

Presidential Address to Synod 2020

**President's Address to the 146th Session
of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton**

President's Charge – The Future

*Administrator/Bishop's Commissary
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18th July 2020

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of Synod,

Our **future** is **unknown**, but our future is **secure**.

I love the verses from 1 John 3:2-3, which are found also in our prayer book, from the 3rd Order of HC

We are God's children **now**,
and **what we will be has not yet been made known**.
But we know that when He appears, (that is Jesus),
we shall be like him,
for we shall see him as he is.
All who have this **hope in him** (that is Jesus)
purify themselves, just as he is pure.

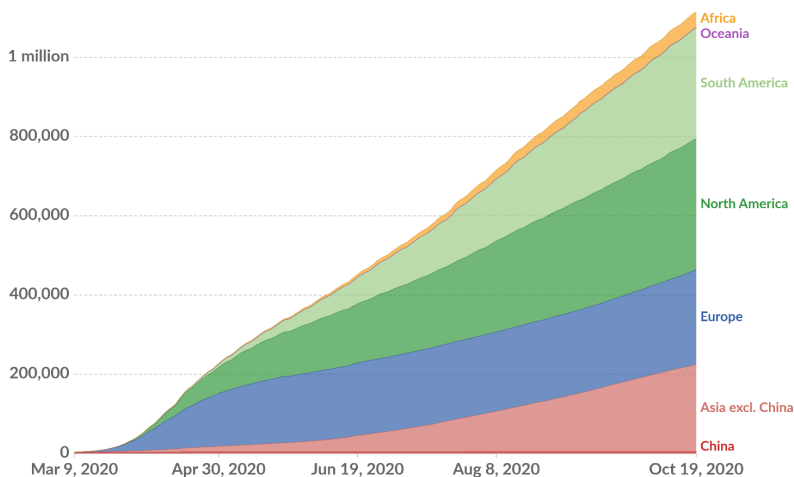
Our future is **unknown**, but our future is **secure**.

If ever there was a year in my lifetime where the future is unknown and uncertain, where the world has been struck by calamity, where it's been clearly demonstrated that life is outside of our control it's been this year, 2020. **Annus Horribilis** – as her Majesty the Queen might say.

At this present time, not only are there ongoing wars that destroy cities and displace millions, not only is the planet being ravaged whilst we ignore the science, to our collective peril, but right now, we are witnessing 2nd and 3rd waves of the pandemic sweeping other parts of the world, beginning to wipe out tens of thousands of more people. So far, well over a million people have died globally. Here's the global culminative graph, from a few days ago. It's coloured according to continents - aren't we blessed to be the thin line under the yellow?

Total confirmed COVID-19 deaths

Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death means that the number of confirmed deaths may not be an accurate count of the true number of deaths from COVID-19.



Source: European CDC - Situation Update Worldwide - Last updated 20 October, 10:35 (London time) OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Yet some will say to me it's fake news, it's a conspiracy, it's not that bad. Some here in this Synod would even take that point of view - I know, because you've told me. And, I suppose it shouldn't surprise me, as the church often reflects the wider community, but I want to ask 'How do any of us know, what we know?' 'What news sources can we trust that don't have hidden agendas?'

Think back, or rather, imagine back to WWII. How would anyone in Australia in 1944 have known how a nation could exterminate 6 million Jews. That couldn't really of happened? Could it? Surely, people couldn't really have done that? Could we? Yet there are people today, unsurprisingly, who say the holocaust never happened. It was fake news. It's a conspiracy. It wasn't that bad...

In our age of relativism, when all truth is relative, the only truth that seems to matter is my truth. What is true for me? In that kind of a world? How do we know what to believe? How can a society even know, who to believe?

And yet, here we are, as a church, the Anglican church, still spruiking a man who lived 2000 years ago, who came from an obscure village called Nazareth and we say that this man, *came back from the dead*.

Jesus wrote nothing down for us to read. For most of his short life he was a tradie, a carpenter. Jesus was only active in his preaching ministry for three years, and when he was falsely tried and brutally executed all his followers deserted him.

And yet, after his death, and his death alone, the world has not ever been the same. Something happened that turned the world upside down. Something happened that created communities of transformation. Something happened that began to champion justice.

Something happened that gave birth to sacrificial love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, purity, selflessness. That turning point in history was the resurrection of Jesus. He conquered death, He reversed disease, He undid sin, and there is so much more. He secured a future for humanity

Yes, our future is unknown but through faith, our future is secure. I don't know when I will die. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't even know, when the borders will reopen properly. And friends, I don't know if our Diocesan structures will survive.

