

Second Ordinary Session of the 46th Synod of the Diocese of Sydney: October 2003

Presidential Address

Delivered by Dr Peter Jensen, Archbishop of Sydney, on Monday 13 October 2003.

Weddings

I grow to like weddings more and more. I love the happiness of them; I love the customs about them; I love the way in which the new generation is having such creative fun with the traditions. I even love the speeches, especially the utterly predictable ones: like the uncle who knows the bride well because he used to nurse her when she was a baby (though he has not seen much of her since then) and the bridegroom he has never met until now, but he is sure he must be an excellent man because Julie would only choose a good man.

Marriage

I love weddings because I love marriages. Whether we like it or not, marriages create networks; quite effortlessly, we acquire a string of extra relations, in old fashioned language, kinsfolk. We may never see each other, or even acknowledge the relationship, but the network is there, and is part of the complex and resilient web which makes for community. If we are fortunate, this new family alliance can come alive and provide amazing mutual support and nurture and satisfaction.

I love marriages because of the exciting paradox of them: the fundamental human unit of one person joined with another to become another fundamental unit of two persons but one flesh. You do not have to be an expert to be married; you do not have to be good-looking, or rich or to be a stand-out person - as usual God has reserved the best things for ordinary people. But every precious individual has come forth from the union of two other individuals. Every individual has the right to expect that the two who have parented him or her did so out of love for one another. They should have had the fixed intention of providing not only life, but nurture and guidance and love. An individual conception may have been an 'accident', but this matters not at all if the home is purpose-built.

Family

The fact is that human persons flourish best in the context of stable and loving family relationships. It is part of the goodness of God's provision, that in the normal course of events those home relationships provide not just one who is the same as me in my sex, but one who is different; the daughter must relate to a man, as the son must relate to a woman, as they learn what it is to be human. Sex education is not merely a matter of talks about reproduction and safety; it is an education in the sexes, a matter of producing men and women who care for each other with insight. Good sex is a matter of understanding, of character, not mere technique.

That determination to love and to provide a loving home is given proper and public expression in the exchange of promises at the wedding. Passionate affection needs the long-sightedness of a sacred and solemn covenant, or exchange of promises. It is a moment both romantic and risky when an inexperienced young couple vow to be true to each other 'for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health'; it is a moment when lovers vow to be mates through whatever adventures may come; a moment when the grandparents smile inwardly at the innocence of those who may make such a commitment. The whole extraordinary business of cultivating human children depends upon the promises of two flawed and inexperienced human beings.

Strangely, it is a covenant which the State itself seems to care little about or to support in any meaningful way. On the contrary, the laws of the State reflect a culture in which individualism is the ruling ethos. Getting my own way is what matters, and morality is personal not communal. Thus, if we have never been taught to keep our word as a matter of honour and of obedience to God, our marriages are put at risk. Even the churches seem to care little whether we honour our word or not. Divorce and even adultery cause as little comment among us as they do in the community as a whole.

Co-habitation

In our generation, co-habitation has become a widespread option to marriage. It is marriage without promises; union without commitment, a shadow of the real thing. It matches the deep-seated individualism of contemporary western society, suiting the mood of autonomy or self-legislation. By its very logic, it is not

successful in creating long-term satisfying relationships; it also inhibits the development of kinship between families in society. In fact, the evidence is that those who marry after first co-habiting have less successful marriages than those who approach their unions in the time-honoured public way. The satisfactions gained from the informal setting up of domestic arrangements are short-term. They do not work in favour of either of the participants. That women in particular have acquiesced in this widespread fashion is puzzling: genuine feminism would certainly have counselled them to hold out for marriage. Even more importantly, children have been disadvantaged. The philosophy of individualism creates a serious love-deficit in the community.

The Love-deficit

Of course, not all marry or stay married. For some, singleness is a choice; for others it is a fact of life which they would prefer to change if the opportunity arises; there are many for whom marriage has been a personal disaster and a source of great pain; there are those for whom sexual union with a member of the opposite sex is something which they find impossible to contemplate. The single person, the individual, is precious in the sight of God. Marriage may or may not be their current experience, but they still have deep need for love, for relationships which yield joy and satisfaction. Increasingly, however, the philosophy of individualism denies them that opportunity. We are starved of righteousness and love.

The single Christian person, whether a teenager or a mature adult, is called to live not merely chastely - we are all bound to do that - but without giving physical expression to their sexual natures. This in a society which idolises sex and offers frequent persuasions to immorality. We are constantly being told that the yielding of our body to another is the same as the unity of one's self with another; that it will lead to intimacy. But sexual freedom yields recreation rather than relationship. In these circumstances many single Christians exhibit laudable self-discipline over their sexual lives in loyalty to Christ; but the lack of understanding and the selfishness of others can be painful. Among their needs, they may rightly long for profound friendship, perhaps even 'mateship', a safe intimacy, both pure and satisfying in its own way.

