

## **ADDRESS FROM THE BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE (DR PETER STUART)**

**TO THE MOTHERS UNION AUSTRALIA SERVICE CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL NEWCASTLE 9 APRIL 2018**

In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today we gather to remember and celebrate a woman who did great things, Mary, Mother of our Lord. As we do, we recall that her pregnancy placed her at great risk in a world largely controlled by men, and in which women's sexuality was under tight control. Mary, by being pregnant, risked being outcast and destitute. She risked violence to herself, and thus her child. She faced potential death in the name of purity. The tendrils of this culture reached to Joseph, who risked shame and ostracisation. This was a difficult world in which the child was announced, in which Mary became pregnant, in which Mary and Joseph became earthly parents. God through Mary and Joseph transformed the cosmos as they nurtured the incarnate one, Jesus Christ. Mary is for us, the archetype of radical woman whose God bearing life changes the course of history.

We also remember Mary Sumner, the woman who could see the benefit of having women meet together as they nurtured their families. In an age of groups gathering for all sorts of adventures, mothers met to encourage and support one another, as well as promoting a life of faith. Interestingly, it was Mary Sumner's experience of becoming a grandmother that helped her set up Mothers Union, for her daughter and her daughter's peers. We all know that Mary Sumner was at first very uncertain about taking on a public speaking role, but her reluctant acceptance of an Episcopal request led to a powerful movement of people of all ages, contributing to a rich female religious culture within the Anglican communion.

One author has likened the growth of Mothers Union to something like the growth of the church in the acts of the apostles, for it spread so quickly and so far. For many women, and for a long time, Mothers Union was a place where women found voice, and found the ability to make a difference in the life of their church, most profoundly in a spiritual way. As we all know, Mothers Union has been a values driven organization. Integral to its life and work, have been values that have been shared and reinforced. Mothers Union members have a sense of what Mothers Union stands for, even if they can't recite the formal words by rote. You will know what I mean, we know why we're here. The spiritual aims of Mothers Union focused on the sacredness of Mothers Union, and this has been at the sacredness of motherhood, and this has been at the core of Mothers Union identity from the beginning.

Those who are familiar with the history of Mothers Union know that its values have at times been contested through history, that with the changing face of motherhood in Australian society, Mothers Union has had to reflect on how it responds. The place of divorced women was, in the 1920s, a source of great controversy. There have been controversy and questions ever since about different expressions of motherhood, and different experiences, and how they are to connect with our story. What we have seen is that Mothers Union has continued to adapt to the experience of women, and continues to do so as women continue to enter into the workforce full time, some of whom are the sole bread winners for their families.

Mothers Union in this diocese has been a place in which women have found their gifts acknowledged. It has been a place where they have developed a deeper spiritual companionship, and they found ways of working for the good of families, locally and across the globe. In 1910, the Bishop of Newcastle said that

there weren't many Mothers Union branches, for the women were very independent here. Mothers Union has continued to grow from that point, and to make a difference. Mothers Union now takes on and continues to take on a different shape as it continues to minister in the life of the diocese.

This morning, I want to call on the grandmotherly and motherly instincts that you all have under the patronage of Mary, Mother of our Lord, and seek your support in a vital project for our Anglican and Australian life.

At the end of 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse issued its report. It proposed that all institutions in Australia commit themselves to 10 child safe standards. The diocese has already done so. The Royal Commission believes that with these standards in place, an institution is much more likely to be safe for children today. While much of the focus of institutions has been on those who have been harmed in the past, the Royal Commission was clear, our call is to address the past, but to make sure that we are safe for children today.

One of the standards focuses us on hearing the child when they speak; properly hearing. And I must say that as we've reviewed these standards in our diocese and life, that's one we've put a big circle around to ask ourselves the question, "do we in our parishes, when children are present, properly hear them?" Sometimes we hear children so that they might entertain us. Their responses to the children's talk might be this. Sometimes we hear children whinging and crying, laughing and celebrating, but do we properly hear them?

