

**SERMON DELIVERED AT THE LEARNING WEEKEND FOR THE NEWCASTLE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY FOR MINISTRY BY THE RIGHT REVEREND DR PETER STUART SUNDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2013**

It is a privilege to be here with you and especially today as I begin my fifth year of ministry among you as a bishop. In a few weeks time some of you begin your fifth year as ordained people. It is good to see people at different stages of preparing for and being encouraged in ministry and mission.

My four years have been part of a longer period, an amazing few years in which the vision of becoming ministering communities in mission has been grafted into Diocesan life. The next few years will define whether the graft shapes the fundamental identity of the Diocese or not.

MCiM is based on a theology and sociology of an empowered laity who as committed believers take responsibility to work with God and in God's name for the transformation of the world. We pray and act in anticipation that God's kingdom will come and his will be done believing that His Church will be a foretaste of peace, justice, mercy, hope and love.

We have named this as a baptismal theology knowing that our identity is shaped by our response to Christ and Christ's grace in us. In baptism we are joined to Christ and become His kingdom people. We are men, women and children who witness to the resurrection in all the world.

In my time amongst you I have been able to tell which parishes have engaged in serious missional thinking and practice when I meet with the Parish Council (resourcing and ministry teams). It comes out in the conversation. This has not been exclusively with parishes that have embraced MCiM but it is clear that MCiM has given many parishes the opportunity to consider, reflect and act more missionally than ever before.

It is not the first time that the Diocese has experienced renewal moments. Some have come and gone quickly. Other have moved more deeply and shaped parish communities for long periods. Cursillo has been one such movement, Emmaus another. You would be able to name others. Each of them became grafts which shaped part of the tree. MCiM has done a great deal for empowering laity in a partnership with clergy and bishops.

One of the struggles or demands for leaders and revolutionaries is knowing whether their actions and choices have been correct. Have they said and done the right thing? A leader can sense deep within them self the vocational call and pursue it but still be uncertain as to whether it will make a difference. Faithfulness in vocation can require patience and trust which, in our instant age, can be a real challenge.

There is encouragement for us in the stories of Simeon and Anna from this morning's gospel. We meet them in the temple. One has been stirred by God in some way to be present. The other is one through whom God spoke to his people in their day. We are not told exactly how long they have been about their vocation or how it was impressed upon them but we do witness their delight when they meet Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Simeon declares, 'your word has been fulfilled' and Anna is filled with great joy. We witness in Simeon and Anna patience in God and in his promises. They know that this child is God in their midst ready to change the world.

There is also a reminder in the story. We are not told what Simeon and Anna had been told to look for. We are not privy to the sign or movement, thought or feeling, by which they were to find the assurance that had been promised to them and which they were seeking. What we know is that in Christ, in their presence, is the answer or, put another way, Christ is the answer.

The marvellous unfolding of the kingdom of God is never captured by any one movement. Those movements can be part of or point to this unfolding but they can never claim to be the complete story. The fullness is found in Christ and in living with and for Christ. The kingdom is not limited by our constructions not matter how faithful they are. There is always more to God's story.

Mary and Joseph took Jesus because they were commanded to. They were faithful. At this stage they are still living into the fullness of what God was doing through the child entrusted to them. We know that Mary would ponder such things in her heart. Joseph would have watched as Jesus grew up dying before it was all fulfilled. The words of Anna and Simeon would have rung in their ears as they watched their child with wonder.

A key part of our vocation and responsibility is to be faithful. We have made vows and promises in our baptism and confirmation, and for some, when we were ordained. We have accepted the disciplines of being a follower and to abide by those choices. We have committed ourselves to being open to the work of the Spirit in our lives - individually and corporately. We have promised to worship and pray, to study the scriptures and gather around the table, to love and to serve.

I am certain that God is working in and through his Church, in this Church. We are in a period when our claiming of power is being questioned, our privileges reviewed and our hypocrisy challenged. A light is being shone on us and sometimes the picture is troubling. In all of this faithfulness to our identity in Christ and our commitment to Him must shape our hearts. Is what we are doing honouring of God who loves, calls, empowers and send us? If so, may it be done and more so. We can be confident and we can find assurance in knowing that God responds to our faithfulness with faithfulness.

So, my encouragement to you - those beginning their learning journey as well as those who are returning or continuing - is accept your call to Christian leadership and be faithful