The love-deficit of our society makes such friendship hard to find and to sustain. But they should surely be found among the fellowship of believers; it is no accident that the New Testament calls us by the family names of brother and sister, describes the church as a family and as a household, and calls upon us to love and nurture one another. Single people need the recognition and support of the brothers and sisters in Christ if they are to be true to their Lord. They should be honoured amongst us; indeed the pure love of the brothers and sisters is immensely precious for the single person. It is especially so for those who have been bruised by the relationship whirlpool which is so typical of modern life. In turn, they have a responsibility to build up love in the congregation and to encourage those who are married.

The Marriage of the Lamb

But there is a deeper mystery here: we marry because the Lord himself is the husband of his people; our marriages are the short-term anticipations of that eternal marriage. Marriage is a reflection of God's ultimate purposes, in which we will all be corporately married, whether now married, or single or unable to be married or divorced or widowed. Our real marriage is with Christ: that is what the book of Revelation describes as 'the wedding of the Lamb' for which 'his bride has made herself ready' with the righteous deeds of the saints (Rev 19:7-8). Christ is our true covenant partner. Here is the ultimate relationship for single or married persons: our relationship with each other and with the Father through the Son and the Spirit. The Church is not only to be described as God's flock, temple and the vine, but even the body and the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22ff).

Multiplying Christian Fellowships

Twelve months ago as a Synod we solemnly set our hands to the Diocesan Mission. In doing so, we accepted this fundamental aim: 'To multiply Bible-based Christian fellowships, congregations and churches which equip and nurture their members and expand themselves, both in the Diocese and in all the world'.

This, then, is a Mission which stresses not so much the multiplication of converts, but the multiplication of Christian churches, congregations and fellowships. Of course we trust that the fellowships contain converts. But why have we chosen this emphasis? For two chief reasons. First, because our strategy arises from the nature and purpose of church as revealed in the New Testament. Second, because the New Testament doctrine is a great aid to mission. It is especially true in the post-modern world in which we are called to commend and to live the gospel. The Christian church both has, and is, the answer to the love- starvation induced by individualism.

At this Synod we will together refocus on the Mission. In my address last year, I introduced the goal, strategy and policies of the Mission. Today I will explain how the Bible's teaching on the church helps us to mission effectively in our culture - and some of the things we need to do about it.

Here are three natures of the Church:

The One Bride of Christ

First, we see that there is only one bride of Christ. She is beloved by him and he has purchased her with his own blood. When we reach the end of days we do not see a situation of polygamy, with different churches being married to the Lamb; we see no ultimate future here for the denominations as they vie with one another on earth; we see only one pure bride 'coming down out of heaven from God, as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Rev 21:2). No doubt this is John's way of saying what Paul says, when he tells us that it is the intention of Christ to present the church to himself, 'as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Eph 5:27).

The Bride is One

Second, we see that the Bride is One, that she is a unity already. We do not create her oneness; that is a gift of God from the beginning. When Jesus prayed that his believers may be one, his prayer was answered and continues to be answered. Not least was it answered when the Gentiles were invited into the church on exactly the same terms and conditions as the Jews. The church belongs to the Bridegroom; it is not the possession of any one group or denomination or church structure here on earth. The visible church is necessarily divided by time and space; it also shows forth confusions and divisions over doctrine and practice. But none of this removes the fundamental unity of believers through the Holy Spirit, a unity which reflects the fact that we are even now united with Christ. To use an older language, the saved, whether alive or dead, are all members of the church invisible.

The Local Church as the Bride of Christ

Third, local assemblies of Christians here and now, with all their faults and sins are manifestations of the one true church the Bride of Christ. They may rightly be called by the titles, names and honours of the church. When Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, he did not address his letter to part of the church, or a branch of the church; he gave it the full title: 'the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess 1:1). Thus it is precisely theologically correct that we say to the congregation, 'You are the body of Christ'; not that we are part of the body, or that we resemble the body, but that we are the body. It is a title fit for the gathering of Christians, small or large. So, too, we may say, you are the flock of Christ; you are the vine; you are the household; you are the bride.

Which assemblies deserve this name? Some popular possibilities and emphases we may at once exclude. There is nothing in the New Testament to support the idea that it is only those who meet in a certain style of building; there is nothing to say that they have to meet only on Sundays, or Saturdays; there is nothing which makes them link to a certain style of liturgy or even of ministry; we do not have to presuppose membership of a certain association of churches; nor that a church is coterminous with a nation, or even that it is another name for all the Christians spread throughout the world.

All these things - our buildings, our ministry, our liturgy, our associations, our communities - can be legitimate. There is no doubt, furthermore, that there is a profound network of communion with our fellow Christians worldwide, what Peter calls, 'your brotherhood throughout the world' (1 Peter 5:9). But the essence of the matter is the purpose of the gathering, a purpose I would summarise as being to meet Christ by the power of his Spirit in his word and sacrament and in loving fellowship with one another. We meet Christ in order to obey him, to manifest the holiness which is his gift, our destiny and our duty.

