

Vicar's Report

to the
Annual Meeting
St John's Camberwell
23 November 2014

Gratitude

The writing of an annual report is an occasion for gratitude and recognition. In this my first full year at St John's I have come to appreciate the range and depth of your commitment to your faith and to the life of the parish. In the pages of the annual reports there is but a taste of your many and varied ministries here at the junction – through every aspect of the liturgy, in so many ways in and around the buildings, through a range of ministries in parish and community.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all who lead and share and serve in so many ways – up front, as well as quietly and unseen. It has been a privilege to begin to participate in the life of your faith community, to see first hand the gracious and generous ministry offered, by so many. To all the many committees and groups and working parties, thank you so very much for all that you do.

I offer particular thanks to the staff team who have so warmly welcomed me and assisted me into ministry here - David Byrne, Emily Fraser, Kuncoro Rusman, Dawn Sullivan, Clare Tomasov, Richard Wilson, and Keith Dempster. Well, Keith is not in fact on the staff team, but he is so generously present as though he were. I am grateful, too, for the ministry support we receive from our associate clergy, Helen Creed, Brian Porter, and Michelle Trebilcock.

St John's has a rich history of supporting the formation of clergy in the Diocese of Melbourne, and for the Anglican Church more widely. This time last year Richard Wilson was close to completing a three year term at St John's as full time Assistant Curate, and Emily Fraser was nearing half way through her two years, and about to shift from half-time to (almost) full-time. We expect that Emily will be leaving St John's, moving to her second curacy, in February 2015. Kuncoro was ordained deacon in February this year and became Assistant Curate on a half stipend. Then at the beginning of November he moved to a full stipend.

The ongoing vitality of parish life depends on the commitment of Wardens and Parish Council and its committees. I acknowledge their work and commitment and thank them. Due to the timing of my commissioning at St John's, and Diocesan regulations, we have had only two Wardens this past year (and in fact for more than a year), which means your Wardens Dr Graham Pratt and Professor Kerry Pratt have carried a particularly heavy load. I offer my hearty thanks to them. Graham retires as Warden at this Annual Meeting, likewise John Manton, who has served as parish treasurer since mid 2004. Most of us have no idea just how much time and energy both have given to the parish. I thank them warmly on behalf of all of us.

This Report

For all of the 15 years during which I have been priest-in-charge, in two very different parishes, my annual report has consisted primarily of a theological reflection. I gather this has not been the practice at St John's, so I thought it best to explain my method and purpose at the outset.

I regard the task of theological reflection as being central to my function as priest in the parish community. As I see it, this is why you have a theologically trained and ordained person in your midst, called 'vicar' – rather than a business manager. I set before you not an institutional vision so much as a theological vision.

Actually, I regard theological reflection as central to life of every person baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ – to consider who we are, what we are doing, and what's going on around us *in*

the light of God's revelation to us and God's call to us. If theological reflection – personal and corporate – is not at the centre we risk being mere managers of just another community organisation.

So by coming before you on the day of an annual meeting in this way I understand myself to be fulfilling the ordination mandate reaffirmed at my commissioning here: I am doing what is central to my calling as the priest in the parish community; and I am inviting and encouraging all of us to reflect *theologically* on the life of St John's 'at the junction', as well as our own personal lives.

Being more specific, because as Christians our theological framework is what our tradition calls the Paschal Mystery – the mystery of dying and rising in Christ – I am inviting us to reflect on our lives as *those who are finding life by being buried with Christ in his baptism.*ⁱ

So because what I am offering is primarily theological reflection, what follows is perhaps like a poem, or a painting, or a piece of music. To my mind, that's how the Scriptures and Christian doctrine work. Contrary to popular opinion, rules are not the principle mode of Scripture and doctrine – this very serious mistake is precisely what spawns fundamentalisms and a moralising and puritanical tendency.

So I am singing you a song, painting you a picture, offering you a poem. It's impossible to really grasp a song or a picture or a poem as mere words to be thought about – though of course thinking is required. Rather, we have to hear with the heart. Listening with the heart is how we read Scripture, how we are to make sense of doctrine, and how each of us can undertake our own theological reflection on the life into which God is calling us.

And I'm making this offering of a picture, a painting, a song in the context of the one central act of the Christian community. The Eucharistic action informs what I, and all of us, are doing: each and every life, taken, blessed, broken open, and given.

Everything I am about to say, under three headings, is contained in the written text which is available at the end of this Eucharist.

Some time will be set aside in the annual meeting when I will be grateful to receive any immediate feedback you might have – comments, questions, or concerns. Though I am inviting us into a dialogue, which I hope we will continue in many conversations as the next year unfolds.

