

HOLY TRINITY DONCASTER

VICAR'S ANNUAL ADDRESS

7 NOVEMBER 2008

It gives me much pleasure to present my 13th Annual Address as Vicar of Holy Trinity. We live in interesting times indeed. As Dickens might say, 'the best of times and the worst of times.'

1. Issues in Society

(i) Global Financial Crisis

The extraordinary economic changes in the last four months in our world raise many issues and possibilities for Christians.

The last decade or more in Australia has been a time of great abundance. Wealth, prosperity and comfort, indeed luxury and indulgence, have been the hallmarks of our society. We have never had it so good. That's true. Though the Bible does speak of abundance as blessing from God, it also warns, more often, of its dangers and test. Perhaps nowhere is the criterion for that test more sharply described as in Deuteronomy 8. 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' That could surely sum up Australia in the last fifteen years.

I don't think Australia has passed the test of wealth with flying colours. Not at all. Rather the idolatry of wealth, comfort and economic security is prevalent. This crisis perhaps helps expose them for what they are: false gods, like Dagon in the Philistine temple in Samson's time, in freefall in the ASX temple today.

How quickly we take wealth for granted. For example, as the All Ordinaries plunged below 4000 recently, people bewailed. Yet it is only about three years ago that this index reached 4000 for the first time. How quickly we settle into the mentality of not being able to live without the latest comfort or luxury.

It may be that now we entering a time of want. Another test from God. Maybe times will not be as tough as the 1930s depression, a time which many of you here have been influenced by. However times ahead may see much higher unemployment than we are used to, tougher times for home ownership, higher prices, a lower Australian dollar.

Just as Deuteronomy 8 warned Israel of the test of plenty ahead of them, the same chapter also reflected on the test of scarcity they had just completed in the wilderness. Israel did not pass that test either. How will we fare?

Tough times can often be spiritually strengthening. Frequently the Bible speaks of tough times forcing a direct dependence on God. The apostle Paul said as much in 2 Corinthians 1. That was the purpose of the manna in the wilderness for Israel. I think

for the times ahead, we should eagerly look forward to the challenge to rely on God and trust his daily, sufficient grace for our needs.

Of course, the danger is that when times are tough we turn inward. Giving to charity, church and mission frequently drops in tough times. However there may well be great needs of others confronting us: unemployed neighbours, homelessness, hungry. Gospel needs never go away either. Tough times ought to sharpen our generosity. Our obligations, and joys, as Christians to love others, to give for the gospel do not ease when the economy crumbles. I would urge us all to resolve not to diminish our giving but use this opportunity to rein in our spending and to live more frugally.

This year, HTD has been extremely generous in mission support, in aid for Burma, China and India following various disasters, and in supporting students and others in places where I teach. Thankfully the dollar was strong then. However the collapse of the Australian dollar means it will most likely cost us more to support overseas mission and our giving overseas in aid will not go as far on a weaker dollar. Our generosity is needed more than ever.

Let us then seize the opportunity of our financial crisis to strengthen our reliance on Almighty God. Let us keep up our generosity to others and for the gospel. Let us set examples to our world of godly love and faith.

(ii) Drought

Of course the economy is not the only major problem facing our country. The drought continues to be severe and devastating with little sign of an end. I must say I have occasionally thought it remarkable that the churches (and here I am guilty too) have not been more vocal in calling our country to prayer.

Drought is frequently a sign of God withholding blessing for ancient Israel. It is one of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28. The prophet Amos condemns Israel for not seeing their drought as God's prompt to prayer and repentance from sin. It seems to me our secular mindset blinds us to God's hand in providing rain and sun in their seasons. Maybe God is trying to bring us, the churches and this country to our knees before him. We will pray along these lines at the November prayer meeting on Tuesday 18th. Come and pray before Almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of this world.

(iii) Abortion

Another major issue that has confronted us in Victoria is abortion. Despite many Christians voicing strong concerns, the state government legislation was passed without amendment, more or less allowing abortion on demand through to the full term of pregnancy. Though I am not convinced that 'sanctity' is the right word theologically, it is sad indeed that what is called the 'sanctity of human life' does not extend in our state to the unborn. It is doubly sad that our own synod could not pass what I considered a relatively straightforward motion promoting the sanctity of life the very week the government legislation was passed.