In particular, I will stress the significance of the word of God in this. The sacraments themselves are 'visible words' depending for their meaning and efficacy on the word; they are actions in which the word of God's grace is given and received by faith. Christ is the head of the church, and he rules it by his word. It is the word which summons the church, the word which guides and governs the church, the word which nourishes its life. The American Bishop who famously said, 'The church gave us the Bible and it can re-write the Bible' got the whole matter exactly wrong. The church is the product of the word of God, a temple founded on the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus being the chief cornerstone.

Experiencing Church

How do we experience the church? Others may look for such markers as buildings or particular liturgy or clergy; some will demand certain experiential signs. But the Church of Jesus Christ will be marked by the preaching of his word and the administration of the sacraments in the midst of a faithful people. They call on God the Father and Jesus the Lord in the power of the Spirit. Clearly it seeks to obey Christ, and so it manifests godliness in unifying love and purity and mutual care.

In Ephesians, Paul spells out what that obedience will look like in the experience of the churches here and now. He gives a list of commands they are to keep: they are not to lie, not to steal, not to use obscenities. But when we examine these more closely, we see that they are all linked with our fellowship in the body of Christ, our unity in the bride. Our behaviour is especially geared to building up the church until it becomes what Christ has already made it. 'Live a life of love,' he says, 'just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us ...' (Eph 5:2); also, 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (5:21). Our sanctification, our growth into the likeness of Christ is not merely an individual matter: it is a corporate responsibility and joy. We are so to love one another that we are all together to become like the Saviour who redeemed us. In this context, our unity with one another is a vital part of the expression of our love.

I think that we can now begin to sense the reason why this is a mission which emphasises fellowship and the multiplication of fellowships and why this understanding of the church is so helpful to us. Here are five reasons:

Word and Church

First, because of the connection between the word of God and the church. Since each church is summoned into existence and lives by the word of God, it is the most natural context for the unbeliever to hear God's word and be saved. Furthermore, the unbeliever should not just hear the word of God, they should see it in action in the love, faith and hope of the church. Without doubt, many are saved through the faithful work of individuals, and there is much scope for personal evangelism. But the fellowship of the church is the fruit of the gospel and its life confirms the truth of the gospel.

Church and Nurture

Second, because of the nurture that each church provides for new Christians. When an unbeliever is brought to faith in the context of a fellowship, follow-up has already begun. They do not need to be drawn to a church as a separate step; they are already in the place where it is good for them to be. The church which is being obedient to its Lord will already be nurturing them and building them up in love. Furthermore, the church which understands itself correctly will have moved from outward formality to meeting, from priest to minister, from parish to church, from church to congregation, from temple to facility, from regional to local. All these moves reflect both better theology and a precious missionary characteristic, reality.

Fellowship and Flexibility

Third, because of the flexibility of this doctrine of the church. The sort of church of which I have been speaking may well be the ordinary suburban congregation - I hope that this is going on all the time in our congregations. But the suburban church on its own is not going to be able to reach out and attract all. For many people, such churches meet at the wrong time in places which are uninviting. Their meetings are too large for comfort and too sophisticated for the beginner. We are going to have to supplement our churches with fellowship groups and congregations which will give access to the experience of church in far more welcoming forms. This doctrine of the church shows how flexible we can be as we preach the gospel and try to win 10% of the population. 'Church' is a big turn off for many; and yet they desperately need the Christian meeting as the place where over time they will find Christ, and where they will be 'taught Christ'.

The small independent Christian group which gathers on a Tuesday night on a hill-side in China in order to meet Christ by the power of his Spirit in his word and in fellowship with one another is essentially 'church'. It is essentially the church, with the full status of the body and bride of Christ. I am not suggesting that a person with a choice should be satisfied merely with the small group; that would impoverish your Christian experience and deny the longing of God's Spirit to unite you where possible with other Christians. I would hope that the fellowship group will be a bridge to the larger experience of the usual local church; but for many, even in our community, it may be their spiritual home, for good reason. Such a group is going to be the only way in which they will have access to Christian fellowship for some considerable time for some, it will ever be their only means of access, and we ought not to say that they have no experience of the body of Christ, that they are not part of the bride.

This flexibility can help the strategies of the big church and the small church alike. Large or small, each church, congregation or fellowship can be thinking of starting a new fellowship or congregation or church all the time.

'Church-planting' may sound daunting and beyond the resources of a small church. But a new cell-group trying to plant the gospel in a certain street or shopping centre is not. Individuals can be looking at their own environment to see what opportunities exist, how networks can be exploited to plant fellowships; how fellowships can be expanded by inviting new people to join them. Planning to do so should be a fixed item on the agenda. After all, our aim is to share the gospel and the good fruit of the gospel in righteous, loving community with as many people as we can. The growth of fellowships is a good way to accomplish this.

The Priority of the Local

Fourth, because in this understanding of church, priority is given to the local church over the denominational, and great responsibility is given to the ordinary church members. The denomination is seen to be a structure aimed at helping the local churches in their ministry. It is not a 'church' as such; it is not in itself the body or the bride of Christ. This approach reverses the usual way we think, puts the local churches in the front of our planning, and turns the denominational structures into mission support. The local is where the action is; you must be global in your concerns, but local in your chief action. Furthermore, we become open to co-operation with Bible-based churches of other denominations; this way of thinking is genuinely ecumenical.