1 Eucharist

So to begin, let me clearly state the essence of my self-understanding as priest in the community. I am here, first and foremost, as the person who assists this faith community to orient its life according to the Eucharistic action. The ordinal charges the priest to "faithfully minister the sacraments".ⁱⁱ In the canons and statutes of the Anglican Church the priest is described as a "minister of Word and Sacrament".

Word *and* Sacrament. Not Word alone, as became the norm under the influence of the more extreme elements of the 16th century reformations. We meet Sunday by Sunday to do the one and only thing our Lord commanded us communally to do with faithful regularity – to break open the Word, *and* to break open the Bread and pour out the Blood.

As I understand it, the Eucharist is the church's very source: it's lifeblood; it's proclamation; it's commitment; it's empowerment; it's ongoing transformation. In the Eucharistic action every person is both the offering and the offerer. Each and every one of us is invited to place our very being on the Table of transformation – each and every one of us called to do precisely what Christ does in this action.

That is why the Altar is the principal symbol in the church building – for in this sign we are to remember and to embody ourselves the same vocation as Christ. We rightly think of Eucharist as being fed, and indeed it is. But that's only half of the mystery. If that's all it was, then it would be no different from any other top-up promise in the spiritual marketplace. In fact, Eucharist is simultaneously the Bread of sustenance, and the Cup of suffering, dying and rising: "Can you drink

the cup that I must drink?”ⁱⁱⁱ This profound calling is affirmed in the very familiar sending prayer: “We offer ourselves to you [O God] as a living sacrifice.”^{iv}

It is a real act – just as each of us is called to be a real bodily presence. It is neither words to be read from a book, nor mere holy thoughts – but a work to be undergone, requiring flesh, embodiment: offered, blessed, broken open, to be given. “We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ.”^v

It is sometimes argued that the Eucharist is only for insiders, not understood by newcomers or seekers. I think this is to seriously misunderstand the Eucharist as a merely rational enterprise. But it’s not. When Jesus offers his Body and Blood to a motley bunch who do not understand he’s not giving them a lecture with an exam to pass. Rather, he’s giving them a sign – not so much an idea as an embodiment, a way. Their lack of understanding is no impediment to the grace of the Spirit. As symbol, his embodied action communicates infinitely more than mere words – like a song, a poem, a work of art. In the action they don’t comprehend he embodies the true fruitfulness which consists in being a ‘grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies.’^{vi}

It seems to me that precisely because the Eucharistic action is symbol, sacrament, not dependent upon mere rational concepts – and because it’s so revolutionary in its evangel - this is exactly why a complete outsider can be astonished to discover themselves as insiders, and be taken deeply into the unfathomable mystery of God’s grace in a manner utterly beyond mere words or explanations.

The whole of the good news of Christ, the *evangelion*, is embodied, enacted, and proclaimed in this sacramental action.

This is why I trust the Eucharist, why I regard it to be the ‘main event’. It is the source and summit of Christian praxis: ‘Do this’^{vii} In this one essential communal ritual action ‘we become what we eat.’^{viii} “Was ever another command so obeyed?”^{ix} This is also why I regard it as our primary missiological ‘strategy’. Everything else we do finds its meaning and purpose and authenticity from this centre.

So you can see that the Eucharist is the centre of my self-understanding as your priest, and guides my understanding of the nature of who we are and how we are to act as Christian community.

In concluding this first section, I want to set before us two areas arising from what I have said, which I believe require our communal attention in the coming year.

(1) As we know, our Indonesian congregation comes from a very different background to St John’s, the Eucharist has not been the centre of their weekly life. Assisting them and growing together as one parish in our contemporary catholic Anglican orientation, centred in the Eucharist, is going to require a great deal of all of us.

(2) In 2010 your then-Vestry commissioned a report on liturgical development by Richard Giles, a leader in this area in the Anglican Communion. Before I joined you a committee had worked on some aspects of that report – the most significant being the relocation of the font to the church entrance. The essence of that report is about liturgical renewal which is grounded in the tradition and oriented to the church’s mission in our time. In next year’s ‘Spring Series’ I am inviting us all to engage in this.

2 Spiritual Vitality

The first priority in St John’s Mission Action Plan is ‘stimulating spiritual vitality’. (Copies of the plan are available in the narthex.) I was greatly impressed by this when it was sent to me in Christchurch. It was central to my sense of call to St John’s. Indeed, it is the primary reason I am here.

