

Welcome to this third Annual Session of the 18th Triennial Synod.

Reflection on the Scripture Passages

Without going over old ground it is fair to say that the Diocese in the last 25 years or so has had some pretty rocky times, and has really lost a bit of focus. We need to discover again what it is to be a missionary Diocese as we seek to encounter and encourage the people of within the communities that our churches exist and operate. The world has dramatically changed since 1970 when the Diocese came into being. Even the church itself has changed, although not as dramatically as the outside world. There is always great temptation to resist change, after all the Gospel is an unchanging message for the world. However, even St. Paul recognised the need to adapt the message so that the people who were not familiar with the reality of a creator God could discover how this creator God cares for them and seeks to be in relationship with them.

It seems to me that we need what Pope Benedict XVI called a new evangelisation as we seek to reach the increasing population that is

either lapsed in their attendance at church, de churched or even no experience whatsoever of church. This does not mean that such people do not have a yearning for the divine, or some sort of spiritual experience. Rather, it would seem that many people who do not darken the door of our churches do have such yearnings.

It also seems self-evident to me that if the way in which we do church for our current attenders is so good, then it would be attracting others right now. That we are not doing this is evidence to me that we need to do something different. As I have gone around the Diocese, I have encountered amazing men and women who have been faithfully serving God, their local church and their community despite all the difficulties that have been thrown at them. It is incumbent on us as a Synod to assist them, and to give them and us new hope.

We of course need to be opening our hearts to the leading of the Holy Spirit, but already I feel that this is being done. When I was preparing for the Workshop in Clare and for this Synod, I was

encouraged to read Isaiah 58. It spoke volumes to me about one of the reasons we in the Diocese are in the situation we are in. We have too often focussed on the wrong things. Not all the time just too often. In Isaiah 58 the prophet is correcting the nation. They are complaining to God that they have been doing the right things. They have been worshipping as they ought, they have been fasting as they ought, yet the nation continues to decline.

The passage is a poem. It is as Brueggemann states a long, insistent concrete advocacy addressed to a community in deep conflict. The prophet urges a strong vision for the future that is ethically demanding, that requires policies and actions of a neighbourly kind that is consistent and congruent with its calling as the people of God.

The first two verses focus on the problem, namely a hypocritical gap between the actual conduct of the community and the intention of the community. I believe that the reality of this gap would have come as a great shock to the people. Here in the

Diocese I believe the people are sincerely following God as best they can (They seek me day and night and delight to know my ways). The gap that we have developed is that we have become inadvertently self-serving. We do things because we like it that way. We have come to serve ourselves and have forgotten to serve the community in an holistic manner. There is no doubt in my mind that there are communities of faith seeking to serve the community. I was recently at Mt. Barker for their food and friendship ministry. There are other parishes who serve their communities by doing Op-Shops especially. While these are important ministries this is not what Isaiah is speaking about.

Here in the Diocese, there is much emphasis on getting our worship right, making sure that we have Eucharist at every opportunity, making sure that we are doing everything the way we have always done things. What has happened for us happened for Israel. Worship has been turned into an act of self-indulgence, void of ethical content. They and we enjoy worship. They and we

enjoy it for we believe that it is connecting them us the character of God.

The lament is placed in the mouth of the nation and the complaint of the contemporary worshippers is that they dutifully fast and humble themselves, but their acts are un noticed by God, and having God notice them and honour them is the whole point of the worship. What they are trying to do is gain advantage with God , in other words they are manipulating God. The worship becomes an instrument, a means to an end. They end up almost accusing God of doing nothing while they are doing all the work of worship. They can say, well, we have done everything right, and God is not keeping up their end of the bargain. Moreover, what appears to be happening is that the people who worship are becoming quarrelsome and contentious, and it is occurring precisely because they are focussed on themselves.

So, if you cant manipulate God with worship, at least self serving worship, what will work? The answer is in these verses. The

prophet concentrates on the word fast, however, what he does is transpose the notion of disciplined piety (worship) into acts of neighbourly affirmation. These verses present a clear radical statement of social ethics that is at the heart of what it is to be in a relationship with God. God doesn't need to be flattered in the temple, God is out in the neighbourhood working among the poor, and that's where they want us to be. The fast is all about injustice, that is socioeconomic practices that deny some members of the community access to the necessities of life. You can't go around worshipping God and being comfortable in your clothes and homes and wealth when there are people out on the street. Verse 7 is specific about how to address the injustice. Share bread, give shelter, clothe the naked. There is an implicit if in verse 7 which has implications for verses 8-9. If you do these things, then your light will break forth like the dawn and your recovery will spring up quickly. The reality is that well being only comes out of neighbourliness, out of community. Anything else is anti community, and therefore anti God. When we truly do these neighbourly acts then we will have true communion with God,

not in bread and wine, but in genuine acts of love and mercy with real people. If we do those things, then we move from self-centeredness and we are less likely to point the finger and speak wickedness. The reality is, these actions break communities, and so working to develop true communities will necessitate the cessation of these actions.

These final verses gives the people true hope. If we give ourselves and satisfy needs, then we will be watered and strengthened, our structures will be rebuilt, and then we will have true communion with God. The prophet reminds the nation that what God really wants is for the nation to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless and to stop the slanderous tongue and the wagging of the finger. In being caught up in doing the outward things of faith, the inward soul has been corrupted and is wasting away, and the nation is rotten from the inside. The same could be said for the Diocese. We have been too caught up in the wagging of the finger, the spreading of gossip, and not attending to the real needs of our society. We have been caught up in ourselves, we have been self-

serving and as a result we have engaged in actions that destroy our communities, and we are oblivious to it, and wondering why our faith communities are not flourishing. This must be a part of our new Evangelization, a genuine searching and discovering of what our communities' needs are, a true vocation for building up communities not tearing them down. Our churches must be there for the world, not just for ourselves.