Fellowship and the Love-deficit

There is a fifth reason why this understanding of church is so helpful for the Mission. The creation of such churches, whether they be mega-churches with thousands of members or small churches with only a few score, provides a key alternative to the individualism and lovelessness of post-modernism. Whether by strengthening the family of the married, or by being the family of the single, the church is to show how we can live in a world where we accept the authority of Jesus Christ and so our true humanity. That is why it is so important to see the church as local; the large, institutional denomination which goes by the name 'church' cannot be the personal place where gospel work is done. The local church is where lonely and love-starved and righteousness-starved people are incorporated into the body of Christ and placed under his headship.

The encounter with fellowships, islands of love and righteousness, is precisely relevant to the needs of post-modern society, a society in which love and righteousness are in short supply. Paul writes: 'But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people' (Eph 5:3). In a world like ours, the mere existence of people who live to that standard is very good, liberating news. In a society which has lost the family and the art of love, providing access to small or large voluntary groups of loving relationships helps people to be healed. In the end, of course, it is only the marriage of the Lamb which satisfies and endures.

The Church Actual

Of course there is theory and then there is reality. It is all very well for me to speak thus about the church, but what we have and what we represent here are the traditional local churches, the street-corner churches of our great city, burdened with stipends, wardens, Sunday schools, property, and ordinances. At a space removed, and yet as watchful as a canine constabulary, we have archdeacons and bishops, the one to bark, the other to bite. And then we have the Synod as the Church's Parliament, a vaguely-heard-of General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia and beyond that at an unimaginable distance removed from what actually occurs, the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury and even, somehow, the Queen.

There is nothing in what I have said which suggests that we should ignore or disconnect ourselves from any of this. On the contrary, our wider links constitute highly valuable ways of associating ourselves with large numbers of 'the brotherhood throughout the world.' Our links with fellow Christians, especially those whose history is much the same as ours, should give us great pleasure, and we should be glad to have the association, even to bear the same name. It can save us from insularity and make us helpfully accountable to others. It would be foolish and ridiculous to dispense with these things as if we could somehow go back to the beginning again and start afresh. The point of looking to the Bible is to check that what we have is actually unbiblical and to see it in perspective and to see whether we may legitimately innovate.

There is nothing quite like a denomination in scripture, but it is certain that the churches regarded themselves as part of a network and checked their doctrine against one another (eg 1 Cor 11:16). The ministry of the bishop had not yet developed, but there were ministers whose activities spanned different congregations. There was nothing corresponding to our Synod, and yet the churches had a responsibility for their own lives. There was at least one assembly in Jerusalem at which the Christians met to sort out issues of joint concern and even issued rules of behaviour for the peace and well-being of the churches.

Our problem is not the accretions to the original, but whether they have become a burden and involve us through our connections in clear ungodliness.

The Diocese and the Synod

Let us start with ourselves. I love the Diocese of Sydney, though I do not imagine that we should call it 'the church', or the bride of Christ. Rather it is a network of churches and Christian organisations intended to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ and to support the churches. Because we belong to each other, we impact on one another; my good name belongs to you; my concerns are your concerns; we are well fitted to extend the reach of the gospel by engaging in joint actions, such as the Diocesan Mission.

How will our Synod advance the cause of the church, the bride of Christ? I think that it is time to abandon the idea that we are the parliament of the church. Often we have behaved as though that is exactly what we are, and tedious and inefficient has been the result. Certainly elections, ordinances and the distribution of money are key elements of our life together; they make our association work. But the true framework is not parliamentary.

It is far healthier for us to think of the Synod as an assembly of the representatives of the churches which go to make up our network, for the purposes of our mutual life. Given last year's overwhelming Mission commitment, the key question is how we are going to best help each other fulfil our goal. For a number of us it will be quite in order to be critical, or to dissent from the Mission. Nonetheless, I hope that our discussions in the next few days will advance the cause of multiplying bible-based churches, congregations and fellowships in our region and beyond with the initial goal of seeing 10% of the region in such churches in the next 9 years.

The Anglican Communion

As you are well aware, however, we are not on our own, isolated from anyone else. This year has shown that some of our other networks and connections are more important than we imagined. We are indeed part of the Anglican Church of Australia and have historically been pleased to take our membership of this denomination with great seriousness. Our Constitution also makes us part of the world-wide Anglican Communion. It is a fellowship of mainly autonomous Dioceses whose origins go back to England and the historical expansion of the English-speaking people and English missionaries from the seventeenth century onwards. Admittedly these associations appear to have little bearing on the daily life of the local churches. Yet by the mass of custom, of good will, of history and of law they do impinge on us. Without doubt we are in an association with our fellow Anglicans which is not the same as, say, the one we have with the Lutherans. We are identified with each other because we bear the same name. It is an association often accompanied by such good things as prayer and mutual assistance.