Spiritual vitality begins with us, with our own transformation at the Altar of Christ – individually, and collectively. Spiritual vitality flourishes as we ourselves become a eucharistic offering, when we are broken open and poured out - when *we* are deepening into the Paschal Mystery.

Conversely, I am quite sure that there's nothing so spiritually deadening as the anxious preoccupation with numbers and fear for institutional future.

In this regard, it's vital to remember that the *evangelion* ('good news') of Christ is not a commodity or a programme, the Body of Christ is not a franchise or a religious club – and has nothing to do with statistics or filling the building. This is to seriously misunderstand the meaning of 'the great commission'.^x That's perhaps hard to hear in a culture so dominated by market-share, profit-and-loss, ratings, and so on. Nevertheless, Christian belonging and charitable action alike are fruit *we* do not have to concoct – indeed which do not come from us, but from Divine grace - which arise naturally, organically, from our being rooted and grounded in the Paschal Mystery. Everything we do derives its energy from, and finds its proper perspective according to, what Jesus declared in Mary and Martha's house as "the one thing necessary".^{xi}

His attention to the one thing necessary is precisely what attracted people to Jesus. Thus, when seekers and searchers encounter the authenticity of *our* spiritual vitality, the lively Eucharistic ground of our being, they *recognise* it - we don't have to try and sell them a religious package or worry about the institution.

We are all accustomed to reviewing our insurance policies, financial plans, and wills – but I wonder, do we regularly review our spiritual vitality? When did we last take stock of our commitments, re-examining the busy-ness and the focus of our life? Individually, any of us can review our spiritual praxis.

I'll conclude this section on spiritual vitality with two matters for the coming year.

(1) I invite us all to commit ourselves to reflect together on our liturgical praxis, by participating in the October 'Spring Series' – and by fully committing ourselves to participate in the liturgies of Lent and Holy Week, most especially the liturgy of the sacred Easter Triduum.

(2) A significant shift has been taking place in the lives of our families with children, particularly in terms of their capacity to participate on Sunday mornings. This suggests that we need to re-consider ways in which we can stimulate the spiritual vitality of this part of our community.

3 Theology & Mission

I have mentioned that the parish's first priority in the Mission Action Plan, 'stimulating spiritual vitality', was central to my sense of call to St John's. Also crucial to my response was your self-description as 'contemporary catholic Anglican'.

In this term I hear a broad theological outlook, a historically-grounded and embodied sacramental theology, and an open-hearted and progressive concept of the mission of the church. We can call that 'contemporary catholic Anglican' if that helps to get a handle on it. Though for me it's not so much about those specific terms, rather, it's about being sufficiently open to the time in which we live. It's a matter of being open to the reality the churches of the West collectively face in terms of the mission, responding to a world no longer impressed by Christian tribalism, by claims to exclusive truth, by doctrines still shaped by a pre-Copernican, pre-evolutionary mindset.

I am sure that the world is yearning for a theology suited to the astounding, expanding dimensions of the universe. In my own mind, at least, 'contemporary catholic Anglican' feels like a space generous enough, and with sufficient heart, so as to be open to what science is telling us about the evolution and the scale of the cosmos - a theology and spirituality capable of engaging with our time and place in history.

But just when we are becoming aware on a near-daily basis of the vastness of time and space, there is increasing preoccupation with our diminishment as institution. Anxiety for our future fuels an assumption that church growth depends on getting the marketing and the product placement right, on having the right strategies and plans. The warning of the late Bishop John V Taylor, former General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, remains relevant:

Success is the only credential we know, and unless a belief is widely accepted we soon start to doubt the truth of it. This makes us latter-day Christians nervously anxious about the effectiveness of our proclamation of the gospel. The prophets and apostles were obsessed by divine revelation or the lack of it; we are obsessed by human response or the lack of it.^{xii}

I am well aware of concern as to whether in ten years there will be enough people to do all the jobs we are doing now. This begs the obvious question - is that our goal? The spirit of Jesus' question to Pilate is relevant: What is growth?^{xiii} As we know, the Paschal Mystery into which we are baptised by water and Spirit is an invitation to an entirely different goal: finding our life by losing it.^{xiv} "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."^{xv}

As I see it, 'growth' as a disciple of Christ is about depth - deepening in an organic manner into what our tradition calls the Mystical Body of Christ, being "rooted and grounded in love".^{xvi} It is about a progressive – at times gradual, at other times sudden – immersion into what many great teachers in the Christian tradition have identified, and which Fr Bede Griffiths (writing at a time before common usage of inclusive pronouns) called the Sacred Centre:

