

A sermon on the Occasion of the Chrism Mass

27th March 2018

Holy Trinity Cathedral, Wangaratta

The gospel today begins with outsiders. Gentiles. Coming to the disciples at the feast saying “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” In a sense is that not at the heart of our diaconal, priestly and episcopal ministry? Providing witness in action and words to those who come to us saying “Sir, Madam, we wish to see Jesus.”

A great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since we last met to review our vows of ordination. I have to say that my faith in the church that you and I are called to serve has been severely tested. And maybe, just maybe, yours has too. That the renewal of our vows be not a rote repetition but rather a solemn recommitment before god we should take time together to look carefully at those challenges and to think through their implications for us in the ministry that we share, for our diocese and for the wider church.

Since we last met the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse has issued its final report. The report of the royal commission at the conclusion of its incredibly painful, horrifying journey provides a scarring indictment of the failure of the churches to protect the most vulnerable and to hold to account the perpetrators of abuse. The harried stories of victims make for heartbreaking reading and reflection. Lives destroyed, innocence betrayed. Betrayal upon betrayal upon betrayal. The commission exposes a church more concerned about protecting its reputation and its property rather than acknowledging the radical evil lurking at the heart of the institution. Whilst in our own diocese we have by the grace of God, avoided the sort of institutional abuses that have taken place elsewhere we nevertheless have had a number of clergy who have betrayed their sacred ordination vows with devastating results.

Let us recall the words of the Priests’ Ordinal:

Never forget how great a treasure is placed in your care: the Church you must serve is Christ’s spouse and body purchased at the cost of his own life.

Remember that you will be called to give an account before Jesus Christ: if it should come about that the Church, or any of its members, is hurt or hindered as a result of your negligence, you know the greatness of the fault and the judgment that will follow.

Our standing in the community has been significantly undermined by the scandal of the abuse crisis. Our sins and our failings make it harder for those who wish to see Jesus, to find him in us. We have no choice but to acknowledge our actions and omissions in shame; to beg for forgiveness from those we’ve failed; to pay whatever

the cost is for redress, and for putting in place the most robust systems to ensure that a crisis such as this can never occur again.

And again to those victims of abuse in this diocese I make a deep and heartfelt apology for all the suffering to which you have been subjected. And make a solemn promise to do all in my power to ensure that the wrongs of the past are righted as best we can.

The second significant factor which needs acknowledgement is the passing in the Australian parliament of the same sex marriage legislation which exposes the gulf existing between the church and contemporary society.

The history of the church in relation to the discoveries of science is lamentable. From the condemnation of Galileo, to the refusal to come to terms with the insights from the Enlightenment, the church has tended to defend the indefensible until it is forced to recant. The God which remains is the God of the gaps between the insights of science, rather than the Almighty, Everlasting God, the creator and sustainer of all things who we claim to worship.

To pretend that theology is science is to devalue and betray both disciplines. No rational person today accepts a cosmology that posits a flat earth with an impenetrable dome above it, the windows of which open from time to time to let the rain in. But such a cosmology is implicit in the literal reading of the book of Genesis. Yet we still defend an anthropology based on a literal reading of the first two chapters of the same Old Testament book, the authors of which are unaware of the insights of science into the complexity of the development of human sexuality. For those who come to us wishing to see Jesus, especially those who are not conventionally heterosexual, our failure to understand the complexity of human anthropology provides a significant barrier. Add to this the searing nature of some of the rhetoric which flowed from the deeply flawed plebiscite process and we are left looking not only out of touch but cruel.

The third matter I want to refer to has been around for longer but seems to me to be more focused in the year since we last met. And that is the development of the new ecclesiastical tribalism: Parties standing on either side of the church chucking theological bombs at each other. The genius of the Elizabethan Settlement has been betrayed. If the Elizabethan Settlement promoted the words of Jesus - those who are not against us are for us, modern tribalism asserts the reverse - those that are not for us are against us.

We have bishops in the Anglican church of Australia travelling to America to engage in the consecration of a schismatic bishop in a church not in communion with this church. We have those who will condemn other Christians for using a different but valid form of hermeneutic to read and understand the word of God. We have

the dismissal of many of us in the claim “we are bible believing Christians – you are liberals”, as though we don’t take the bible deeply and absolutely seriously.

Added together, the journey we have been on since we last met I think poses to us enormous challenges in our self-understanding. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Will we see Jesus when we look in the mirror, when we look at the church? Or will we see what Ludwig Feuerbach announced those centuries ago – a projection of our own human needs, fears and inadequacies sent out into the wide blue yonder, called God, and used as a club to beat those who don’t comply with the way that we see the world.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Jesus goes on to tell us very truly, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains a single grain. But if it dies it bares much fruit. As we come again to stand before Almighty God and to repeat our solemn vows of ordination, do we have the wisdom and the courage to look at that which is amongst us which needs to die that the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ may live? That when the spiritually starving come to us saying “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” it is the liberating, life giving, redeeming, healing, proclaiming Jesus that they encounter.

I’m not one you know who deals with proof texts. But I have got a favourite and my favourite also comes from St Matthew’s gospel. It is this.

Every scribe that has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

The challenge for the church in this time of repenting our sins and acknowledging our failings, is to look at what new needs to come from our treasure chest. That those that come to us saying “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” will see Christ of God and be healed and transformed and enlightened. For Sir, we too wish to see Jesus.

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