

**Synod Charge  
Diocese of Nelson  
August 2018**



It's one of the worst kept secrets in the Church. That this will be my final charge to the Diocesan Synod. I have a letter which I'll present to the Archbishop, when he joins us later today, advising him of my intention to retire as Bishop of this Diocese at the end of this year.

This is not a job that was on my radar. I'm a parish priest at heart. Hilary and I knew that our time was up after 15 pretty special years at Nativity and were preparing to take up a position that had been offered to us in Ireland, by our close friend Bishop Ken Good in Londonderry. But God had other ideas!

Many of you will remember that I began my ministry in Nelson hospital – actually it feels as though I am ending it the same way with much of these months waiting for, and now recovering from heart surgery! Anyway, I was ordained in a wheelchair – having been allowed out of the hospital for four hours. At the end of the ordination service I was to give my first blessing as Bishop and I was determined that I was going to stand to do that. As I stood I looked out and saw that either side of me in the transepts below the organ loft and organ pipes were all the clergy in their robes. And I remember feeling overwhelmed right at that moment. I know I said something to you all as I looked at you. As I come toward to end of my ministry can I say what a privilege it has been to serve such a committed, passionate and faith-filled group of clergy. These past twelve years have been an incredible journey of self-discovery. And now it's time to prepare to lay it down.

When I was a youngster my Dad took me on a trip from Christchurch to Blenheim. He had travelled up with the conductor of the Royal Christchurch Musical Society to prepare the way for a concert in Blenheim by this 200 voice choir. While Dad and the conductor were tied up in meetings, the conductor's son and I were dropped off at an aviary that used to sit on the banks of the Taylor River not far from the centre of town – an aviary that is long gone. In the middle of the aviary there was a large cage with a tree growing up inside it. And in this cage was a solitary monkey. As the two of us young boys looked at this monkey

the midday siren went off at the fire-station (as it did every day). And this monkey suddenly came alive and roared up that tree to the top of the cage, grabbed hold of the cage and shook the hell out of it. As long as the siren sounded the monkey shook the cage and as soon as the siren faded away he quietly descended the tree and sat there, in his cage, looking at us.

This image came back to me as I started to prepare this final charge.

In some way it feels like a metaphor for these past twelve years – the monkey living and working in a cage that is being pretty vigorously shaken. I certainly don't want to get stuck on the metaphor – I'll let you read into it whatever you like (particularly the monkey). I'll just let the metaphor stand for the moment and may come back to it.

Because this is my final charge I intend to do something different to what I have done in the past which has always been to try and cast vision for the year ahead – to keep us excited about being the church; something that I am passionate about. I went back and read my last eleven charges:

2008 I wondered how you managed to stay awake! My charge was so long and I went off on all sorts of different directions. I don't remember the year, but this was probably the Synod where Malcolm Taylor (a Synod rep from the Awatere) came up to me over a cup of tea and told me it was one of the worst Synod charges he'd ever heard.

2009 I told the parable of the eagle who was raised with chickens and thought he was a chicken and I asked you whether our church was more comfortable pecking around in the chicken coop when we could be flying with the eagles.

Another year I introduced a strategic plan for the Diocese and the next year tried to encourage parishes to intentionally develop their own strategic vision.

2014 I interviewed and videoed 14 young adults asking them what they were looking for in the church.

2015 was probably one of my most strategic and passionate charges – I got quite excited the other day when I read it. But nothing happened! The issue of same-gender sexuality was beginning to dominate the life and debates of the church. It side-tracked us – and has continued to do so!

2016 I shared something of my crisis of faith while visiting New York with our daughter and the subsequent personal renewal found in the Gospel story of Peter walking on the water.

At this Synod I don't think it's appropriate to cast vision (although I still have so many dreams for what we might do and be). I won't be the one to see it outworked.

When I walked the boundaries of the Diocese in 2009 I kept a diary, and half way through the trip (and again at the end) I made a bullet-point list of things I learned about myself and my faith on that spiritual pilgrimage. What I would like to do this morning is share a couple of bullet points (from a much larger list) that have been defining for me; spiritual (or not-so-spiritual) lessons that have challenged me over these past twelve years. I am a very different person now to the one who stood up in front of you and gave that blessing twelve years ago – I think the photos say it all!!

My faith has been tested in ways I never imagined: I have experienced intense loneliness, the sleepless nights accompanying the dark night of the soul. But just in case you think this is generating into maudlin introspection, I have also experienced such incredible support, encouragement, love and joy – right across the whole Diocese. It is certainly the most personal address (I hesitate to call it a Charge) that I have given to the Synod of this Diocese.

