

# **Presidential Address to Synod 2019**



## **President's Address to the 144th Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton**

### **Introduction**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, welcome to this the 144<sup>th</sup> session of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton. I would like to acknowledge the Darumbal people, the traditional owners of this land upon which we stand. As we continue to learn to live together on these ancestral lands, we acknowledge and pay our respects to elders, past, present and future, praying that God will unite us all in the knowledge of his Son, in whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible – all things have been created through him and for him.

This Synod presents us with a number of challenges - both financial and spiritual, challenges about our vision of church and ministry, challenges about our ability to remain viable as an independent diocese in the Australian church.

### **Everything must Change**

A few years ago, my then three or 4 year old grand-daughter was proudly carrying a pink case. I asked her what was in it. 'My Leapster', she replied. 'Let me show you', and so my education began.

Now for those of us who don't know. a Leapster is like a junior version of a Nintendo DS or DSi. Of course, if you don't know what a Leapster is you probably don't know what a DS or DSi is either. They are electronic game machines. Switch them on and away you go, for hours on end oblivious to everything else in the world. Ellie, I discovered, at 4 years old, was already an expert in the intricacies of Leapster gaming and computer control. The world has changed, and it continues to change at a rapid and, dare I say, alarming rate.

Brian MacLaren in his book 'Everything Must Change'<sup>1</sup> speaks of the changing world in which we live - challenging the nature of church as an exclusive club, calling us, the church, to live in radically different ways, to become true followers of Jesus in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Everything Must Change: When the World's Biggest Problems and Jesus Good News Collide, McLaren, Brian D., Thomas Nelson, 2009.

The difficulty communicating the message of Jesus today, is not a lack of faith, or that people are not drawn to Jesus' message. It's the negative baggage attached to the words Christian and Church, so much baggage that some people have suggested dropping these words from our conversation entirely. We can see this happening when we look at some of the names popping up for new churches: Elevation, The Cause, The Vineyard, The Road Home, The Mix, and my personal favourite, Warehouse 242. All of which, by the way, are the names of real churches.

McLaren argues that there is a huge difference between what is happening in the world and what is happening in the Church. As an experiment, for a moment or two, turn to your neighbour and talk about what you think is the biggest problem facing the world today?

Now what do you think is the biggest issue in the church?

Do the two themes match?

McLaren, states that, as a general rule, the church is not telling the story of Jesus in a way that makes a lot of sense of the world as people experience it today. Society and culture have changed, but the way we present the message of the gospel hasn't. The message of Jesus, of course, remains unchanged, but unless this message can be seen having an impact on everyday lives it all seems pretty worthless. The Church has become an institution more concerned with its own issues, issues of doctrine and survival, than the issues that the majority of people are most concerned about.

The answer to this dilemma is not to become more like the world. Many western churches, in an effort to be relevant in society, are adopting and promoting the values of the world around them. But, we are called to be in the world, not of the world. Faith in Jesus and following God's plan and purpose for our lives should make us different.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See for example:

John 15:19 *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.*

Romans 12:1-2 *Therefore, [Urge you brothers](#) and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

1 John 2:15-17 *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.*

We are not of the world and in our words and actions we are called to be the presence of Jesus in our families and communities, transforming them in ways that please God.

When Jesus stood up and said, *'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'* (Luke 4:18-19), it was a clarion call to those around him – to the poor, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, it was good news, but to the rich and the powerful, those who dealt injustice, it was a threat that they understood only too well. Jesus' message made a difference to how people lived. It was a message that addressed the big issues of his day and people responded to that message, building communities of faith that came to be called church.

Following Jesus is a call to take a risk, to challenge the world and its powers. To challenge injustice, to seek to make right the wrongs of this world with acts of righteousness, peace, equality, justice, love, above all love. In short we are being called to fish from the other side of the boat.

### **The other side of the boat**

*<sup>4</sup> Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup> That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. <sup>8</sup> But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. (John 21:4-8)*

Peter and his friends had been fishing for years. They knew how to fish, they had to – their families depended on it. They have just spent a fishless night and tired from their labours, they head towards the shore. A stranger shrouded in the half light of

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*And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.*

daybreak, insults them by calling them children and then proceeds to tell them how to do their job.

Jesus' disciples are a lot more polite than most, if not all, of the fishermen I've ever met. No smart comments, no rude gestures – they simply let down their net for a catch. Amazingly they pull in a hundred and fifty-three large fish, so many, in fact, that the net should have torn apart, but it didn't. Such is the way of things when people are obedient to God in Christ.

