

## **St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne**

Sunday 1 June 2004

**A matter of public importance.**

**Guest preacher: Dr John Davis, Vicar, St Peter's Eastern Hill**

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“Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you by your name; you are mine.”

I wish to address a major current issue of concern for our Church.

Strong criticism of the way the bishops of the Church have responded to incidents where clergy or laity have abused their positions of power, particularly in sexual abuse of the young, has become an increasingly significant part of public discussion in recent times. The whole matter is deeply distressing and disturbing for all concerned, but it is not something that is going to quietly go away and the implications have to be addressed by us all. We are all together the people of God – and in the context of God's love for all of us, we must search for a better way forward. We ask forgiveness for what has been done and for what has not been done. We acknowledge the human frailty we all share and take no pleasure in the noting of the shortcomings of others. We acknowledge the deep pain of shattered lives and lost dreams. But we are doing this in the context of a faith which calls us all together to the gift of life and life in abundance, and also to resurrection and grace and the redemption of that which is lost. The whole community of faith is damaged and diminished by these troubles. Our challenge as a community of faith is to respond to this current profound challenge in a way that truly reflects the gospel. That may in fact mean some big changes. But then who would doubt that we are in a period of enormous transition and upheaval?

There are two major issues at play here. One is the issue of the abuse itself – the abusers and the victims and all the pain that causes. The other is the question of what is done when this is drawn to the attention of those in authority, particularly in our system the bishops. In none of these cases have the bishops themselves been accused.

How is the accusation or the fact responded to? What is their prime concern? What are the due processes in place? Are they followed? Are they fair? Is justice done? It is this second area of the role of the bishops that is the focus for increasing public anger and concern just at the present time. People are expressing their anger at the bishops and at episcopal blindness or mishandling and this anger is growing.

This is widespread. We have noted for instance the enormous and costly scandal overwhelming the diocese of Boston in the American Catholic Church. There are other examples in Europe. In Australia no one could be unaware of issues much closer to home in our own Church over the last several years. And on Friday afternoon, the Archbishop of Adelaide announced his resignation effective that day, as a result of the storm of criticism flowing since the publication of an independent report commissioned by him, highly critical of events, processes and attitudes relating to that diocese. This has been a huge issue in

South Australia, even though there has been very little coverage in press radio or TV here in Victoria.

It is no small thing for an archbishop to be forced from his position in this way, just a week before the holding of a diocesan synod. But key councils and committees indicated a loss of confidence. Our whole system in fact depends on mutual confidence. After the tabling in Parliament of the Report, the fall was swift. What had been talked about for months and years was out in the open. How could things have gone on for so long and been dismissed or ignored or sidestepped? What is the responsibility for those who hold leadership?

The flow on from the Adelaide case is by no means ended. But today the diocese of Adelaide is without a bishop because of it, before any of the formal processes of the Church that might have come into play had even started. This is a significant shift, without a precedent in the Australian Church. There is a different sort of power being exercised here – a power that does not come from the formal clauses of an Act or ordinance. There is a stirring of dissatisfaction that is by no means confined to the Church but that is nevertheless evidence of increasing unhappiness with the tired workings of the present structures. Uneasy lies the head that bears the mitre, one might say. That stirring has been experienced in a dramatic way in Adelaide.

Much is demanded these days of those who hold positions of responsibility in every institution. What was previously acceptable is no longer so. What was possible in former times does not work any more. Some of our leaders have not caught up with this generational change of mood and the subsequent widespread dissatisfaction. Very much is required of those who exercise power in the Church and now they are being held accountable. Whoever would want to be a bishop? And now a number of vacancies are coming up at the top level – Adelaide, then next year Perth, and then Melbourne.

The bigger questions underlying so much of all this are questions about identity. Already choices are being made and people are going to where they find the answers they want or are not going anywhere. For those of us who are already or still part of the Church, these are questions that desperately need to be asked afresh, particularly by anyone under 60 and even more so under 35. When the institutional structures of the Church are shaking or showing a distressing tiredness is exactly the time to be asking such questions.

What is our community of faith going to be like? What is creative and good and life giving? What ideals are going to be cherished and lived out? What on the other hand is going to be completely unacceptable and with what implications? What gifts are going to be shared and honoured? How might leadership be exercised? How might old truths be re-expressed and passed on? How might new insights be embraced and valued?

A Christian community of faith will have distinctive marks of worship and of service to others: the particular Christian traditions have various ways of loving God and loving neighbour as followers of Jesus. We have Scriptures, we have sacraments, we have creeds, and we have bishops. We have people and we have property. We have many local communities mostly small. We do a lot in the wider community, particularly through our agencies of care. And we have a huge challenge to have any idea at all of what things might be like in as little as 20 years from now. Stepping forward into that space takes a deal of courage. And the hope that we need is buffeted by things like the events of this last

week in Adelaide. Perhaps it is indeed a very loud wake up call. Just going on as before is not going to work.

There is no doubt that the Christian Church as a whole has already entered into another time of Reformation and upheaval similar or greater than the upheavals of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will not see the end of it – it could take a number of generations. We are all part of this. But the Spirit of God is powerfully in this as well. That is where we can find encouragement in dark or confusing times. I am presently reading an excellent new book titled simply *The Reformation* by Diarmaid MacCulloch. The turmoil of new ideas, new politics, new wars, battles with Islam coming ever closer, the shock of a faith seen with new eyes in new ways, the bitter battles, the break down of old and accepted patterns and from time to time, the searing realisation that as it were in the line from the fairy tale ‘the emperor has no clothes’ – so much seems so very familiar. Very frighteningly so, very excitingly so.

There are some things that have to be done. And that we must together do as a community of faith in all the local expressions of these communities – in big cathedrals, in churches, in hospitals or universities, in gatherings of like-minded friends, and beyond across those boundaries of language and custom to all sorts of strangers of goodwill. There will be questions and there will be hardship. There will be times like the present when we are forced into reconsideration by events beyond our influence. But we also know that mere damage control will not be enough. The times and the gospel demand more than that.

“Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you by your name; you are mine.”

The Lord be with you.

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