

**Presidential Address to the Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle meeting in special session on May 25th, 2013 by the Right Reverend Dr Peter Stuart – Assistant Bishop of Newcastle and Administrator of the Diocese.**

We gather in the name of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We gather to be God's people in this place; devoted to doing God's will.

As we gather we acknowledge those who have walked this land before us especially the Awabakal people. We acknowledge their ongoing custodianship and commit ourselves as custodians to take our appropriate place in the journey of reconciliation.

As we meet, it is a joy to welcome Canon Stephen Williams as the Dean-elect and to welcome Canon Sonia Roulston who is now among us as an Acting Archdeacon. They both bring many gifts to their ministries and I look forward to them both sharing further in diocesan leadership.

As we prepare for the business in front of us I want to reflect on Genesis chapter 32 where we read of ancient patriarch Jacob. He arrives by the stream and sends his family and servants over together with all of his possessions so that he might be alone. Then, without explanation, Jacob described as being by himself, wrestles with a man until daybreak. When the man finds that he can't overpower Jacob, he wrenches Jacob's hip from the socket. This doesn't stop the tussle. As the sun comes up Jacob demands a blessing before he will let the man go. In one of those show stopping moments of the bible, the one he is wrestling with reveals his divine nature changing Jacob's name saying, "You have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob is blessed and gives the land a special name, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." In the light of a new day, Jacob walks away having encountered God but is forever marked with a limp.

There is so much in this tale. One aspect is its reminder to us that nicely ordered quiet contemplation isn't the only place that God engages humanity. This encounter is a full on wrestling match in which one person walks with his identity and physical capacity changed forever

It can take us some time to become comfortable with the idea that we might encounter God and God's ways in contest. Yet, there is plenty of evidence for this in the scriptures. In Acts 15 we gaze into a fiercely contested dispute about the expectations of Christian converts who were not Jews. We are told of some conclusions "after much discussion". Those words imply so much. We are left to wonder who got up many times to speak and what rules of conversation may have applied. The story also points to people changing their minds. A central tenet to Christian discernment is that we may arrive with one set of views and leave with another.

Every one of us has gathered here today with the desire to do God's work. There will be much discussion and every chance at times it will feel like we are wrestling. It is important that we are able to see this as holy work. Conflict while uncomfortable is not necessarily unholy. As we grapple with different proposals we seek to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order that we are ready to do God's will.

As ever, in our speeches today and conversations in the breaks we bear in mind James' warnings about the tongue. It can be the part of the body that causes abundant hurt and anguish. Yet it is also the means by which praises are sung. Our focus is on the matters debated not on the debaters. We seek to address ideas and principles in order that we might take our various places in guiding and governing the Diocese. Sometimes a Synod is judged by how irenic it is - the more peaceful the better. Another way of judging a Synod is by its outcomes and by the Godly quality of the relationship in and after the Synod of those who have met together. We may be blessed in the wrestling and walk away differently knowing that we have been on holy ground.

Now I need to say that I am as surprised as you are that we are having a special session of Synod. I had fully expected that in April the Synod would have elected a new bishop. I had begun the preparation for a handover; which is one of a number of ways of saying that I had anticipated that one of the other candidates would be elected and was ready to work with them in this great diocese of Newcastle. I was not expecting to learn from Archdeacon Pullin that the rules we had established together as Synod in 2009 had frustrated the Synod in testing its mind. As we gather today it is inevitable that part of our thinking will be addressing our experience of the last election process. Yet, to the best of our ability, our focus should be on preparing for the next election.

Before calling this special session of Synod I consulted widely as to whether I should immediately issue a summons for the next election session and call for nominations. The consistent advice matched my own thinking that it would be better to review the rules free of nominations. The Synod and the nominees should be clear about the rules that will apply in the discernment and election process. There are no nominees or candidates. None of us here today is advocating for any person to be the bishop. That is work for another day.

A number of you will be wondering why the bill is broader than just dealing with the concerns that emerged in the operation of section 60. Those developing proposals for the Diocesan Council were aware of a number of other issues that had arisen in the election process and decided also to present a response to those issues for consideration. The Diocesan Council supported the broad response coming to the Synod.

No bill is the work of any one person. There are many contributors. Along the way there is give and take until a final form is reached. But a bill is only the beginning. We do our work together to find a common mind. There will be more give and take until the House of Laity and the House of Clergy together present an ordinance for assent. Our Synod

Standing Orders give us the framework. They spell out that we can move into Committee at any time and must do so to amend a Bill. Like any ordinance, this Bill will be fashioned by our work together and then take its place in the web of rules that make up our version of canon law.

