunities for lay leaders; for many years Cursillo fulfilled such a role and there is a need for us to recapture something of its 'charism' even if the structures are different.

In the wider society we have the opportunity to engage with discussions around the introduction of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. I welcome the commitment of the Prime Minister to holding a referendum on this matter in the current parliamentary term and pray that churches will be active in the cause of inclusion and justice as they were in the lead up to Referendum 1967. An excellent resource on the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which lies behind this initiative, can be found at www.abmission.org/resources/a-voice-in-the-wilderness.

Fellow Labourers

As we re-acclimatised from a warm and dry Europe to a cool and damp Australia, Monica and I were reminded how deeply grateful we are for the blessing of serving you. Your faith, hope and love is an inspiration as we labour together in the cause of Christ.

Today, I want to acknowledge three fellow-labourers who will be with us at Synod for the last time, at least in their current roles.

The Very Reverend Phillip Saunders will be retiring as Dean of St Saviour's Cathedral in early 2023. Since being called to the Diocese almost 20 years ago Dean Phillip has renewed the culture and the fabric of one of Edmund Blakett's great gifts to the Australian church. He has been a judicious adviser to Bishops and others on all things liturgical and has co-ordinated many worship services that have expressed and enriched our life as God's people. On such occasions some of Dean Phillip's best work happens behind the scenes so it is appropriate that he will come out from behind the curtain to preach for us at our Synod Eucharist. Our prayers and wishes are with Phillip and Sue as they prepare for the next stage of life in this beautiful city.

Mr Jeremy Halcrow's passion for justice and Jesus has been evident during his service with Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT, first as Director for Communications and Strategic Partnerships, and for the past nine years as CEO. Jeremy has modelled the Anglicare values of dignity, inclusiveness, compassion and integrity. He has been a dedicated team player, building bridges between Anglicare and other aspects of the Diocese. His expertise has been recognised by his peers in the welfare sector and the Anglicare Australia network and will ensure he continues to make an impact in his new Canberra-based role with The Benevolent Society.

Ms Bev Forbes has served three Bishops in her time as Bishop's Executive Officer. More importantly, she has quietly and faithfully served countless clergy, lay people and staff by guiding them through the complexity of Diocesan life and Governance. Bev has been gifted with a head for process and a heart for people and I have greatly valued and benefitted from her care and concern for others in all the changing circumstances of Diocesan life. It has been a blessing to work

with Bev and other members of the Bishops Office team to make it a place where all are welcomed and treated with respect. Bev and Alan will be enjoying retirement in Canberra and I expect their home will soon be welcoming the sound of little (puppy) feet.

Please join with me in thanking these servants of Christ and praying for God's continued blessing on their life and ministry.

Conclusion

Let me conclude where I began: it is good to be here! It is good to be here because God is here. It is good to be here because Jesus promised that in this world we would not be left bereft as orphans (John 14:18) and Jesus can be trusted to do what he says. God is here, and God will be with us as we go into that world, with all its difference, bearing words of truth and deeds of love. I invite you to join with me in praying that we will do so, confident in the all-sufficient grace of our Lord and Saviour.

Most loving God, **You send us into the world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage in the power of your Spirit. Amen.**