Our future is unknown, but our future is secure. You see, members of Synod, your future is unknown. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. This time last year, none of us had any clue about the coronavirus. None of us had any clue that church services would cease; that community would be locked down; that international travel would just stop. Your future, in the here and now, is unknown. But, because of Jesus, your future is secure.

Friends, the hope of the gospel, when properly understood is the most tantalising good news ever. As I recently wrote in CQFirst, I have spent the last 30 years reading the Bible, exploring faith in community, standing against injustice, listening to people's struggles, praying and reflecting on all things spiritual and this is what I know... Jesus is the answer. Jesus is the key to all of life.

Are there any fellow science fiction fans in Synod? Are there any fellow Trekkies – apart from me? Well – you will understand this next comment. I wish I were a Vulcan like Spock in Star Trek, where I could telepathically connect my thoughts to your thoughts, my mind to your mind. Where I could do what's called, the 'Vulcan mind meld', so that you would know what I know and I would know what you know.

Imagine - it would change evangelism forever. To be able to instantly help another person see the truth of the Kingdom of God; to be instantly convicted of God's greater reality; to hear immediately Jesus' call to pick up your cross and follow.

Jesus is all that the Bible, that our Prayer book, that our creeds and articles declare him to be. The Son of God, in our human flesh, come to set us free from sin, disease and death. The unseen truth he declared is also that this world will be recreated, a new age will dawn. It will be indescribably spectacular, so much so that if anyone got a 1 second glimpse of it their life would become instantly different.

You see, none of us knows what tomorrow holds but everyone who knows Jesus has a tomorrow that never dies, has a secure future that begins the moment you believe in Jesus and it lasts for eternity. Now, hold that thought till I come back to it at the end. Let me now change track a little. I want to gently speak to our church.

Here's an observation from life. We all need to talk with each other better and listen better to each other. We need to ask enquiring questions of each other and really open up our lives to each other.

Why do I say this?

Like all of us, I am guilty of often just making assumptions about what another person might think or believe. We rarely take the time to get to know another person deeply. Often, we are completely lacking in any curiosity about each other. We tend to make small internal

judgments about others, that if we're honest, has more to do with our own comfort levels; our own presuppositions and biases; our own beliefs and values. Let me be blunt with a harmless example.

Why do I still have a straggly, increasingly pathetic, pony-tail...?

Now you might assume that...

- I'm a throwback hippy from the past
- I'm a cheapskate and don't want to spend money on a haircut
- I've just been growing my own toupee
- You might even conclude, well...all the bad guys in the movies have a pony-tail for a reason...

We all make judgements based on our assumptions...

I recall a former parishioner, not here, back in Sydney, telling me about their conversation with a church warden from the neighbouring parish, who apparently said *"I'm glad our minister doesn't have a pony-tail. I don't know how you guys cope with a minister with a pony-tail"* I hope you're laughing, but imagine seriously for a moment if I were indigenous, or a woman, or Asian or all of the above at the same time, with a pony-tail. My point is this, we are all guilty of judging each other based on our assumptions, not on getting to know each other deeply.

Let's gently raise the stakes...

If, I as a minister, come along and suggest there's another way we could do this or that and if you don't like it Your immediate reaction will be to judge.

- What would he know, he's from down south!
- What would he know, he's got a pony-tail!
- What would he know, he's an overweight middle-aged man?

And here's the problem. We are all in the same boat of making judgments about one another. So how can we know, what we need to know? How do we discern truth from different points of view? And more importantly, how do we begin to discern, what God thinks?

I'm talking about our Church, our denomination. You're all familiar with this – the Anglican Prayer Book, 1995 and here's its predecessor – the 1978 edition with wait - an introduction from the Bishop of Rockhampton Sir John Grindrod, and that is based on this one, the Book of Common Prayer, 1662 and that one is based on Thomas Crammer's, the Archbishop of Canterbury's original version of 1549 which was sealed with his blood just 7 years later, when he was burnt at the stake for saying that the Bible, the word of God, is the source of final authority for discerning truth, not the Church, or the Pope, or tradition, or human reason.

The ultimate truth, is Jesus, who declared

I am the way
I am the truth
I am the life.

Followers of Jesus, those who want to live for his Kingdom, don't jump to assumptions about each other, instead they listen carefully to each other and measure what is said against what

has been revealed in his word. Members of Synod, remember what I'm saying when we come to debate motions and listen to our speakers.