Our culture in Australia is vastly different from a world where children were to be seen and not heard. I remember my parents telling me that, usually when I was being heard. But it was a culture we all know about, don't we, when children weren't to have voice? It was present in our homes, but even now we must ask ourselves the question, "will the voice of the child be given dignity and equality?" The voice of the child being given dignity and equality. To be heard with dignity and equality is a struggle that we know many women had to work hard for, that their voice might be given dignity in a church in some places which says women can only speak in certain environments. It's a struggle we've had in our church where women have been locked out from all sorts of ministry until only three decades ago. So if that's been one of our struggles, how ready are we to hear the voice of the child with dignity and equality?

Theologically, we know that Mary's vocation was to enable her child to be heard, as a child and as a man. We know that Jesus took the children and held them, he drew the child to his heart, and he esteemed them. Jesus went on to name the child as a wisdom bearer of the kingdom life, become like this child to enter the kingdom of God.

We probably are meant to be the best at hearing the voice of the child, given this teaching of Jesus. Yet sociologically we know that children who have sought to cry out have been dismissed. We know that some of the children who were crying out were crying out because of the harm they were experiencing, but we didn't hear. We also know that it is really hard for children to speak, especially as damage is unfolding. To get a child to speak who is in their teenage years is a really difficult task. We know that, for we have been parents, some of us grandparents, some of us great grandparents. But we also remember what it was like for ourselves when we wanted to live in our interior world, rather than tell others what is going on.

But I know that your first reaction to my question, “will we listen to children with dignity and esteem?” will be, “of course”. But what will we do when they say things we don't want to hear? Will we be quick to cover their words with our words? Are our gestures such that really we say, “I'd rather not know?” I don't want any of us to feel profoundly guilty about that on one level, because some of the stuff that children want to tell us is hard to hear. The sort of hearing we're talking about involves grace, grace to be able to continue in the conversation when the conversation gets hard.

But my suggestion is that the environment of critical listening begins a long way back, before any difficult moment. If our culture is about celebrating the voice of the child, if our culture is about saying, please speak so that we might hear you, then we will find ways of always encouraging their contribution, we'll make sure we let them finish their words, we'll be listening for the words behind the words, the ones that are unspoken, and we'll make it safe for them to explore ideas that children do. Because they work out how to walk on this world sometimes by disagreeing with us, actually quite often by disagreeing with us.

My reason for asking you, as the Mothers Union, is because this goes right to the heart. Mothers Union was formed to look after families. The purpose of families is to look after children. This is core business, and I know that if in our parishes, you went back and said, from today we are going to listen to children in a different way than what we've been doing before and show it, you will bring change. I know that if you do this, our diocese will be different because you will say, "If we're not listening to children we're not doing the right thing, how can we change?" Because you are women in the spirit of Mary, mother of our lord, and women in the spirit of Mary Sumner.

My reason for asking you is that we do need to be well placed to hear children. To hear the child who says to us, "I'm wondering about my sexual identity." We need to be well placed to hear the young person say to us, "I've shared an intimate image of myself and it's now being misused." We need to be well placed to hear the child who says, "This is what's happening to me."

Mothers Union is value driven, protecting children is our highest value. You are gathering here today to celebrate radical women, Mary, mother of our lord, and Mary Sumner, women who made a difference for the world. You are part of the church that needs to reform in the light of its failures, and you can make a difference because you have done so before. Will we together do all that is in our power to ensure that children are fully heard in our church life? So that they can be properly heard at all times, so that they can bear the kingdom to us in ways that we've yet to discover, so they can speak to us when they need our help?

One of the things that shapes us is that as we look at what's gone on in our diocese, we feel the weight of the problems that have come. We wonder where we've been, and what our part might have been, and we can be weighed down by that burden. The invitation, I think of the Royal Commission, and of days like today, is to go, "Yes that's part of our story, and some things I would like to have done differently. But I can do something differently now."

My invitation to you in living out the values of Mothers Union, in living out its mission, in sharing the mission of Christ, which is reflected in his love for children, that you will be agents and ambassadors of making sure that our children are fully heard in our life.