While the legislative issues are complex, and the practice already existing in Victoria left much to be desired, we see in this legislation, and some synod voices perhaps, a priority on choice to the detriment of those without a voice. This legislation appears to

place doctors who object to abortion in an invidious position.

However it is worth also considering some of the social issues around abortion. No doubt many want abortion simply out of protecting their freedom, lifestyle and so on. But no doubt others take the abortion route because they feel unable to cope, in despair or unsupported. Rather than simply being disappointed in our government, perhaps this situation calls us to take more social action and express deep love.

One group of Sydney Anglicans has established 'Free Money for New Lives' and is urging Christians to give away half of the Families Bonus coming in December from the government to Christian help for early intervention and for a Women's Forum. Maybe we in Melbourne ought consider something similar, though not limited to those who receive the families bonus, and act in love for those facing the excruciating dilemma of a potential abortion. The website, for those interested, is: www.freemoneyfornewlives.com.au.

2. Anglican Issues

(i) Worldwide

This has also been an intriguing, and distressing, year for the Anglican Church worldwide.

Every ten years the Bishops of the Anglican worldwide church meet at what is called the Lambeth conference. You need to know that this conference has no legislative force and the Archbishop of Canterbury does not have the centralist power of, say, the Pope. This year, over 200 Bishops declined the invitation to attend, largely on the grounds of the practices of the Canadian and USA Anglican churches in matters of sexuality. Another conference, not only for Bishops, was held in Jerusalem to which almost 300 Bishops went along with many others. Some Bishops attended both conferences.

It is clear, following Lambeth, that the Canadian and USA Anglican churches are unlikely to restrain from ordaining or making Bishops practising homosexuals, nor from blessing same-sex unions. It is also clear that both those churches are seeking to expel priests and Bishops and claim the property of individual churches who resist and oppose these liberal trends. So a number of clergy, Bishops and parishes have become aligned to other dioceses in the world, for example in South America and Africa.

To think that Anglicans throughout the world are in unity is a fantasy. Indeed the divisions are deep and likely to grow and spread. In Australia, these divisions have not quite reached the surface. But the breadth of spectrum in worldwide Anglicanism is found in Australia, indeed in Melbourne. It is probably only a matter of time until this erupts somewhere in Australia.

We must remember that the so-called visible church is never perfect. A study of church history reminds us that regularly in the last 200 years, heresy and immorality occur and are promoted in some parts of the church. More often than not, though not always, breaking away to form some new denomination weakens the church at large.

Personally I think a stronger stand for orthodox belief ought to have been made a

generation ago when some Anglican leaders publicly rejected basic doctrines like the resurrection and uniqueness of Jesus. Fighting battles on matters of sexual morality is a harder, though proper, battle to fight.

The Bible teaches unity between Christians. However it is not an institutional unity. Rather it is a unity in truth, grounded on the gospel handed down concerning God's Son. Fighting for institutional unity is the wrong goal, though institutional unity grounded in the truth is a powerful witness of course.

The Jerusalem conference I mentioned, usually called GAFCON (for Global Anglican Future Conference), has rightly argued that our unity ought to be clearly doctrinal. Proper Anglicanism has always had as its doctrinal core the theology of the Book of Common Prayer and the 39 Articles and Ordinal. However these are often ignored or dismissed as binding confessions of faith today.

I have signed agreement to the Jerusalem statement, which is not so much a political statement as a theological one. I stand by orthodox brothers and sisters in USA and Canada who are being hounded out of the Anglican and Episcopal churches there. It may be that we as a church agree to the Jerusalem statement in due course. I propose for the Vestry to discuss this in the new year.

(ii) Diocesan Matters

Thankfully in Melbourne we have godly leadership by our Archbishop and Regional Bishop. My heavy involvement in the diocese as an Archdeacon and member of Archbishop in Council is to strengthen our diocesan mission and ministry and to avoid the marginalisation of evangelicals as has happened in past generations. However our diocese is not without problems.

Our diocese has a financial crisis, only in part due to the global financial problems. We have a \$1.8m deficit for this calendar year and a projected further \$1m loss by June 2009. Strong action is now being taken to reduce spending which inevitably will cut some ministry and central support. Maybe good under God will also come from this. Perhaps we can sharpen our focus as a diocese on essential support and ministry, with stronger measures of effectiveness.