These fishermen could have chosen to ignore the stranger and his advice. Left or right side of the boat, what does it matter? Clearly it does! In many parts of the Western World the church continues to fish out of the same side of the boat. Bound to tradition, bound to personal preference, these churches either have become, or are becoming, obsolete.

When challenged to try something different, will we stick with what we have always done, will we hold to our tradition, or will we fish from the other side of the boat?

We, like those first disciples, are called to be fishers of people, all of us, no exceptions. Yet, I suspect many of us are afraid of obeying God in this area. We want someone else to do the fishing for us – we don't want to get our hands dirty – we want our fish, cleaned, filleted, and lightly grilled, a piece of lemon on the side, ready to consume with a minimum of effort on our part.

Fishing from the other side is a call to change. The difficulty with change, with doing things differently, is that we each believe we know the best way to fish, yet, we have just heard that even the professionals had to be told to do it differently! Are we so busy trying to do what we have always done that we either haven't heard, or have refused to hear, the call to fish from the other side, to fulfil God's call on our lives.

Missionary and preacher, E. Stanley Jones, speaking about the church, said, "The laity on the whole have been in the stands as spectators, and the clergy have been on the field playing the game... The laity must come out of the stands as spectators and take the field as players; and the clergy must come off the field as players and take

the side-lines as coaches of a team.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a radical change, especially for the Anglican Church, but it is a change that we must make if we are to fulfil God’s purpose for us all. In many respects it means the church of the future will be more like the church of old – focused upon people not buildings and programmes – focused around everyone having a part to play and everyone playing their part. The age of the spectator church is coming to an end. The church of the future is more likely to resemble the church in Acts – groups of Christians meeting together in homes, supporting, caring and learning together. Each group will be responsible for caring for each other, for spreading the message of Jesus, for drawing others into their midst to learn and come to faith. Everyone, young and old will have a part to play, a task to perform as these groups become the centre and focus of Christian life and worship.

These groups will likely meet together in larger gatherings perhaps, in a church building, but just as likely in a school or community hall. Such meetings will not be unlike what we do now, there will be a time of praying and praise together, time for communion, time for sharing what is happening in our groups and a time for teaching, for sharing a common vision and purpose. This is an image of the church to come.

### **Diocesan and Parish Finances**

You will have already heard about the Diocesan financial situation. The impact of personal injury claims and redress from the 1960s and 70s is beginning to bite in a significant way. We will only be able to negotiate this difficult time if we work together, seeking the will and desire of God. There is no point in blaming others. What should never have happened did, children were abused, and young lives destroyed by the actions of a few. We have to be willing to recognise that these events occurred and then do everything in our power to ensure they never happen again, while providing a caring and compassionate response to the survivors of abuse.

There has been a very personal cost paid by all who are involved in dealing with abuse claims. You cannot hear or read the stories and not be affected to the very core of your being. This was a great evil that has undermined the church and its position in society in many different ways. Prayerfully we seek forgiveness for the past and

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<sup>3</sup> The Reconstruction of the Church, on what Pattern?, E. Stanley Jones, Abingdon 1992 p.47

wisdom for the future - there is a lot of healing needed.

Rockhampton Diocese is committed to the provision of support for those who have been abused and to seeking fair and just payment for survivors. Unfortunately, this has an impact on Diocesan finances. The reduction of funds invested leads to the reduction of the income available to support ministry.

The registrar will be speaking about parish contribution rates, over the course of this synod, and how they might be linked to the provision of an independent episcopal ministry in the diocese. If we are unwilling or unable to work together to this end, there is a real possibility that our diocese will have to seek outside assistance to support the Bishop's office. This will almost certainly lead to a loss of independence.

## **Giving**

Anglicans are not keen to speak about money and giving, at least not in relation to the church. We appear embarrassed about this aspect of our faith. Yet, you cannot read the Bible and avoid being challenged about how you manage your money. Sixteen of Jesus' thirty eight parables are about money and possessions. One in every ten verses of the Gospels deals with money. The Bible offers some 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2000 verses on money and possessions.

“Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a person's real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a person's true character. All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of character and how people handle money.” (Richard J Halverson)

Jesus' teaching on giving is a significant challenge to all of us:

*<sup>33</sup> “Sell what you have and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven have no holes in them. Your treasure will be safe—no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. <sup>34</sup> Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.”*  
(Luke 12:33-34)



<sup>22</sup> *“There is still one thing you lack,” Jesus said. “Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* <sup>23</sup> *But when the man heard this, he became sad because he was very rich. (Luke 18:22-23)*

I have wrestled with these verses in the poverty that exists in Bangladesh – asking the question how far to go, how much should I give? Let me say emphatically, at this point, experience has taught me you cannot out give God.

Across the diocese I hear stories of parishes that struggle financially. I don’t want to deny that statement but I think it needs challenging. There is an old saying “the church does not have a financial problem; it has a spiritual problem”, time after time, wherever people are growing in faith, wherever the Spirit of God is at work in the community, resources will be found, and ministries will flourish. I will return to this theme a little later.

For now I want to ask do we trust God with our finances? Is it time to seriously consider our level of giving to the work of God, to ministry, in our communities, in our diocese? In many cases an increase in giving equivalent to the price of a cup of coffee and a piece cake every week would make the difference. In a congregation of 50 adults that equates to roughly \$25,000 per annum.

While what you choose to give is your decision, a decision that you make before God, you might consider this little prayer when you think about your giving.

"O Lord, no matter what I say or what I do, here is what I think of You."

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### **Prayer and fasting**

I want now to shift gears and focus on lament and prayer. It is too easy at Synod to become overly concerned with legal and financial matters forgetting that our primary purpose for coming together is to further the kingdom of God, announcing the good news found in Jesus.

Prayer and fasting are an essential part of our Christian life. Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights prior to beginning his ministry (Matt 4). The apostles prayed and fasted

before sending out Barnabas and Paul for ministry (Acts 13) While there is not space or time to consider all of the different times and ways that God's people pray and fast, we can be certain that this has been an important part of the life of the Church from the earliest of times. People fast and pray before significant events, when facing conflict, in times of disaster, in fact wherever God's blessing is sought. In a world that is increasingly focussed upon doing things ourselves, on being self-sufficient and where prayer can be seen as a sign of weakness, we need to see that prayer is foundational to our life as the family of God in Central Queensland.

We have seen that our diocesan family faces many challenges and I suggest to you that it is time for us to stop, to pray and to fast, to seek God's voice and direction for our life together. These challenges will not be overcome in isolation, they require that we work together as family, there is no 'us and them' simply 'us' gathering together for a day of prayer and fasting. Lifting before God the challenges we face in each ministry unit, the diocese and our wider community.

I am suggesting that we use the last weekend in August as a time for us to come together all across the diocese to pray and fast. I do hope and pray you will make this a priority in your ministry area. I am convinced that God will hear our prayers and provide us with the resources and the guidance we need for our future together.

There is a flyer available for you to take back to your ministry units outlining some ideas on how to conduct the day of prayer and fasting, with some points for prayer. Please take them with you and use them as we join together all across this diocese to seek God's blessing upon our lives and ministry – may God's love be visible in and through us for the Glory of his kingdom.

### **What next?**

I want close with a story that I hope will inspire and encourage us in our growing discipleship as we face the challenges ahead.

I first saw God as my observer, a judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like a king. I recognised His picture when I saw it, but I didn't really know Him.

Later on, when I recognised this Higher Power, it seemed as though life was rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and God was in the back helping me pedal.

I don't know just when it was that God suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since - life with my Higher Power, that is. God makes life exciting!

When He took the lead, it was all I could do to hang on! He knew delightful paths, up mountains and through rocky places--and at breakneck speeds. Even though it looked like madness, he said, "Pedal!"

I, worried and anxious, asked "Where are you taking me?" He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into adventure. When I'd say, "I'm scared," He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance, and joy. They gave me their gifts to take on my journey, our journey, God's and mine. And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and our burden became light.

At first, I did not trust God in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it. But He knows bike secrets - knows how to make it lean to take sharp corners, dodge large rocks, and speed through scary passages.

And I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places. I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant Companion. And when I'm sure I just can't do any more, He just smiles and says, "Pedal!"

We have challenges ahead but let us look to God and may God smile at us in the weeks, months and years ahead, speaking the word "Pedal".

I think, despite the challenges, we are entering into a wonderful, new and exciting phase of ministry here in Central Queensland. There will be challenges ahead, but I'm thrilled to be on this journey with God, and with you, and look forward to seeing where our God will lead us next.