Our primary role is to set up a process that will enable us to do the work of discernment. We must have in place a system that gives us confidence that we have identified the person God is calling to be our new Bishop. Ours is not a political process, even though politics can play a part. It is a process of prayerful listening to each other and to God. We have traditionally held the view that the Bishop must be called with the strong support of laity and clergy – a simple majority is insufficient.

Each Australian Diocese must choose its own electoral process and what is in place reflects something of their history and story. Some Dioceses have never had election by Synod instead preferring a committee to make the appointment (Brisbane and Perth for example). Bathurst has recently returned to election by Committee and Grafton has a combination of Synod and Committee. A number of Dioceses require their nomination committee to undertake a shortlisting process and this can include the committee interviewing nominees (Tasmania and Adelaide for example). This special session of Synod is not being asked to engage in wide reform of the election process. That is the work for another day.

I do think that the Synod must be mindful of some broader questions as it does its work.

I have for some time been concerned that as a Synod our behaviour around age differs to the broader community. We actively discriminate on the basis of age in a way that we didn't in the past. It is a blunt tool to ensure succession in various ministries in an era when the broader community has a much wider range of tools. It concerns me that we may go into the election of a diocesan bishop with the effect that someone who is 60 will need to retire in five or five and half years' time and the time is shorter for an older person. Every other member of the clergy can have an extension for up to five years but we make no provision for the extension of a bishop's ministry. It is a demanding journey to have your ministry scrutinised by a Synod. It is a complex journey for an election but it would be even more complex for an extension of ministry. I hope that future Synods will look creatively at the whole issue of clergy retirement ages but there is merit in putting in place a process that signals to the next election Synod the option for our next bishop have his or her ministry extended.

This Church has experienced historical tension surrounding the autonomy of dioceses. Unlike most other churches of the Anglican Communion there is a very limited role for the bishops of the church in confirming who will be made a bishop. The responsibility falls to the diocesan bishop of a province who are limited by the rules of the province. In 1965, the NSW Provincial Synod made it clear that only a person who is not a bishop is subject to confirmation and then only about their age, whether they are baptised and whether they are a priest. At that time it also included their gender but this was removed with changes

to the constitution of this Church. Our current ordinance has an ambiguity about what is involved in the confirmation of a bishop. It can be read that the bishops of the province have the right of confirmation whether or not the person is already in episcopal orders. I am advised that in 1992 and 2005 the perspective of the Metropolitan was factored into contributions in the electoral process. I am also aware that, perhaps unwittingly, the Church has introduced an undefined character test which can be applied by the Metropolitan to any candidate who is not in episcopal orders by virtue of the Canon concerning Holy Orders 2004 which we adopted in 2008. That is a useful Canon in so many ways but not in that instance. I think the Synod needs to be clear about the level of veto it wishes to give to the Metropolitan and to the diocesan bishops of the province.

Our election process has carried similar features during the decades although with refinements along the way. We have election Synods meet until nearly 4am. We have had the Herald publish the name of the bishop-elect only for that person to decline. The Synod twice delegated its election to the Diocesan Council. One of the interesting asides with legislation, especially church legislation, is to ponder why particular provisions were created and amended, some as fail-safe provisions. There is a history and sometimes names to the development of such things as the select list and rules for members of Synod who are candidates. At this Synod we will become clearer about the rules about when a candidate may withdraw, and it will be good to be clear. We will also reflect further on the nature of our communication in a context where the media remains interested in what we do and we have instant communication and photography.

I will be listening carefully as it is my privilege and responsibility to exercise the role of considering assent to whatever we decide. If all goes well, it is my intention to issue a summons early next week so that the new process can begin.

Our gathering today also has another purpose. I was very conscious at the beginning of the last election process that there had been no formal gatherings in the Diocese about the next Bishop. We have been helped by the parish based consultations which provide a window, especially into lay expectations. This is the last chance before the process begins again in earnest for some conversation. Again after consultation it is proposed that at this gathering as Synod, time has been set aside for the two houses to meet separately for a while. It only takes a small number of members of a house to ask for this deliberation. This opportunity will provide clergy to speak with clergy and then report to the laity. It will provide for laity to speak with laity and then report to the clergy. I am hopeful that those conversations and the reports may be helpful in the work of discernment. The opportunity is simply for members of the houses to address each other and then for the houses to address each other on matters relating to the election of a bishop.

Today we may wrestle for a while and there will be much discussion. It may be on this ground that we meet with God for a while and that our work is holy.

I am grateful for your affection and support as I undertake the work of Administrator of the Diocese. My commitment is that we will maintain our missional momentum and that our new Bishop will find us in good heart when he or she comes amongst us.

I commend the business of this special session to you.