So, my ‘bullet points’ - and I repeat, they are a couple of insights that these 12 years of ministry have taught me. I’ve chosen to only share two. They are one person’s journey - but they have been learned in my ministry *with you* here in the Diocese, and they offer insight into my thoughts regarding some of the issues before this Synod.

First bullet point:

***I have come to love the Anglican Church more and more and the institution less and less.***

I was born into the Anglican Church. I am an Anglican by heritage rather than by choice and so I never had much inclination to explore the roots of the church, until I became a Bishop and discovered, in the ordination vows, that I was to guard and teach the historic faith. This realisation came at a time when many within the Diocese, clergy and lay, were dismissing the Anglican Church as irrelevant – well past its used-by date. And I must add that if we’re talking about the institution (with all its trappings) I couldn’t agree more. But I’m not talking about an institution. I’m referring to the uniquely different church that emerged out of the Reformation in the UK – uniquely different to other Reformation churches.

I used to describe being Anglican as having one foot in the sacramental tradition and the other in the biblical tradition – a rather simplistic, but not incorrect, description of how our church began. Alister McGrath describes it this way:

*'In essence therefore, the English national church may be seen to have set itself consciously to steer a middle course between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.... Anglicanism sought to affirm the common faith of the Christian church, grounded in the New Testament, and given a particular focus during the first five centuries of Christian history....*

This 'middle course' became known as the Anglican *via media*' and is one of the things I have come to appreciate more and more about the Anglican Church.

- It is a Church that sought to keep a *balance* between the traditional worship patterns of historic Christianity, reshaped and reformed by a renewed respect for the authority of scripture;
- A Church that balanced, in its liturgies, the fundamentals of the faith with the mystery of faith.
- A church that believes that the gospel is the good news of Jesus **and** the good news of the kingdom
- A church that retained and affirmed the threefold ministry of Bishops, Priests and Deacons but also empowered and released the ministry of the laity – the priesthood of all believers.

Sadly, as with so much in life today, we have taken what was really good and debased it. Balance has become compromise and the foundational 'via media' of Anglicanism has been put through the mincer and come out redefined as 'unity in diversity' – anything goes! And in the vacuum we have created bitter factions – each arguing for the heart and soul of the Anglican Church based on their own particular spiritual hobby horse.

Back in 1975, the late John Stott (one of my heroes in biblical Anglicanism) wrote a small book called 'Balanced Christianity – A Call to Avoid Unnecessary Polarisation.' He writes this:

*'One of the greatest weaknesses which we Christians (especially evangelical Christians) display is our tendency to extremism or imbalance. It seems that there is almost no pastime the devil enjoys more than tipping Christians off balance. My conviction is that we should love balance as much as the devil hates it, and seek to promote it as vigorously as he seeks to destroy it.'*

As I have manoeuvred through the church politics of these past twelve years I have become more and more convinced of the creative strength and power of what was the *via media* and have tried so hard to create in this Diocese a church that understands the concept of balance rather than compromise and to be an

example of a renewed Anglicanism – a church presented to Christ *‘as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.’*

I quoted from Alastair McGrath earlier. He continues on from that particular quote by writing:

*‘The reformers had no intention of founding a new church; they were concerned to renew and reform an existing church. The imperial politics of the sixteenth century eventually led to them being forced outside the institutional church of the time; this was not, however, their intention.’*

And it’s not mine!

I do think that reclaiming the via media (as it was envisaged by Thomas Cranmer – and the early fathers and mothers of the Anglican Church) would be a great starting point.

Second Bullet point:

***Things don’t seem as black and white as they used to. We minister today within a world made up of a thousand shades of grey. But I have learned that although I must minister in some very grey areas, my faith must never become grey.***

I remember Bishop Derek saying something very similar toward the end of his time as Bishop of Nelson.

I was drawn back to the Sermon on the Mount as I was writing this second bullet point. It is an incredible Christian manifesto – discipleship in a nutshell.

But it is also (on the surface) so black and white!

Just in the last part of this Sermon alone – Chapter 7 of Matthew’s Gospel - there is a wide gate and there is a narrow gate. There is a good tree with good fruit and there is a bad tree with bad fruit. There are good disciples and there are bad disciples. There is a house built on the rock and there is a house built on the sand.

