

Special Session of the 52nd Synod of the Diocese of Sydney to Elect an Archbishop

Election of Archbishop Raffel

Presidential Address

Introduction

As Synod gathers for the 11th time to elect the next Diocesan of the See of Sydney, otherwise known as the Archbishop of Sydney, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet. In his wisdom and love, our heavenly Father gave this estate to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. Upon this land they met for generations until the coming of British settlers. As we continue to learn to live together on these ancestral lands, we acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders, past and present, and pray 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—for all things have been created through him and for him.

"The election of every one of Sydney's archbishops has been a great drama" states Dr Stuart Piggin in his recent biography of Harry Goodhew, a former Archbishop of Sydney. It remains to be seen whether that will be the case this time, but drama is acceptable, even riveting, as long as it is drama played out in a godly and gracious way. And as the curtain rises, please allow me to make some remarks for your consideration in the conversation that we are about to have and in the votes you will cast.

Previous Election Presidential Addresses have tended to define the role of the Archbishop in order to help the Synod determine who can best fill that role. Of course, there have been many different views expressed on the role of the Archbishop. I do feel at some level I have been alleviated of this task, since the Synod has adopted parts of the Doctrine Commission's report from 2018 on "An Evangelical Episcopate", which included the Appendix entitled "The Contemporary Role of the Archbishop of Sydney". There we collectively decided that the Archbishop of Sydney is to be a guardian of 'the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints', committed to order the ministry of the Diocese to the gospel of Christ and his mission, to exercise pastoral concern and insight, to represent the Diocese, to administer the Diocese in line with its mission, and all undergirded by a godly, gospel-driven character.

It is my opinion that we have four nominees who can fill this role. I think the question, then, is not so much who could fill this role but *how* will each one, if elected, fill this role? That is, what kind of Archbishop will each one of these men be? Each will bring to it different strengths and weaknesses, different priorities and emphases. Part of our discernment will be understanding our context and challenges we face, so that we might assess with humble wisdom which of these men may bring the kind of qualities we most need as they execute the role of Archbishop.

Let me suggest 5 areas for you to consider as you speak, listen and pray, and as you seek to discern what kind of Archbishop each of these men might be.

1. Our strategic moment

In my view, we are at a crucial, strategic moment for the work of the gospel in the Diocese for the future. It is crucial now because to wait will be too late. Let me explain.

It is no secret that the city is going through massive, infrastructural changes.

This has become necessary due to the rapid population increase that will see more than 8 million residents in the Diocese by 2056, if not sooner: 1.5 million more people by 2036, another 1.6 million by 2056.

50% of the growth will be in new land release areas – with the largest portion of these being housed in Western, North Western and South Western Sydney.

By 2056 it is forecast that the current Western Region alone will have a population two and half times that of the South Sydney Region or the Northern Region.

Or take the South West, where the new city of Bradfield will be located next to Sydney's second airport. Size-wise, this city will be in the order of 1.5 million people. There will be over 300,000 people moving into just the immediate area around the new airport. We currently have 3 churches available for those 300,000 people.

Compare that with the fact that, for example, we have 3 churches in Lindfield alone, covering a population of 18,000 people. Having 3 churches in Bradfield, would be the equivalent to having only 9 churches in the South Sydney Region or 11 churches in the Northern Region.

And given the size of Bradfield, not to have a major Anglican church there to preach the gospel, as well as have a significant symbolic presence, would be like not having St Andrew's Cathedral in the CBD or St John's in Parramatta or St Michael's in Wollongong. And given that currently the closest churches to the city centre of Bradfield are 18-20kms away, it would be similar to not having the Cathedral in Sydney, and the closest church being Hornsby or Pennant Hills or Narrabeen or Sylvania or Georges Hall. This simply will not do.

By approximately 2056, there will be 50% of the population of Sydney west of Parramatta. However, 70% of the Diocesan parish assets (namely, church buildings) are east of Parramatta.