But let me be even blunter.

This Diocese barely has the resources to survive, let alone raise up clergy from within its own ranks. But the clergy who come into this Diocese from afar must not assume that the local people have nothing to offer. I have been blown away by the people I've met.

Let me embarrass two, forgive me Pam and Jacqui from North Rocky. Pam Guy and Jacqui Keily ran GFS in North Rocky for 52 years-

- That is 52 years of *being there* for generations of kids
- 52 years of preparing lessons + craft
- 52 years of giving up time that could have been with their families
- 52 years of nurturing and praying for kids
- 52 years of modelling Jesus to kids
- 52 years of sharing God's love

And there are many other amazingly beautiful and godly men and women across this Diocese, and those who come in from afar must not assume that the locals know nothing. Similarly, those who have been born and bred in CQ please don't assume that those coming from afar have nothing to say or offer. Don't assume they don't care or that they haven't got things to say that have your best interest at heart, because they do. Don't assume that if they come from Sydney for example, like me, that they don't have a heart for justice or people on the margins.

When the AIDS virus hit the world and Australia was running scared with grim reaper ads it was an Anglican Parish in Sydney that set up the first AIDS Hostel before anyone else including the gay community.

When crime and police corruption was so rampant that it led to the Wood Royal Commission in the mid 1990's, it was an Anglican Parish in Sydney that was running a drop-in centre for the homeless, the poor, the marginalised the sex-workers, addicts and those caught in that underbelly of society.

When the whistle was blown on Israel's secret production of nuclear weapons and the whistle-blower was imprisoned and sentenced in a kangaroo court to 18 years solitary confinement in Israel. It was an Anglican Church in Sydney that ran an Australian and international campaign demanding his release including putting legislation through the Australian senate to help effect his release.

How do I know? I was there. And why was I, as a Sydney Anglican, involved with those things? Why was the Anglican Church involved in all those things? Because the gospel changes everything. The Good News of Jesus is not just about Jesus dying for your sins so you can be forgiven the gospel of Jesus Christ, changes everything.

It changes what you do with your life

- It changes how you use your money and possessions
- It changes how you treat other people
- It changes what you live for
- It changes what you do with your time
- It changes everything

Bishop David, said at last year's Synod, do you remember? *"I may well be the last Bishop of Rockhampton"* He wasn't being melodramatic. It was because he saw close up the cost of this Diocese paying for all the sins of the past. He read, heard, and gave evidence at the Royal Commission, about the physical, the emotional, the psychological, spiritual and sometimes also sexual abuse perpetrated in the name of Christ in the past in this Diocese.

It is abhorrent to even think about the sins of a few that left many people wounded, broken and scarred for life. I am on the record for saying that, if it means that this Diocese gives away every last cent it has to redress the sins of the past, then so be it.

This Diocese has been in debt and running negative cashflow budgets for ages. So, a year ago, the Diocesan Council asked for a legal opinion surrounding the issues of insolvency. This Diocese received that legal opinion on the 26th February, just 4 days after Bishop David laid up his staff. We called a Special Synod, which happened in July. We wanted to bring all the members of this Diocese up to speed with the risks involved. We did not want any of you to be in the dark about the seriousness of our situation. The Chancellor, Registrar and I came to that Special Synod with one report in three parts, called the State of the Diocese and we came with one Roadmap for the way forward.

I thank that Special Synod in July for giving Diocesan Council the mandate to put that road map into action and as you will hear from the Registrar, that is what we have done. The Diocesan Council has in a short space of time of three months been able to divest itself of much of its debt

- by selling properties in Musgrave St (*not the Anglicare buildings*)
- by selling part of the Parkhurst site, including the old St George's Superintendent's House
- by selling the Bishop's residence in Cobble Court
- and most recently the Tanyalla site is under contract before settlement.

None of that was easy at all. Some of it involved lengthy debates, much prayer and close decisions. We are not totally out of the woods yet, but I think it is fair to say that the axe is now not at the foot of the tree - it's resting up against the shed door.

I have kept Bishop-elect Peter apprised of these things. He asked me a few weeks ago *"Tom, honestly, how long will I get as Bishop? A year or 18 months?"* And I was able to say to him, *"No, No, No, longer than that. There's at least a solid 5 years or more"*.

But friends, it can all change. All it takes is for more PIPA Claims and Redress to come to light that we don't know about. As a Diocese, our future is unknown. But, as God's children, as God's people, as the church of God, our future is secure.