What does this mean? When I was thinking of studying in the US in 1976, Archbishop Loane wrote on my behalf to the local ECUSA Bishop, certifying that I was in good standing and enquiring whether a part-time place may be found for me. It was assumed that we were in communion with the Episcopal Church and that as a result a courtesy could be extended to me; I did not have to be re-ordained or retrained; it was assumed that there would be a relatively common approach to ministry and that my good standing included my moral and doctrinal probity. In fact, I went to England and was accepted on the same sort of terms in the Diocese of Oxford. I never felt that I was serving in a different denomination. For me, it was merely a different Diocese of the same world-wide communion. You may have the same experience by joining an Anglican congregation all around the world, sometimes in surprising places. It is a privilege not to be scorned.

On the other hand, it is a privilege which can be overstated. After all, as we look to what God is doing, there is only one Bride of Christ, as we have seen. Membership is not via membership of an ancient denomination, but via faith in Christ. Our brothers and sisters include faithful Anglicans, of course, but not only faithful Anglicans; we must include the faithful of all denominations and none. We can be so in love with our denomination that we exclude others from full fellowship with Christ, and fail to co-operate with other believers or to discern great movements of God which do not have the right 'brand-name'. One of the joys of my life as a Christian has been to take part in interdenominational work through Scripture Union or Crusaders, or to attend the Katoomba Convention, with its great text 'All one in Christ Jesus'. As far as I can see, my communion with my Presbyterian colleagues or my Baptist friends is barely hindered at all by denominational considerations.

Women Bishops and Communion

It is also a privilege which may cause grief. We can cause grief to others, and they to us. Although ten years have passed since the first women were ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Australia, and at a level of friendship there is more peace than there was in those tumultuous years, we have to acknowledge that the denomination has never been the same since. I know that some of you grieve deeply and sincerely about my unwillingness to adopt this development. For my part, and I too am saddened, on that day for the first time my denomination wrote into its charter-documents a practice which is contrary to the bible's teaching. Necessarily,

sadly, our communion has been impaired. We can no longer exactly accept each other's ministry as we once, in principle, did.

At the moment, the Australian Church is discussing the issue of women bishops. If the priesting of women was wrong on scriptural grounds, it cannot be right to accept women bishops. The difficulty is exacerbated because a bishop at some level represents a whole Diocese and has to minister to every church in the Diocese. What happens if her ministry is not received, for conscience sake by a parish, or by another Diocese? Nor is this merely symbolic. Various elements of a bishop's role as we have it in our denomination, matters such as jurisdiction, training of clergy, the succession of ministers in a parish and the safeguarding of property make this development perilous for those who do not accept it.

To meet this problem, some people talk of alternative episcopal oversight. At present the legislation being proposed will encourage the Diocesan bishop to provide for a rather minimalist alternative episcopal ministry (rather than oversight) by a male bishop where wanted by a parish. But a bishop provides more than liturgical acts and pastoral care. Is a system such as the one proposed going to be strong enough to offer protection to those with conscientious objections to women bishops? For that matter, how will any self-respecting woman bishop allow for it? Is there not going to need to be deeper structural change? We are confronted with one of the agonising difficulties of modern Anglicanism. It still seems to me that should the General Synod legislate for women bishops, we will only be able to restore a measure of unity with a formal, structural realignment of some sort.

Sexual Immorality and Communion

The problems raised for many of us by women in the role of priests and bishops is significant. But they are of a different order than the blessing of same sex unions and the active practice of homosexuality by those in the ministry. We ought always to obey scripture. We cannot set it aside as I believe has been done with the priesting of women, without unfortunate consequences. But the warnings against same sex practices create a fresh level of concern; they put the practitioners at deadly spiritual risk: 'they will not inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor 6:9,10). Certainly this is part of a list of other gross public sins; certainly we do condemn practices of swindling, lying and greed; certainly the problem is not homosexuality as such; it is the disregard for the scriptural teaching on chastity for us all which is the problem. Heterosexual immorality disqualifies a person from active ministry as much as homosexual immorality does. These are salvation issues, and we cannot falter in making our opposition clear, even if it were to cost us everything we hold dear.

I have already referred to the fact that there are Christians - sometimes including those in ministry - who struggle with same-sex attraction. Sometimes they fail in the struggle. I want to say clearly and emphatically that all are welcome in our churches, and especially all who struggle and fail. Where else can any of us turn than to the Lord Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners? Which one of us can judge another in this area with perfect heart? I want to say that I hope that they find their pastors knowledgeable and caring and their Christian brothers and sisters supportive and encouraging. I want to say that in this struggle we admire them and honour those who seek to live godly lives in Christ Jesus. One thing that angers me is the little acknowledgement that is given to those who live chastely, whether men or women, whatever their inner dispositions may be. To them I say - remember that the fine linen of the bride of Christ 'stands for the righteous deeds of the saints' (Rev 19:8); certainly you are helping to adorn the bride.