There is black and there is white!

And there are no compromises in the rest of this Sermon on the Mount either. ‘You’ve heard it said – well I tell you this...’ And in the retelling he lifts the bar on the expectations of being a disciple of Jesus: the kingdom of God is all about advanced citizenship; we’re told not to be like the pagans, or the tax collectors or the hypocrites.

There’s them and there’s us.

Black and white!

Jesus finishes the sermon, comes down off the mountain, and is immediately confronted with one of life's greys – a leper who kneels down before him and says 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'

We can't even begin to understand the significance of this encounter without putting it into its historic and cultural context. Leprosy was not understood. Lepers were considered to be cursed by God, they were excluded from the community forced to live outside the walls of the towns and cities, rejected by their families. They were the untouchables. This leper kneels before Jesus, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'

Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man.

You don't **touch** these people. They are unclean, cursed.

But Jesus did.

One minute he was up the mountain raising the bar on the kingdom expectations of moral and spiritual purity and the very next minute he is reaching out the hand of grace to an outcast. Black and white to grey.

Two things we must notice about the Sermon on the Mount.

*Firstly:* Jesus wasn't preaching it to the world.

He was teaching his disciples.

He was giving his disciples a standard of holiness that every single one of them should aspire to – not a list of rules they could then use to judge others (or even one another).

(I'm not sure that we always get this.)

And *secondly:* everything that he expounds in the Sermon must be read in the context of the Beatitudes with which he begins his sermon: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst and are persecuted for righteousness sake.

The challenges of the Sermon on the Mount will only bear the fruit of genuine discipleship when they are planted into the seedbed of lives shaped by the humility and vulnerability of the Beatitudes.

This 'Matthew 5-7' faith is **not** the foundation for a black and white faith that we take out and judge a world with all its shades of grey. It **is** rather the foundation for a deeply personal strength of faith that enables us to live in a world with all its rainbow shades of grey: not letting the world colour us grey but, instead, radiating the love of God, letting our lives first (and our words second) bear testimony to this amazing grace that has transformed us.

Where is all this leading?

Twenty seven years ago, Bishop Derek invited me to move north and become part of this Diocese (as the Vicar of Nativity). I have never regretted the decision to do so. I love this Diocese and deeply appreciate its strong evangelical foundations. While the Anglican Church in some other parts of the country was struggling to maintain and sustain stipendiary ministry, we continued to do so, because our parishes were full of people (lay and ordained) who had a personal faith in Jesus, and a passion for scripture. There was a unity right across the Diocese that was tangible when we met together at synods or diocesan conferences. We took it for granted, but people coming in from outside immediately noticed and commented on this sense of being one family. We enjoyed each other's company and were committed to supporting one another in our ministries. However over the past few years cracks have appeared in that unity.

A few months ago the Listener's leading article was on the rise of what it called 'political tribalism' - a very disturbing trend that could see the ultimate destruction of democracy. While the article particularly focussed on the bitter polarisation within US politics, it also reflected briefly on the world-wide rise of tribalism - the growth of which is inversely proportional to the decline of the family. More and more new groups are springing up around some particular issue - groups that gather like-minded people around them and who look with suspicion on anyone who is outside the group. Within this group nothing else is important except the particular issue that defines them.

Sadly the church, which so often argues against the way in which contemporary culture insidiously infiltrates the life and faith of the church, has been very quick to slip into this tribal culture. And nowhere is this more evident than in the issue of same-gender sexuality which, once again, will dominate much of the emotion of this Synod. I don't wish to comment on this issue here in this Charge - except to reflect on what it has done and is doing to our unity. We have a very clear statement of where we stand as a Diocese and that remains foundational to us as a Diocese. But the tentacles of this 'tribalism' can be seen creeping into the secondary issues now being debated within the church. And the most frightening aspect (as I've already mentioned) is that these issues become what defines them and us.

This is anathema to the gospel. Paul wrote about Jesus breaking down the dividing wall of hostility in order to bring the Jews and Gentiles into one new humanity.

He broke down the walls.

We have no mandate to erect new ones.

Rather than take a tribal perspective on what divides us we must focus on what unites us. When we truly proclaim, with one voice the Lordship of Jesus, all these other things will become the dust that they are. And we can show the world the life-giving, saving grace of Jesus.

This is my final charge.

If I had one dream for the Diocese it is that I might leave it healthy, biblically and spiritually. A Diocese that seeks to proclaim Jesus – full of grace **and** truth.