

The sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at the Synod Eucharist of the Diocese of Newcastle in Christ Church Cathedral on Friday, October 22nd 2010.

Text: Jesus said to Peter: 'you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go' –John 21: 18

The Gospel of Saint John is a multi-layered text. The first layer is an account of some incident in the ministry of Jesus. The incident is treated by the Gospel of John at further levels. Amongst the further levels or layers are theological insights about the incident that act as a template to understand what God has achieved through Jesus, through the life, teaching, mission, death and resurrection of Jesus.

For instance the first sign that the Gospel of John records is at a wedding party at Cana of Galilee that occurs on a 'third day'.¹ In the Gospel of John reference to a 'Third Day' is a theological signal about the resurrection of Jesus. Thus the resurrection nuance of the water into wine at the wedding feast is that God's abundant aliveness will break in upon us when we are at our wits' end (like the situation when the mother of Jesus says to him, 'they have no wine'). At the wedding party it was litres of best wine. Resurrection means that the best wine awaits us now and hereafter.

'We have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life'.²

The massive reversal of The Third Day permeates the entire Gospel of John – the Gospel of John is a gospel of glimpses of resurrection life now.

And this incidentally is the major reason in the liturgy of A Prayer Book for Australia that when we are given the consecrated bread and wine in the Eucharist, the words of administration are so Johannine –'the body of Christ keep you in eternal life, the blood of Christ keep you in eternal life'. The Johannine understanding is that conversion begins the experience of eternal life that is partially given to us now but awaits us fully within the kingdom of Heaven.

To read the Gospel of John is to read a theologically interpreted account of the ministry of Jesus that points to the intrusions of resurrection life within our present experience. The Gospel of John is an intentionally developed reflection on the whole Christ event and nothing within it is incidental or superfluous.

When we read and study the Gospel of John we have to digest the text, not skim over it or hurry over it but let the text seep deeply within us. In reading and studying the text of the Gospel of John in this manner we will begin to become aware that incidents act as theological signals –incidents that at first reading do not seem all that significant.

Such is the case with the piece of conversation that the Gospel of John provides with Peter after that resurrection breakfast when Peter had been re-commissioned in a likeness to his three-fold denial before the crucifixion. Peter's own three-fold self-inflicted decommissioning as an apostle is carefully and fully reversed by Jesus' three-fold questioning and instructions.

The conversation continues and we hear Jesus saying to Peter (moments after Peter's sense of his restoration),

¹ John 2:1 'On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...'

² Romans 6:4.

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.

This snippet of conversation is more than Jesus previewing the prospect of nursing home care for Peter. This is not a first gospel reference to an Anglican Aged Care facility!

This little piece of conversation is most likely an assurance to the church, especially that part of the church deeply associated with Peter's ministry as an apostle, that his removal from them was foreseen and that if foreseen, then the providential care of God for the church would continue beyond whatever had engulfed Peter.

This piece of conversation has often been interpreted as a reference to Peter's crucifixion, 'you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go'. If it is such a reference, it is very softly euphemistic.

An issue that the earliest churches faced was the deaths of their founding apostles, either deaths in old age or sudden deaths, such as those ascribed to Peter and Paul. However, tonight I want to use this piece of the restoration conversation between the Raised Christ and Peter in its most surface form and suggest how it may speak to this Diocese at this time of the Church's history and mission.

I learned from an experienced church consultant, someone who had worked intensively with literally hundreds and hundreds of congregations, that it is possible to understand the identity of a congregation by picturing one particular member of that congregation. The one particular member of the congregation seems to encapsulate the identity and the personality of the entire congregation.

On the basis of this consultant's thesis a congregation might be female, elderly, secondary schooled, quiet, reserved and conservative. Or a congregation might be male, a young adult, noisy, extroverted, tertiary educated, and given to experimentation.

The consultant's theory that congregations can be reflected in the typology of one member is interesting. I confess that as I engage with congregations across the Diocese I look out for who might be the particular characterization of the parish. You may think more about this theory and discern whether there is credibility in it.