To be quite frank, there needs to be re-imagining, dare I say it, a re-distribution of the church assets and ministry resources of the Diocese so that these burgeoning areas have gospel ministry available to them.

The growth is tremendous and so, therefore, is the responsibility. By that I mean the responsibility of the Diocese as a whole, of this Synod, in fact. It is not the responsibility of those in the new areas because they are not there.

As such, a monumental task lies ahead. These are not distant mission fields we may or may not choose to support. This is our own backyard. They have been entrusted to us as a Diocese. Or if I may push the analogy further, this is our front yard as hundreds of thousands of people come in the gate. The question is, will they have a door to walk into?

The urgency is that the plan and the initial implementation of securing land needs to happen under the next Archbishop. The future churches we have out there will be determined under the leadership of the Archbishop we elect this week. It is no exaggeration to say that if the churches we need are not put on the development and planning tables of these new areas now, there is no way, *no way*, that we will be able to insert ourselves later. Once the planning has been decided, that is it. And even if we were to try to come in later, if that were even possible, it would be at a minimum of 4 times the cost. If we do not secure our position today, we shall have no presence tomorrow.

What happens in the growth areas will be our legacy, for good or ill. It is not up to one man. It is all our responsibility. But our era and the legacy we leave will be known by the Archbishop of the day. No pressure gentlemen.

The next Archbishop will need to lead and inspire us into quite possibly enormous acts of gospel sacrifice. What kind of Archbishop will each of these gentleman be?

2. Our cultural moment

When I was at university, in our tutorials, you were asked at the beginning to state your name, what school you went to, maybe your favourite hobby. My daughter who is currently at university, in one of her first tutorials, was asked to state her name and the pronoun she designated for herself.

We live in a time where identity rules the market place of ideas, and the moral and political landscape. Identity, in the main, has been hijacked by sexuality and gender, and identity is self-designated by how you feel. You are what you feel you are.

The notion that you are what you feel, and that this has moral authority and objective truth, demonstrates a clear shift in how people think about themselves in relation to society. As such, this way of thinking infiltrates more than just the areas of sexual and gender identity. In just about any sphere now, how I feel is who I am. And it cannot be questioned because there is broad agreement that self-designation is unquestionable.

How did we get from a time where your gender was determined by your biology, confirmed by your name, and normalised by the symbol on the restroom doors, to gender being assigned by individual feelings, and being accepted as authoritative and affirmed by unisex facilities?

Carl Trueman's recent book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, referred to in yesterday's Presidential Address as well, is a fascinating analysis of the current state of play but even more so, how we arrived here. While one may question Trueman's heavy reliance on the agnostic Jewish sociologist, Philip Rieff, given his heavy reliance on the theories Freud developed from an extremely skewed dysfunctional sample group, I think enough of Trueman's analysis is convincing, especially as he interacts with Charles Taylor and Alistair MacIntyre.

In short, he proposes the current manifestation of the sexual revolution is not because of the sexual revolution itself or because of sex, but a far deeper revolution in how people see themselves. People became consumed with their inner being and its well-being, and sexuality and gender came to lie at the heart of one's authenticity as a person. You are what you feel you are, and to express what you feel you are defines authenticity. Self-attestation indisputably reigns.

And yet despite the supremacy of individual self-designation of identity, Trueman posits society is still important in recognising that identity. Society is the theatre in which someone expresses their true self because try as some may, affirmation of identity does not occur in a vacuum. Affirmation of identity is required to legitimise it because we are in a world where individuals still live in community. Society is the mirror that you hold your identity up to. And you expect to see in that societal mirror what you have decided others must see.