Recently I gave three Bible studies for the conference for new Vicars, called EPIC (Equipping Priests in Charge). Most of these twenty or so people I know. They are fine people. I reflected though that the majority were older, some much older, than me.

In itself age is not necessarily bad. People starting in ministry in middle age bring much experience with them. But older age at ordination increases the pressure to keep raising up sufficient people to serve as ministers in the Anglican church. Demand exceeds supply, by and large. I see that as an Archdeacon on Incumbency committees as churches try to find a new Vicar. I have noticed it recently as a number of evangelical Vicars or curates have left ministry in Melbourne or altogether. As a church we are committed to working towards and praying for more people to serve in ministry. This need remains acute. That's just one reason we encourage people to study at Ridley and why we promote a training scheme for ministry, as we are doing for Matt Scheffer in 2009.

The second reflection is how many churches are really struggling to survive. Many of these new Vicars are in difficult, small places under great pressure for the church not to close. Several are finding themselves facing significant personal stress. I am so thankful not to be in such a place but I am acutely aware of greater needs to support such people.

3. Holy Trinity Matters

Finally, three matters closer to home.

(i) Midweek Service

In last year's Annual Address, we floated the idea of starting a midweek congregation. It is our intention to begin a weekly Wednesday traditional afternoon service starting in February. The service will be short, 30-40 minutes. One week will be the current Wednesdays at 2 format. The other weeks will be Lord's Supper or Evening Prayer. We see a need for those working on Sundays, for older folk unable to come in the morning or unable to sit through a longer or crowded service. The service will be open for all. We will more fully publicise this in the months to come. Helpers and drivers will of course be needed and welcome.

(ii) Mission trips

Last year a team from HTD went for a week to Port Hedland. That parish was encouraged and helped by our visit, and our team had a great experience of ministry and service. We plan to send another team next September, under Wayne's leadership. This will be a great opportunity and I encourage you all, of any age, seriously to consider being part of this team.

In addition, we are planning to send a mission team to Myanmar in June, led by Ben and me. Our brothers and sisters in Burma have many needs and will be greatly encouraged by our fellowship, encouragement and practical service. We are still sorting out the details of what the team will do. But let me also encourage you to consider being part of this mission adventure also.

(iii) Building Needs

As I have mentioned before, and as many of you know, we already have space issues in our buildings, especially on Sunday afternoons, when our bi-lingual service meets in the Main Hall (not an adequate venue), and on Wednesday and Friday evenings. A few months ago, we were approached by the Bible College of Victoria whose Chinese Department in Bennettswood needs to relocate by the end of 2009.

As a result, the Vestry has begun in the last few months discussions with BCV and an architect to establish the feasibility of leasing to BCV land for their buildings in return for being able to provide facilities adequate for our needs. We are in the early stages of discussions at this stage but we are optimistic that under God this may help provide a mutually beneficial solution that give us expanded meeting rooms, a worship space and other facilities.

4. Conclusion

It remains exciting to be part of Holy Trinity. There is much for which to give God

thanks. There is much to do. Many of our church members are involved in great ministry. We will farewell in the next few weeks Suz Ireland and Peter and Gwyneth Michalke to missionary service as Associate Missionaries from HTD. Four of our church members are in the process towards ordination. Others are studying in theological colleges.

I urge you to get involved fully in the life of this church. Use the sheet recently inserted in Inside LOOK to express a commitment to serve God in some appropriate way. In particular, we have special needs for a Girls Group leader and also for a Kids Hope convenor for next year. We will need helpers for our new midweek service. And we are looking for volunteers to join the Mission trips.

Sunday 16th November is Thanksgiving Sunday, a personal highlight for me in our calendar. Here's the challenge! Instead of arriving at church and saying, 'How are you?', here's the greeting to use: 'What are you thankful for today?' if that doesn't get us talking and praising, nothing will!

It is a privilege and joy to have accepted recently the Archbishop's invitation to a re-appointment as Vicar. This means I could continue as Vicar until April 2014. I cannot make a commitment to be here that long. Already, over twelve and half years is a long time. But for as long as God calls me here, I shall serve with all I have for his glory.

Paul Barker
November 2008