I mention this consultant's observation from his long experience with churches because I hear as I move around the Diocese that we are an aging church. That observation is at times and from some voices more than a description, it is a complaint. The sense of the complaint is that we should not be a church composed predominantly of people over 60; we should be a church that has equally represented age cohorts within it.

There is a challenge within the observation that we are an aging church. I do not want myself to avoid that challenge, nor do I want the Diocese to avoid that challenge.

The challenge has various edges to it, depending upon your age and your role within the church. The first challenge is to those under 60 to be so connected to their own age groups within their communities that they can attractively commend the gospel to their own age groups.

This year in deep conversations with parish councils across the Diocese I have listened as some men confessed that all their friends are within the church. This means that the natural networks that are ripe for evangelism are not available to those men.

We know that churches grow most substantially through relational networks. I was very encouraged in an interview I had with a young priest who was open to coming to serve in the Diocese who told me that he had deliberately joined a gym so that in working out and maintaining his fitness he might connect with non-churched people and attract them into Christian Faith. He indicated that six people were now worshipping in church as a consequence of his developed relationships at that gym.

We are inclined by spiritual temperament to be an introverted church. Our natural inclination may continue, but as a church we must learn to act in extroverted ways to engage with those at present indifferent to what we believe. This will be an imperative in particular for the present clergy aged under 60 but for every congregation and every Ministry Team within the Diocese. We must not degenerate into a worship club; we must be open to being Christ's church.

For those of us over 60 the prospect that Jesus put before Peter looms closer, 'you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go'. And now I want to challenge the 60s and over.

First, I want to recognize that much energetic and creative ministry is being undertaken by this age cohort within the Diocese. Indeed, if it were not for the work of this cohort we would have fewer parishes able to be staffed with stipendiary clergy within the Diocese.

There is a distinct and immediate challenge before those of us who have been faithful within the church for decades. The challenge is this. The church cannot continue with 'business as usual', if it is to be obedient to the Missionary Commission given to it by the Raised Christ at the moment of his Ascension.³

The shape of the mission ahead of this Diocese will be a matter of wrestling creatively and obediently with missional principles practised effectively by missionary agencies such as ABM and CMS. We will need to be trained to be missionaries to our own culture and our own local communities. We will need to inject the Christian ideas that so nurture and enrich our lives into whatever available public space and platforms are there for us.

We must move out of the privacy about faith in which we have sequestered ourselves. We must recognize that now is the time to go public about what we believe and how society should be structured so as to be aligned with the vision explicit in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God.

If we in the 60+ age cohort fail to act in these ways, we will know the reality within the church of what Jesus predicted for Peter,

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'

God will change the church in spite of us. God will not let us hijack the church for our own interests.

³ See Matthew 28:18- 20.

The church is God's church and God will ensure that the church undertakes the gospel's purposes even if 'someone else will fasten a belt around us and take us where we do not wish to go' in reshaping the church for mission.

We need to remember from our own sacred story what The Exile was like for those Jews who thought that they could determine faithfulness and were then traumatized by dispossession of their religious institutions. They lived as forced refugees in a foreign strange land. They lamented their plight in that grief-stricken psalm, 'by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion'.⁴

Changing as we must into being and behaving as a missional church may feel like being crucified (the traditional interpretation of the import of Jesus' words to Peter), but in the Christian story the pain and agony of crucifixion finally surrenders to the greater life and joy of resurrection. If that is our true story (and the Gospel of John is predicated upon that truthfulness)⁵, then within the assurance and empowerment of the Christian story, we can also receive and be obedient to Jesus' final instruction to Peter in this resurrection conversation: **'Follow me.'**

And do you recall what Jesus went on to say to Peter when Peter was first called to follow –
'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'⁶

The lakeside breakfast conversation at a fishing site is a reiteration of the great apostolic task that is before us too,
'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people'.

The mission commission is ageless and for all ages in the Church.

⁴ See Psalm 137:1.

⁵ John 21: 24, 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.'

⁶ Matthew 4: 19.