The Test of Communion

The reality of the Anglican Communion has been put to its severest test this year over the issue of the blessing of same sex unions and the endorsement of unrepentant homosexual ministry. But it is not only the world-wide Anglican Communion; it is also our own Australian Uniting Church which is involved in a debate over the same issue. Indeed it is no exaggeration to suggest that parts of western Christianity are at an acute phase of the struggle to survive as Christians in our sort of culture, and that this issue is a turning point.

When the Anglicans of New Westminster, in Canada were faced with this, a number of parishes left the Synod, and effectively declared themselves to be out of fellowship with their own Diocese and its bishop. Amongst those who left were the Reverend David Short and Professor Jim Packer - hardly revolutionaries. The nine dissenting parishes have called themselves, 'The Anglican Communion in New Westminster', and have gained the episcopal protection and support of Bishop Terence Buckle, Bishop of the Yukon. They have risked, and continue to risk, the loss of their property and their identity as Anglicans, but they have done the right thing. They have obeyed the Head of the Church.

Many people talked with me when I was in London during the controversy over the appointment of Dr Jeffrey John as the Bishop of Reading. Subsequently I also visited Vancouver, Washington and Nairobi at the

invitation of those who are seeking the support of our Diocese in the struggle to remain in the Anglican Church. I have also had discussions with a number of Uniting Church leaders.

These invitations are a recognition of the important role played by Archbishop Goodhew and the other Sydney bishops at Lambeth. The Diocese is able to make a key theological contribution in giving evangelical and orthodox leadership. Whether we like it or not, we are involved. I have been advised by some to say and do nothing, that these matters do not concern us. I cannot accept that suggestion, especially having heard and prayed with those who are suffering deeply over what they see to be the apostasy of their churches. For them, the imagery of Ezekiel 16, where the Lord's bride has become defiled by her capitulation to the gods and moral practices of the nations is the present reality of their denomination.

Authentic Anglicans

We must ask, why is the action of the orthodox in New Westminster at all a risk? The danger is, of course, that they will lose their parish rights, their property, their ministry. That is why the recognition of other bishops national and international is useful to them. It does not solve their legal problems, but it is a start.

Why, then, have they not been instantly recognised as authentic Anglicans by the rest of the Canadian church and by the Archbishop of Canterbury? After all, it is not they who initiated change; it is not they who are dissenting from the Lambeth Conference; it is not they who have deserted the teaching of the Bible as understood for two thousand years and is still understood by the vast majority of Christians around the world. This exposes the difficulties in the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury, not least the present Archbishop, whose theological views are supportive of the Diocese rather than the parishes.

Surely the Archbishop of Canterbury cannot be out of fellowship with the dissenting parishes; and yet he remains in fellowship with the Bishop of New Westminster. His choice is a painful one. He can either abide by the general rules of episcopal behaviour and maintain fellowship with Bishop Ingham; or he can accept that the Bishop has introduced an innovation against the wishes of the vast majority in the communion and many in his own Diocese, and recognise that only the dissenting Anglicans are faithful; or he can recognise both.

At the very least he must relate himself to both sides, or he will see the moral authority which adheres to his office ebb away. Indeed if he continues to relate to New Westminster and ECUSA without rebuke on moral and spiritual grounds, that authority may be at risk in any case. For my part, and I say it with sorrow, I am no longer in such fellowship with the bishop of New Westminster as to welcome him here or indeed to have any dealings with him, while this situation persists and while there is no repentance.

Mine is a moderate statement compared to others; in fact we are facing a future in which the Communion will be in disarray, with parts not recognising other parts. Realignment and even dismemberment is possible, with effective leadership for large parts of the Communion passing to hands other than those of Canterbury. It is not a welcome thought; but those who created the situation by innovation must bear some of the responsibility. Please continue to pray for Dr Williams.

The Significance of this Dispute

The Anglican Communion as such is not the bride of Christ, but all of us who belong to it should aspire to the holiness of the bride. Where that holiness is put at such risk as it has been in the UK, the USA and in Canada, it will be absolutely inevitable that major divisive consequences will follow. In their activities our good name is at stake; our capacity to preach the gospel is imperilled.

Already there are those who have expressed the view that the fuss will die down, that the dissenters will either leave or become quiet as they have over the ordination of women. I can understand why they may think this, given that many of the arguments that have justified one innovation have now been used to justify the other. But, nonetheless, let me say with all seriousness, that this is a massive miscalculation. For a start, those of us who have opposed the ordination of women have not disappeared. Second, the rejection of these developments on this occasion has been widespread and powerful. They are particularly strongly voiced in the global south, where the numerical strength of the Anglican Communion is now found. Wherever it happens it is bound to lead to sustained opposition and a major and costly realignment of the churches.