How this schema has taken hold is outlined in Trueman's book, albeit giving slightly more credit to the philosophers and poets than I would. Douglas Murray's work in *The Madness of Crowds*, complements Trueman's as he outlines group think in the areas of gender, race and identity. Murray assists us in not only understanding the content of group think in these areas but also provides a window into the dynamics of group think. People want to be individuals but to be individuals with everybody else. Group think still matters. Group think is still important because group think is about acceptance and affirmation. People want to say it only matters what a person thinks of themselves, but it turns out that it does matter what others think of you as well. And what matters is that what others think of you aligns with how you feel about yourself, and that all people think the same.

And so, public and private engagement is no longer two people differing over ideas or issues but simply two people differing, because people think how they feel and what you feel is who you are. To disagree, therefore, is not merely to say what you think or believe is wrong, it is to say that YOU are wrong. Your chosen existence is wrong. Your expression of self is wrong.

So you can no longer "play the ball, not the person", because the ball is the person. It simply does not wash to say that we love the person but disagree with their lifestyle or what they do, because to love them IS to love their lifestyle or what they do.

To disagree with the identity of another, then, is quite opposite to affirming them. It is to erase them. It has nothing to do with freedom of speech about issues. You are attacking the individual, their entire being.

Therefore disagreement is not simply wrong – it is harmful and, therefore, not safe, for it violates a person's authentic existence. So where disagreement occurs, it is not a safe space.

The response to the perceived attack on self, is often to respond in kind – giving rise to cancel culture. This is facilitated by social media where virtual distance fires the dutch courage of the keyboard warriors and is fuelled by the intoxication of “likes”.

And that arguments and ideas are prosecuted in memes and tweets ensures complexity, depth and nuance, or even just plain explanation are discarded, and meaningful deep engagement leading to mutual understanding is lost.

I have only touched the tip of the iceberg in terms of the cultural context, but this is something we all must grapple with as we seek to share a gospel that says repent, that says change, and that says your ultimate identity is not located within you but in being called a child of God.

Why this is important is that our Archbishop will have platforms and opportunities to do this which are not available to most of us and will have much more broadcast than just about any of us. He will need to lead by example: to engage, and be heard. He will need to be insightful and incisive, deliver depth with precision, be winsome and warm, yet clear and bold, unflinching on truth.

What kind of Archbishop will each of these gentlemen be?

3. National Church moment

All the Election Presidential Addresses dating back to 1982 mention the National Church, and our ongoing relationship with her. Each alert the members of those Synods to the issues of their day. Yet we remain an active participant in the National Church. However, our relationship with her now, in my view, raises more serious questions than it ever has in the past. The key issue of tension - homosexuality and same-sex marriage – is a gospel and salvation issue, because it is about its status as sin, and therefore of the most serious order. That this is an issue is not because we hold it out to be an especially grievous sin, but because some consider it to be no sin at all.

If homosexual activity in any form is accepted, blessed or celebrated, then it is an encouragement to sin, not to repentance. This is a line in the sand moment because unrepentant sin has eternal consequences.

Our position as Anglicans here in Australia, as affirmed by General Synod, has always been that homosexual activity is sin. And so we have never sought to bless it in any way, let alone liturgically, and certainly have not, and currently do not, celebrate it in marriage. The constant moves to splinter away from our long held, and only, position doctrinally and practically threaten relationships within the National Church in a way it never has before.

Do we want people to move away from the doctrine we hold and have always held? No.

Do we want people to move away from the practice that reflects the doctrine we have always held? No.

Do we desire relationship with those who continue to agitate for a divide? Yes we do.

But if people decide to leave what we have always held to, which we are committed to, which have consequences at the very core of what we believe, then it is right to ask how this impacts our relationship with them. For the question becomes: what relationship can we have with those who essentially believe a different gospel?

It may be pointed out to me that this is “what I believe it to be”. That I might not be right. Show some epistemic humility. You could discover you are wrong. Stay united in the meantime.

There have been endless conversations, active listening, study, research, teaching and learning for more than three decades. We are called to live and act according to what we believe, on all sides of the equation.

If this is what we believe, integrity demands we act accordingly, until shown otherwise. If the integrities on both sides end up mutually exclusive, then what meaningful unity is there?

