

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY BISHOP PETER STUART  
AT THE CONVENTION FOR THE DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE  
17 AUGUST 2013**

It is great to be here and to see so many people gathered. It is a privilege to be a bishop in ministry in this Diocese. Every Sunday worship is offered and thoughtful sermons are prepared. Across the Diocese we have seen a recapturing of ministry with children and families through messy church and mainly music. A number of parishes are trying an alternative form of worship, We see opportunity shops with space for tea and coffee, with a genuine desire to see them as places of outreach. We see parishes and clergy from each other. Conflict is up in a number of parishes, and it is sign of health, as parishes explore their future. We are in the work of mission together. That mission is expressed through Samaritans, Anglican Care, the schools and in partnership with agencies such as BCA and ABM.

I hold very dearly that episcopacy is about collaboration and cooperation as we seek to do Gospel work together. I understand that I have a part to play as do you all. It is a privilege to be a bishop in ministry here. It is the spirit of collaboration and cooperation that I want to reflect with you today. Your not all going to agree with me but I want to raise a conversation which is shaped by a theology of hospitality and inclusion.

I have found myself with two condrua in recent weeks over asylum seeker policy. Like you all I have found the news that people travelling in the hope of a better future have been dying at sea very disturbing. The idea that people are making money by sending people across the oceans in dangerous vessels revolts me.

In thinking about those who make the journey there have been times when I have imagined that if I was in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran or Iraq and I had the money I would use it to escape all that oppressed me or my children.

Through the ministry of adult baptism and confirmation I have learnt of the fear of Iranian Muslims who embrace the Christian faith. They worry for themselves if they return and even more so for their family and friends if the Iranian authorities learn of their conversion. We only have to listen to the news to learn of the harshness of the Taliban especially towards women and girls who seek to learn. When we hear of the persecution now being experienced by Copts in Egypt we understand why they might seek to leave. There are countries and regimes that people understandably wish to flee when they hear of a better way of life. I understand why people want to come to Australia and join in the life we share.

I have found myself personalising the story of the people who seek to come to our shores. I have wanted to think of them as old men and old women, as young women and young men, as girls and boys. They are real people seeking to make choices for themselves and the people they love. Some choices are good and some bad.

One of the things that has really troubled me over the last few weeks has been the movement by the majority of our politicians to dehumanise and depersonalise these children, women and men. They are called queue jumpers and illegals. They are presented as invaders - those who want to take what is portrayed as belonging to us.

I don't find this response to orphan, the widow, the sojourner and the needy in our scriptures. There were expectations of hospitality and generous care for those who would otherwise be destitute or struggling. We see Jesus in the Gospel reaching to the leper, the

woman with the flow of blood, the demon possessed, the woman caught in adultery, and the child. God as he has been known in his people and revealed in Jesus is a God who reaches to the last, the lost, the least and the lonely. As we honour God with our being and grow in love of him so we are called to love our neighbours. It is incongruous that we should be responding to some of the most vulnerable people in the world by transferring international aid budgets to the management of transit zones and responding to the crisis facing people across the globe with harshness. Yes, stop the boats coming but do so by making refugee access to our country meaningful even if it hurts us a bit. Make it seem to the people who have been in refugee camps in Egypt or Thailand for a decade that there is a realistic possibility of resettlement and new life.

My second conundrum is that our border policies reflect the protectionism that we as a church have and seek to retain here in NSW. The state anti-discrimination law allows religious groups to discriminate if the threshold is reached that the religious sensibilities of church members might be affected. It is a low threshold for wide discrimination. Now, I understand that as a church we want to ensure that militant opponents cannot come into our leadership and erode the very fabric of what has become important to us but we do so with some of the most widespread exemption in the country. We have tremendous freedom to discriminate against others and there are times when Christians have used that freedom poorly and with great hurt - when we have not acted with generosity and grace to those who are different from us. We have tended not to use the provisions much as Anglicans but all Christians are seen together. We do have practices around clergy deployment that build-in age discrimination but is not long ago that gender was high on our list as well.

One of the greatest risks to the community and the church is that we will become holy huddles of like minded communities in which the rich tapestry of God's revelation of himself to creation is unknown. God looked on the male and female he had created as bearers of his image and declared them to be very good. When we deny the contribution of those we begin to see as other and different we are diminished in our lives as individuals, as communities and as church. When we protect ourselves too much the divine grace mediated by those who bring an Asian insight into the scriptures, or an African insight into prayer, or a Chinese insight into service, or a South American insight into hospitality is lost to us and those who bear it to us go away diminished.

Since the earliest times people have revealed a great capacity in their sinfulness to colonise the life and world of others as if they have known better. They have presumed that their insights into the Good News are complete and with every capacity at hand have done their work. In this those they have served have not been seen as friends, co-heirs, fellow, inheritors, companions on the way. At times they have been depersonalised and diminished - unworthy of being heard. Their fundamental dignity has been denied.

I am not asking you to agree with me but I am asking that you wrestle through these things with me. This is not stuff on which we should be silent. Whenever we risk people being portrayed as the other, the intruder, the enemy, the worthless we need to sit up and watch carefully. Some fundamental values might be under threat.

We live in challenging times but the heartbeat of the Spirit leads us into risky places. My hope is that we will be bearers of kingdom values in work today and always.

For me, if we have the sense that we want to use violence towards another person that we should stop and see them as people with hope and purpose. When we do this our desire

to cause harm evaporates. If we have the sense that we want to exclude another that we should see them as people with gifts and love. When we do this our desire to isolate and diminish vanishes. If, when the world is crashing in on us and the busyness consumes us, we become aware of the plight of those who are struggling then we can join with others - people of faith, little faith and no faith, in making a difference.

I think this conversation is vital. It goes to our identity, our humanity and our share in God's divine action. It is all about how love which is at the heart of the universe and the heart of God is made real in our time and in our place. Love takes its shape in compassion and mercy, justice and peace, hope and care. If we live in love we live in God.

I don't want to undervalue the complexity of the issues our politicians and future politicians have to deal with. They make tough decisions and at times I am going to disagree with them. That is the benefit of our open democracy. This is one of those times. I am convinced that our character as a nation and as people is shaped by our hospitality and compassion - it is shaped by the love that has set us free.