There are of course, other Dioceses, much worse off than ours. I was talking to one Bishop recently who said *"the Money will be gone by March"*.

So, let me spend some time outlining the way forward, that I see. The first thing I say to you all is:

Don't ever be too proud as Central Queenslanders to ask for help. Anyone who has any connection to the land knows just how independent and proud people who work the land, are. Regardless of whether it's battling a mental health problem or surviving a crippling drought, people on the land are the last people to ask for help. The church in CQ must not be like that. Remember, you belong to a network of brothers + sisters who will help

A personal story

When I was a new Christian, I found myself on a 6 week QLD road trip with my best mate after a year of uni. We'd been camping and bushwalking in national parks. When we drove into Maryborough, on a Sunday afternoon, I reckon the locals would have smelt us before they saw us. Nevertheless, as we were, we took ourselves off to church. The Anglicans had an evening service at 6pm. So we went. We knew nobody in QLD.

After the service over a cuppa, a mum in her 40s asked us *"Where are you staying?"* We had nothing planned, we were 18! She said *"You're welcome to stay the night at our home"*. So we did. A shower, clean bed, bacon and eggs for breakfast...An 18yr boy could ask for no more.

That was the day in my life, that I realized that as a Christian, I belonged to the body of Christ all over the world. I have brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers that I have never met yet. So I say, brothers and sisters of CQ remember, you have Anglican Christian family all around outside of this Diocese. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

1. Remember that even though it looks like our issues are all financial they are not.

You are in a spiritual battle for the heart and soul of CQ. Therefore, your best resource is God! So, be a people of prayer. Pray for our diocese and each other, every day in your own meditation times with God, every time you meet together for worship. Pray unceasingly for each other and that Jesus might be glorified in our churches and community. So Pray.

2. Get connected with people who don't go church

Meet them wherever you can. Listen to them, love them, respond to their needs. I haven't got time to tell you about one of my heroes -an English Anglican from the 18th Century called Charles Simeon. When he began as the Anglican Minister at Holy Trinity Church Cambridge, at the age of 23, when the wardens locked him out of the church, because they didn't want this as their minister. How did he start his ministry in that industrial revolution blackened city of poverty? He went door to door introducing himself like this: *"Hello, I'm Charles Simeon the Anglican Vicar, is there anything I can do for your welfare?"* Get connected with ordinary people.

3. Be bold in embracing change

Every Anglican church around the country is having to do this. It's not just you. Find out what your brothers and sisters are doing elsewhere and see what things you can do to share God's love with the people in your community.

4. We need to invite and embrace Anglican church planters into our Diocese

I think this last step is critical.

It's nothing new, in fact it's as traditional as you can get. Do you realise that after the four gospels, the rest of the NT is basically accounts of the first Christians? Taking Jesus words seriously, of going out and making disciples. The rest of the NT is a record of church planting, one after another. I'm not talking about bricks and mortar building projects. That didn't happen until centuries later. I'm talking about communities of faith, meeting together, praying together, eating together, breaking bread together, doing life together.

So my final word to you as a Diocese, is that you need to take some steps of faith to replant churches again. Many of your forbears did it all over CQ three, four, five generations ago. It is, I believe, what needs to happen here next. Peter will be keen for it.

So, invite, pray for, embrace and support church planters in your midst they will come if you ask them. Members of Synod **the future is unknown, but it is secure.** None of knows what tomorrow holds but it is God who holds tomorrow.

I want to finish with a personal story about how the gospel changes everything, about how meeting Jesus changes people.

Gerry O'Rourke was a really likeable, intelligent guy. (*I do not know if he's any relation to Barry!*) Gerry had a wicked sense of humour which fitted his Irish surname, from his grandfather, but he was proudly Aboriginal. Gerry came along to church in Kings Cross but he didn't want to appear like he believed in God, so he'd sit up the back of church and read the Sunday paper, but I knew he was listening cos he'd ask me questions about faith, later.

Sadly, one day, like so many I've known, Gerry was found dead outside a men's refuge with a needle in his arm. Weeks before he died, Gerry had warned me about his mate Eric. Eric was beyond hope, he thought. *"Stay away from my friend Eric. He's a nasty piece of work. Don't ever get mixed up with Eric"*.

Now, I'd never met Eric, only just heard about him. People on the street feared Eric. Eric was violent, he was in gaol more often than not. He had bashed so many people, that he carried a gun on him in case he needed it, to defend himself.