The question is whether this difference that divides us is greater than the threads that unite us? If so, what might that look like? Does unity turn into mere association, fellowship into simple, constitutional connection? Or is it more severe? I do not know.

I think for most of us, our desire is the National Church stay as we are doctrinally, liturgically, in practice, united, and non-negotiably on gospel issues such as this. We do not want to see people or Dioceses move away from this, because I do not believe any of us want the situation where we may share a denominational label but unable to share at the Lord's Table.

The Archbishop will need to be one of the leading lights navigating us through these tricky waters whether things change or they don't. Lord help him.

What kind of Archbishop will each of these men be?

4. Personal moments

I have often heard how important it is that the Archbishop deliver well in the media. My view from the episcopal bunker is that while it is not unimportant, what the Archbishop is like when the cameras are off and away from public view is far more important. An Archbishop can be upskilled in media performance, at least to the point of not doing too much damage, and most gaffs are forgotten by the next news cycle anyway.

However, what happens in his office has a much greater and more lasting impact.

There are the hundreds of difficult and delicate conversations, the gut-wrenching hearing of courageous victims and survivors, the heaviness of the most awful decisions, often lose-lose, and unable to be understood to those without full knowledge. There are the confrontations with misconduct and the unrepentant. Sometimes he must be the bearer of the worst of news, or bears the brunt of brutal attack. Sometimes it is just weeping with those who weep and, in a different way equally impactful, rejoicing with those who rejoice.

These moments cannot be diluted by the distance of media or the buffer of screens. They cannot be brushed aside with a tweet or a post. They are immediate, yet lasting.

These moments can be a balm or an abrasion. They can leave scars for years or heal wounds for a lifetime. They can make or break, revive or ruin.

Any lack of genuine care, any hint of stunted emotional insight or superficial assumptions or rehearsed responses will be detected in a second.

Media-savvy public performance can matter, but the personal, the private, the pastoral matters so much more.

What kind of Archbishop will each of these men be?

5. Gospel moment

Fifthly, finally and in conclusion, it goes without saying, though always worth saying, that we live in a time of gospel urgency because any time is a time of gospel urgency. For the Diocese, any overall statistical growth that can be detected should be interpreted at best as stagnation. We continue to trend downwards in newcomer attendees and invitations to church from attenders. Careful attention must be given to ministry amongst first nations people, as well as the ever changing ethnic mix across the Diocese, all of which are under-represented in our churches.

When it all boils down, quite simply, we are in a city where millions of people do not yet know the Lord Jesus as Saviour. They need to hear the message of salvation – that God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him – his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sin – shall not perish but have eternal life.

And to put it in perspective, the proclamation of the gospel to them is not dependent on the Archbishop, nor is the growth or decline of our churches.

Whoever we elect cannot sink or save us. He may, however, help or hinder us. As such, he will need to lead from the front and set the example but he is also uniquely placed to urge and arm us from behind – cheering us on in fruitfulness, focussing us in distraction and challenging us in complacency.

In the end, though, God has given him the responsibility of reaching this Diocese with the gospel as much to the Archbishop as he has given it to each one of us. Yes, what we are doing this week is significant, but it is still not as vital as each of us going out to share Jesus with those at the school gate or the person behind the counter at the shops or mowing the lawn next door or sitting across from your desk or next to you on the bus or family.

So as we begin our important task, we do so in the context of the greater task of God's plan and purpose in the gospel. Thus, we must remember that he is sovereign, and he is able, whoever God has in mind, whether he is your choice or not.

Yes, we are electing someone to lead, and carry weighty responsibility. But what we are electing the Archbishop to do out the front of us is not as important as what we do as he stands beside us, and we stand beside him, as fellow foot soldiers seeking to proclaim Christ crucified to a city of souls in desperate need of forgiveness, and all to the glory of God.

The Right Rev Peter Lin
Bishop of Georges River Region

4 May 2021