Each man must discover this [Sacred] Centre in himself, this Ground of his being, this Law of his life. It is hidden in the depths of every soul, waiting to be discovered. It is the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price. It is the one thing which is necessary, which can satisfy all our desires and answer all our needs.^{xvii}

Of course, this Centre is Christ. Specifically, it is living into the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of death and resurrection - it is being grounded in the astonishing truth that "those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ's] sake will find it."^{xviii} Fr Bede stands in the same tradition as the One who declared to those looking for spectacle and signs: "the Kingdom of God is inside you."^{xix} It is truly the Sacred Centre within. "God's temple is holy," declared St Paul, "and you are that temple."^{xx}

For this reason Christian mission does not *begin* with programmes and plans, but with our faithfulness to the Paschal Mystery, our becoming what we eat. Plans and schemes and practical action will follow, most assuredly - as the organic and authentic outflowing of our spiritual vitality in Christ's death and resurrection. It's a matter of order and priority: "Seek first the kingdom of God."^{xxi}

I think the great challenge facing the church's mission lies not in selling our religious product, but in a long-overdue transformation of theology. What's desperately needed is a theology which can be liberated from an anti-evolutionary, tribe-bound, and sin-obsessed religion. We need a theology suited to the immensity of what we now know. In the sending rite of the Eucharist we are pushed out for mission, into a world which is searching, as Teilhard de Chardin grasped:

The human world of today has not grown cold but is ardently searching for a God proportionate to the dimensions of a Universe whose appearance has completely revolutionised the scale of our faculty for worship.^{xxii}

Let us together be such a song, manifest such a poem, paint such a picture for seekers and searchers here at the junction, that they may find a generous and deep space here for their ardent searching.

(1) In our Spring Series we will have an opportunity together to re-consider our church building in terms of its function to bear witness to the gospel's counter-cultural proclamation in our time.

(2) The old vicarage has been the subject of much discussion, over a number of years. Various schemes have been considered. I have recently suggested to Parish Council that perhaps it might be possible to find a way in which the house could become the base for a residential community of prayer - perhaps involving young people who might commit themselves to something like a spiritual 'gap year', stimulating spiritual vitality among us, and here at the junction.

To conclude, assisting those who are searching at ‘the junction’ is a work that belongs to all who are baptised into Christ’s death and resurrection; it is the labour of all who are being transformed on the Altar; the vocation of all who are becoming one with Christ’s ongoing re-creation. And I’m grateful for our companionship, our shared vocation as those who offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, whose lives are deepening in the Paschal Mystery.

Beginnings, middles, ends

I take this opportunity to recognise and commend to our prayers those who have been baptised, received, married and buried at St John’s during the past year.

Arielle Rusman, Julia Sutanto, Kamlesh Kumar, Poppy Rutherford, and Edward David Holden have been welcomed into the Body of Christ by baptism. May they grow in grace and in the love of Christ.

Giok Bwee Kwee, Reza Margared, Nora Manurung, Nikki Sasanti Dewi Milner, Wilda Mayer Parhusip, Evi Potgieter, Maradona Abraham Runtukahu, Tina Setiawati, Kevin Timothy Tanan, and Karen Yunia have been received into the Anglican Church. We welcome them as baptized and communicant members of the Christian Church and pray for the gifts of the Spirit in their lives.

Adam Legg & Crystal Montague, and Kamlesh Kumar & Sumpriasti Herawati have celebrated the Sacrament of Marriage. May they grow in life-long faithfulness to each other and to God.

We have commended into God’s loving embrace Edward Charles Gibson, Lalith Susew Alexander De Soysa, Hugh Rutter, Cyril Frederick William Dunn, Bruce Smith, Ruby Margaret Moore, and Peter Thomas. May they rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory!

With my gratitude and love,

Fr David Moore

Notes

- i Romans 6:4
- ii **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p793.
- iii Matthew 20:22, Mark 10:38
- iv **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, 144.
- v **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p141.
- vi John 12:24
- vii Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24
- viii St Augustine of Hippo
- ix Dom Gregory Dix, **The Shape of the Liturgy** (2nd edition), London: A & C Black, 1945, p744.
- x Matthew 28:19
- xi Luke 10:42
- xii John V Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, London: SCM, 1978, p69
- xiii John 18:38
- xiv Matthew 10:39, Luke 14:33
- xv John 12:24
- xvi Ephesians 3:17
- xvii Dom Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, London: Collins, 1976,
- xviii Matthew 10:39
- xix Luke 17:21
- xx 1 Corinthians 3:17
- xxi Matthew 6:33
- xxii Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, **The Future of Man**, London: Fontana, 1961, p281.