So, there I was, taking Gerry's funeral. I read out this poem, written by a 19yr old street girl it's called **"Help Pain Overload"** – Let me read it to you.

"Help Pain Overload"

The continual darkness on the road to nowhere
The isolating experience, the unbearable despair
Exploding sensation inside your head
Wanting to die but in a way already dead

Relying on drugs for some kind of high
Afraid to live and sometimes afraid to die
Guts knotted up, mind still in a mess
Continue to fight, it seems so useless

Tried to be the right person and do the right thing
What kind of consequence does that damn well bring?
Get rid of the cut up feeling inside
If people won't stay cool just run and hide

Look in the mirror at the ugliness staring back
Gotta keep running, that's one person you can't hack
Avoiding yourself, getting away
So hard to do day after day

You can't afford to stop and think
Block it out, have another drink
If wrecking yourself don't first of all work
Then you've got to do it again you jerk

If I keep doing this where will I end?
In an asylum around the bend?
Achieving that don't have much gain
I just want someone to take away the pain.

I read that poem, then talked about the hope we have because of Jesus. God can heal our pain and replace it with his love. And if we put our trust in Jesus, God promises to never forsake or abandon us, but he prepares an eternal home for us. After the service, this huge guy made his way towards me, through the crowd. He had tears rolling down his face. He held out his hand. I'm a mate of Gerry's. – I'm Eric.

He got straight to the point. He asked "*Can I have a copy of that poem?*" "*Yeah sure, what do you want it for?*" I replied. I'll never forget his reply. "*I want to tattoo it on my back!!*"

Do you understand what he was *really* asking? He just wanted *someone to take away his pain...*

So we sat down, over a cuppa and started to chat. He told me about his life, his extreme violence. He told me about some of the abuse he received as a kid, and some of the abuse he'd dished out, and how he preferred living in prison, because it was safer there - safer for himself and safer for other people. Then after a while I asked him "*Eric, in all of your life, in all of your years of violence, crime, hatred and pain, is there anything at all that you have found that has helped you be less violent?*"

I was not prepared for what he said to me.

He said *"In all my life I have **found only one thing** that has helped me be **less violent**. When I am feeling right on the brink of snapping and hurting someone, I recite these words to myself until I calm down."*

Then he recited the words.

*"For God so loved the world,
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him
will not perish but have eternal life.*

And I say it over and over and over again, until I calm down."

Well we talked some more, then we prayed together. Some weeks later he came and sought me out to tell me what he'd done.

Eric then described how he took his gun, which was his security; it was his protection, his life insurance policy. He took his gun, and took it all to pieces, then he threw it all into Sydney Harbour. It was his way of saying *"I'm deciding to follow Jesus"*.

Jesus changes everything. No matter what tomorrow holds, Jesus holds this Diocese, and you, in his loving hands. **Your future is unknown, but it is secure.**

Let's pray.

Postscript

The following was omitted from my address for the sake of brevity. However, as I included in my address a poem written many years ago by a young 19 year old woman in need on the streets of inner city Melbourne, I thought for the sake of completeness, that I would add here another poem she wrote only a few months later called 'Answers'. As I said in my Presidential Address, Jesus is the answer to all of our searching and questioning and this is something that this young woman perceived many years ago, through the eyes of faith, eyes that had also shed tears of pain that had turned into tears of joy.

Answers

They say Jesus is the answer to the questions inside
That he won't desert me when I just wanna hide
That he is beside me in all that I feel
That his love is forever there, seeking to heal

Sometimes the pain inside threatens to break you
And you just can't hack feelin' so blue
The pain of living rips you apart
Makes you wanna cry and tears at your heart

It's easy enough to act strong and tough
But it really tests ya when things get too rough
The pain gets too great to break down and cry
You get tired of fighting and just wanna die

So what do ya do when you reach the end
And it seems your emotions won't ever mend
When you've reached this stage where do you turn
Your eyes upwards to heaven or downwards to burn?

Look to the heavens and to our Father above
Let him restore you with everlasting love
Sometimes the pain makes it so hard to trust
Even though people say that you must

Suicide attempts, rejection and sexual abuse
Leaves negative feelings that are so profuse
Look in contempt at the ugliness you see
Can't imagine what its like to be free

Self-imposed prison, emotionally tight cell
Destructive emotions, in a living hell
Keep on drinking and drugging, seeking the high
Doin' anything to escape and somehow get by

Reality closes in and you're full of fear
Just don't know how to let others near
This is where you need to know God's grace
To transform your life so you can run the race.