Our hearts go out to the brothers and sisters of the Uniting Church, who have found this issue so painful. We pray that the Assembly will reverse the decision which has led to this sorrow. If you ask, by what right do I comment on the affairs of the Uniting Church, I reply that the decision of the Assembly has impacted for ill on all Christians in Australia as we try to witness to the standards of the Bible. The bible-based churches must be able to count on our support; I hope that that support will be forthcoming from all Anglicans if needed, and that this will be made clear at the General Synod next year. Certainly as a Diocese we cannot even contemplate

being party to an ecumenical covenant with a denomination which has taken this step. I quote the decisive words of the distinguished German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

Here lies the boundary of a Christian Church which knows itself to be bound by the authority of Scripture. Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism. If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognised homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. (Christianity Today, Nov 11th, 1996).

The Health of the Local Church

These large affairs may seem remote from the local church. But the opinions of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the doings of the American Church are instant news here. They affect our presentation of the gospel, especially as we bear the same name and are structurally connected. Far more deadly, of course, is the local endorsement of Bishop Spong, who in the name of the Anglican Church attacks the evangelical presentation of the gospel. He thus gives comfort to the unbelievers who reject it. For myself, I engage in these disputes unwillingly, but I am bound to do so for the sake of the people of God in the local churches. In the end the success or failure of our Mission under God depends on the capacity of the local church to commend the gospel. It is not helped in this task by connections with a denomination which in some parts has compromised so blatantly with the culture of individualism. This has to be publicly challenged.

The good health of these local churches is basic to our Mission strategy. We need churches of quality, whatever the size, whatever their ethos or their churchmanship. Our churches need to be places where you may hear the biblical gospel taught faithfully, from the pulpit to the kindergarten Sunday School class. They need to be places where that gospel is lived: where there is a manifest righteous love, the holy love that you would expect of the bride of Christ. They need to be places of prayer; they need to have a world vision and a clear local mission; in terms of our Mission they need to have the multiplication of churches and ministries always on the agenda.

Our diocese has always been blessed by strong lay leadership, and we are going to continue to need men and women of sterling spiritual maturity. But the good health of the churches depends mainly on one key factor. The local church rarely rises above the character and skills of its own Rector. Under God, he is the most important single element in the situation. He above all is charged with the weighty responsibility of preaching the word of God which is the basis and regulative principle of the church.

The Quality of the Rector

The quality of the pastorate has always been a great concern to the Archbishops of Sydney. We have wanted to know about the godliness, personal maturity and skills for ministry of those being ordained. No doubt we have had our failures; indeed the ministry is a calling which often remorselessly exposes the failures of those who enter it. No doubt every lay person here would have his or her criticisms of members of clergy: after all it is from the lay people that we recruit them! But on the whole, standards have been maintained, and the Lord has blessed us with clergy whose personal lives will bear scrutiny, whose grasp of the scriptures is sound and whose capacity for pastoral ministry is proven.

The need for this quality is going to be felt more keenly in the next decade. First we need ministers who are godly, not given to greed, or scandal, or gossip, or sexual failure. As ever, they must manage their own families well. This at a time when the culture is making it all too easy to fall into sin at these and other points. Second, they need to lead the churches in the preaching of God's word and in prayer. Of course they will need to love those outside of Christ and be concerned to win them to him. As the churches multiply, if the Lord blesses us in that way, the Rectors are going to need to be all the more excellent pastor/teachers, because more people will be looking to them for help. They will need to explain why we need to believe and to live counter-culturally. Third, if we follow our strategy, the Rectors we need are going to have to be able to lead churches through change, in the multiplication of fellowships and in taking responsibility for several congregations. They will need to be those who can lead leaders in the multiplication of nurturing congregations. There will be much more lay leadership, for example, and the professionally trained minister is the central resource person in this area.

We can only look to the Lord to continue to raise up such men. But they will need to be shaped and resourced and prepared by the very best education which we can give them. In a world where the faith is under intellectual

and moral assault they have to be clear and strong in belief, mighty in the scriptures, like Apollos of old, able ministers of the new covenant.

Ministers of Congregations

Rectors are like the anchor-men of the ministry. But they are going to be called upon to multiply their ministries through others; to train people, to recruit others for the work. Inevitably we are going to develop new patterns of ministry. One such ministry is going to be that of the person who has pastoral responsibility for a specialist congregation. They will, for example be church-planters or evangelists, bringing together a new group of people; they may be pastors of ethnic congregations. Such workers may not need the same qualifications of those whom I am calling Rectors (though it would be good if they possessed them!). But they may need the recognition that ordination brings. We need the flexibility to ordain ministers for service in specific congregations. This development would enable us to recruit, recognise and employ numbers of men and women whose theological training was different from that of the Rector. But they need to have the skills and graces to do pastoral work in congregations.

Moore College

Let me say with all solemnity that integral to the provision of such pastoral leadership is Moore College with its sister, Mary Andrews College. It is our College, manifestly blessed by God through its 147 year history; far beyond anything else it has made this Diocese what it is. It has been, and promises to be even more so, a mighty instrument in the hand of God for the defence and confirmation of the faith. Its present faculty is illustrious; its library is the best in Australia; its student body is impressive. It stands - it has always stood-for godliness; it stands for the intellect captive to the word of God; it stands for the gospel. Speaking strategically we have never been at a more important moment to see the influence of the College through its faculty and its graduates do great things for Christ in Sydney, and beyond. The experiences I have had overseas this year have reinforced at every point the duty we owe to play a part in the defence of the gospel far beyond our own shores. Frankly, in many places biblical theological education is at a low ebb. Moore College is at the centre of the contribution that we are being summoned to make.

