

**ADDRESS BY THE RIGHT REVEREND DR PETER STUART
THE ASSISTANT BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE
CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL NEWCASTLE – 11 SEPTEMBER 2016**

In a few minutes we will move across the road to the Hall where two experienced consultants, Gill Fletcher and Tim Dyer, will facilitate a structured process to help us understand what needs to be done to move forward as a community of faith. We will find them to be people of deep faith with amazing wisdom, sensitivity and skill. I am confident that we will be grateful for their ministry among us.

I recognise that there are people here who have come with anxiety or anguish about the conversations that will unfold. It has taken a lot to be here. I suspect that many of you are asking, ‘why is this happening?’ Some of you are personally disappointed and angry with me [because in response to a request from the Dean I have dissolved the parish council]. You see me as having hurt your friends. Others of you are upset and concerned about the actions of fellow parishioners. In reality, we won’t finish today with every question answered or every matter resolved. My hope and prayer is that we will feel we have made a healthy start and that we are able to do more work together in the coming months.

In the next few minutes I am going to touch on some things that may bring to the forefront of your mind some difficult memories. If you need to distract your thoughts for a moment look around at the beauty of the windows or take in afresh the artistry of the banners. It is not my plan to dwell on any one thing for too long.

Much of the context of our conversation today is affected by the case study underway into our life by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. I know that the Commission’s work has generated many thoughts and emotions for people across the Diocese. Some people are bewildered, angered, and saddened. There is information that has come out recently that is new to them and very confronting. There are other people who are thankful, relieved and grateful as they see light being shone on what has been their darkest experience. The Commission will resume its work in Sydney from 16 November.

Like many others, I have been involved in assisting our Church respond to the Royal Commission over the last 3½ years. This is the third case study for which I have prepared formal responses. I was also part of the leadership teams of the Dioceses of Tasmania and Adelaide that held independent inquiries which reported in 1998 and 2004.

Over the last 20 years we have learnt a lot about how we as a church should respond to the reality of abuse in our midst. For me, the most significant and recurring learning has been that the survivor of abuse should be placed first in our thinking. They are to be to us like the lost sheep and the lost coin of this morning’s gospel. Our passion and compassion should be for them. As I speak today I recall the names, faces, conversations and writing of these brave people.

As I have grown in my understanding I have learnt something of what it means to place the survivor first. These women and men have the right to be believed, the right to be treated with dignity, respect, sensitivity and understanding, the right to privacy and confidentiality and the

right to exercise control over decisions affecting them. In a vivid sense these practices become markers of our character or signposts to our values. They communicate to present and future children that we have learnt and that we want them to be safe.

Our church, the Anglican Church of Australia, has been on a journey of change. By 2004 we were deeply aware of our failures. We said through our General Synod, “We apologise unreservedly to those who have been harmed by sexual abuse perpetrated by people holding positions of power and trust in the Church. We apologise for the shameful way we actively worked against and discouraged those who came to us and reported abuse. We are ashamed to acknowledge that we only took notice when the survivors of abuse became a threat to us.” Over the succeeding decade, we have done many things to make our church safer, to try and assist survivors, to prevent abuse from happening or recurring, and to respond appropriately and fairly to those accused of abuse and negligence.

In 2009 all of this came very close to the Cathedral. People with deep connections to this community stood accused of professional misconduct including child abuse. I lament that the processes of parish recovery that we are now using across the Diocese were not in place at that time. Some of the deep separation, lack of knowledge and anguish we are struggling with may have been avoided, at least to some extent.

For a variety of reasons people here, including some key leaders, knew and gave greater weight to what was said by those who stood accused. People here questioned the integrity of the diocesan processes even when fellow parishioners were bringing their considerable professional skill to those processes. The loudest lay voices of this community said or seemed to say that survivors would not have first place in this community’s thinking. It is vital that we realise that there are survivors of sexual abuse and those who support them who do not see this community as safe or as one that will welcome them. There are survivors of sexual abuse and those who support them who do participate here but at times do so with great difficulty.

The Cathedral is the ‘mother church’ of the Diocese. It receives strong support from the parishes and is a place that Anglicans and people in the wider community look to as a spiritual home. It is of great concern if this is a place that some or many do not see as being safe or as a community that is not caring for survivors of abuse. This is particularly profound when there has been so much harm done within the church.

The Cathedral is seen as being out of step with a Bishop and his Diocese as they seek to acknowledge the reality of abuse and address a culture that permitted the abuse to happen. Those who lead your parish and exercise public ministries on behalf of the parish must be people who embrace the safe welcome, belief and support of survivors as an urgent and profound responsibility. These practices are markers of our character and signposts to our values. They communicate to present and future children that we have learnt and that we want them to be safe.

For nearly a year Gill and Tim who are working with us today have been engaged in offering support to this community and the Cathedral Council. As part of that work they have heard a desire of the Council to be reconciled with the bishops who because of some very harsh sentiments expressed to them do not feel welcome in this space. The sharp division between

our Bishop and this community was made plain in the letter that leaders from this community sent to the Royal Commission which questioned the Bishop's credibility and integrity.

The pain that is present now is not the end of the story for we are a Christian community. Our call is to recognise the crisis we are in and set our faces to addressing it. If we do this work well none of us will be the same at the end. In the power of the Spirit we can experience the deep transformation and healing of the reign of God.

For me there are some significant steps we can take. First we can acknowledge that no one needs to be left behind or excluded. No matter where we began we can be on a journey together. Together we can RECOGNISE the pain that is present, we can REPENT of our part in causing that pain and we can set about REPAIRING the harm that has done when and where that is possible. In many ways the Cathedral community can fashion this journey and how long it must take.

This Cathedral is a sacred place for me but also one of anguish. It is not without some considerable anxiety that I am speaking with you and spending time in the meeting that will follow. I am committed to my part in and pray that together we may shape a healthy future.