Many of you will remember my talks on Simon Sinek and the need for Existential Flexibility. That is the recognition that we are going in the wrong direction and that we need to make changes for us to stay in the game. I am totally committed to Existential Flexibility. I am willing to do whatever it takes for our Diocese to remain viable, even if it means jettisoning long held, even dearly held attitudes. I am not talking about jettisoning core beliefs of our faith, Incarnation, life of Jesus, death, and resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus. I am not talking about denying the Trinity or other important doctrines. What I am talking about is how we exist as a church for the 21st Century. The way we did it, and to a

certain extent still do it today is not working. Having TV screens in churches will not make up for uninspiring liturgy, uninspiring sermons that does not connect with people's spiritual needs, and I daresay we will not meet their spiritual needs if we are not first meeting their basic human needs.

Time and time again, we see Jesus meeting people with where they were at. The paralytic lowered through the roof of the house, the blind man on the road, the ten lepers, the lame at the pool, the thief on the cross all had their basic human needs met. Sometimes the people were grateful, other times not. Jesus did all this out of his great love for us as being made in the image and likeness of God. So it will be for us, but I suspect that if we are to claim to be ambassadors for Christ then we will need to be willing to first meet human needs in our communities if we are to have any credibility. It is only when we have done that will we be able to start to live out our purpose as Christian men and women to make disciples as we love as Jesus loves. Only by loving as Jesus loves will we avoid the trap of simply seeking to grow our churches so we can have a

replacement for ourselves on which roster we hang on, and increase the number of financial givers. If this is our purpose then we will be found out, and our churches will not grow. But if we seek to love as Jesus loves, because we know what it is to be loved, welcomed and included by God. If we seek to make and nurture disciples because we know the joy of what it is to be a follower of the Lord Jesus and we want that same joy and delight for others, then we will be honest with others and we will find our efforts will be honoured.

So what is the Vision that I have for the Diocese that I want you to get excited about and what I want you all to get on board with?

I have a vision of a Diocese of The Murray which is a place of Safety, Inclusion, Welcome, Refuge that seeks to tenderly Evangelise people in new ways that helps them see that God is not only interested in them but is desiring to be in a new relationship with them. I have a vision of a Diocese where are faith communities are safe places for everyone, no matter who they are,

and even if we differ with them on whatever issues. I have a vision whereby people can belong to our faith community, before they believe what we believe and behave in the manner they behave. It is about building faith communities that have a genuine sense of calling and understanding that God is at work in our towns, our cities and our suburbs. We need to be involved as well. We need to be alert to whatever the needs are around us, before we attend to our own needs in our churches.

This will necessitate us first and foremost loving as Jesus loves. As we love as Jesus loves, then we will be better placed to make disciples of Jesus as we are working out ourselves how to be the people of God more effectively and more lovingly. This does not mean we become doormats for Jesus, for Jesus was no doormat for anyone, but it does mean that we are going to have to be willing to live with a level of messiness. I think in the church we have tried to make everything too neat and tidy, and I am not sure Jesus was doing that. He ate with sinners, and tax collectors. He mixed with the wrong people. Too often in the church we are

seeking to be with the right people, and being seen to behaving in a certain way. What Jesus was doing was meeting the needs of the people he encountered and gave them a way back to God that was not available through the normal means of accessing God at the time.

This will mean that we have to reassess how we do our mission, ministry, leadership and structures.

Leadership

What sort of leaders do we want? – Positional or authentic

What sort of leaders will we need? Big picture, or specific

Where will they come from? Our church population is decreasing and tired

How will we train them? Where will we get the resources from

Mission

What are the needs of our community?

What are our resources?

Have we got the skill set?

What can we realistically do?

Ministry

How do we identify people for ministry?

How will we train them?

How will we afford it?

Structures

What do we need to do in our parish to enable all this to occur?

Are there difficulties in the PAO, or the CSO, or our Ordinances or Regulations?

Are our people structures right for today and the future?

Are our physical plant and equipment resources appropriate for our needs now present and in the future?

While these are difficult issues we have to deal with, be encouraged, it is possible to do this. Those who attended the Parish Workshop at Clare were asked to read two books, Divine

Renovation and Rebuilt. I highly recommend these books for parishes and especially Parish Councils to consider. Both have follow up publications that assist in such bodies looking at how changes might be made in the parish. They demonstrate that with limited resources, both people and other resources we can do this. I want you to be encouraged, and not to lose heart. You will not be expected to do this yourself. I will be going around encouraging and supporting you. I need to hear your feedback. We will take all that we do here these few days, back to the parishes for further reflection. This needs to be a powerhouse of encouragement to the Diocese and the Diocesan Council. I can not do this by myself, individual parishes will struggle to do this, but together, with God, and with our turning our hearts fully to God and away from our selfish purposes and designs, I believe that we will indeed be strengthened by God and our Diocese and parishes will be rebuilt. However, when that occurs, as I believe it will, I suspect that the rebuilt Diocese and Parishes will look very different from what it does now, and that might be the most difficult thing for us to stomach, but if we don't, then we will go the way of Pergamum,

Laodicea, Smyrna and the other churches of Asia Minor in
Revelation. But I am not here to oversee that fate.