Humanly speaking the success of our Mission is going to depend on the health of the College. Whatever we do we must support it; whatever we do we must keep sending men and women to it; it is our single most important diocesan activity beyond the local churches. Indeed the more we diversify our training for lay and stipendiary ministries - if for example we develop ordained ministers such as the ones of whom I have spoken - the more important is the College.

The present and immediate needs of the College are the needs caused by growth and life. The Council has refused to set a limit on its growth. It believes that if God raises up men and women we must take them and train them now. This is an astonishing act of faith, for the facilities are already stretched and those who work at the College are heroic. Please take an interest in the College; be affectionately critical of its endeavours; please support its work in prayer; please support its work with your gifts; pray for the supply of very significant sums of money so that the work will not be hindered. Make it your College and a natural part of your Christian duty to be concerned for its fortunes and interested in its progress.

Marriage and the Love-deficit

The Marriage of the Lamb of God to his Church is part of our great hope; and yet its fulfilment is part of our Christian experience in church here and now. We have a distinctly other-worldly hope. Better, we have a hope for a new world in which dwells righteousness. Our hope drives us forward to share the gospel of Jesus with others, so that they too may be saved through him and spend eternity with God.

But - against all human wisdom - this other-worldly faith of ours is also very worldly. It has powerful consequences for life here and now. Not least can we see this through the experience of church, of fellowships of people dedicated to obeying Christ and building one another up in love. In this context we may see that God was always right to give us his law to live by; that the life of obedience is the good life; that being centred on other persons is actually for the best.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Christian doctrine of marriage. The life of a married person is no easy calling; but there is no more honourable title in all the world than that of Husband, that of Wife. That a Christian man is prepared to devote himself utterly and with self-sacrifice to the one woman; that he is prepared to say so, solemnly and in public; that she is prepared to do the same and to honour the responsibility which he takes for their home; this is one of the most remarkable and wonderful things that human beings can do - far, far more significant and even heroic than the efforts of those sporting celebrities whose doings fill our

brains with trivia. And in the doing of it, the Christian man and the Christian woman have the honour to reflect the glory of Christ and his church.

This is one of the greatest of the gifts which the gospel gives to the world; our culture's individualistic abandonment of it is a painful disaster. Here is purity and holiness; when we break our vows we bring dishonour to our own name and to the name of Christ. And yet, very strangely, marriage, even the best and most committed marriage, is broken eventually by death, the last enemy; indeed, the better the marriage the greater the pain of the separation of two who have grown to be one. In the end, however, our tears will be wiped away, for our earthly marriages will be transcended, and we will find each other again, but this time within another marriage, one that fulfils and transcends our-earthly union; one that will last forever. This is the marriage of which we are all a part, even those who labour with their singleness: 'I speak of Christ and the church' (Eph 5:32).

My main point is this, that one of the very best things we can do for our society, is to demonstrate true and holy community; for each local church, for each fellowship group to be the pure and obedient bride of Christ. Even when our moral or doctrinal standards are criticised, if they are biblical we have no option but to stand for them. And we will see that, in the multiplication of Christian churches, the pivotal strategy of our Mission to bring the gospel to our generation, we are ourselves simply part of God's great work, in preparing the bride for her marriage to the Lamb.

To the Church of God, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Diocese

I would like to pay tribute, on behalf of all of us, to those ministers of the gospel who have retired from active ministry during the year, wishing them a blessed and fruitful retirement.

The retirees were: the Rev Robert Alexander, Assistant Minister of Cremorne; the Rev David E Firmage, Rector of Kellyville; the Rev Martin W Hunnybun, Rector of Glebe; the Right Rev Brian F V King, Bishop of Western Sydney; the Rev Jim R Le Huray, Rector of Kingsford; the Rev Robert K Luscombe, Assistant Minister of Camden; the Rev Trevor Middleton, Rector of Oak Flats; the Rev Jeffrey M L Parsons, Rector of Lakemba; the Rev R Brian Telfer, Rector of Gladesville; the Rev Don K Wilson, Rector of Padstow and Rev Ken G Yapp, Rector of Neutral Bay.

In addition, those who died were: the Rev A Peter B Bennie; the Rev Bert L Bovis; the Rev Canon R Alan Cole; the Rev E Doug O Crawford; the Rev David G Davis; the Rev Don M Douglass; the Rev Canon Stanley W Giltrap; the Rev Jim W Holmes; the Rev Canon J Roderic L Johnstone and the Rev Robin P Muers, Rector of Katoomba.

As we thank God for their life and ministry, we also send our sympathy to their families, as we with them look forward to that final heavenly marriage feast of which I have spoken.

Peter F Jensen
Archbishop