

## Synod Eucharist Sermon

*The sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at the Synod Eucharist of the First Session of the Fiftieth Synod on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011 in the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Maitland.*

Philippians 1: 27-30:

'For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well...'

Mark 10: 23-31:

'Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions...'

There are religious threshold moments. These moments are moments of deep realization about God. They mostly produce change. The change can be of commitment, saying for a first time 'Jesus is Lord'. The change can be a sense of calling, recognizing what the Lord's will is for you. The change can be an encouragement - the impact of the faithful witness of another Christian.

All these changes move us over thresholds. We are never the same thereafter. We move into new behaviours, new attitudes and new visions. Both the lessons for this Eucharist are such threshold moments. The prospect of suffering as a fact of faithful discipleship becomes clear and stark. Robin and I shared such a threshold recognition about the reality of suffering in faithful discipleship on August 6<sup>th</sup> 1998.

We were at the University of Kent in Canterbury in a large marquee that held over a thousand people at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops. The Eucharist was being celebrated. We emerged from that Eucharist with deeply changed and charged perspectives about what being Christians entailed. We had crossed a threshold in

religious awareness. And as in such crossings, we both had had a powerful emotional religious experience.

We were changed because we heard first-hand how one man had endured incredible physically inflicted suffering (torture) and had stayed magnificently faithful to Christ throughout his ordeal.

On August 6<sup>th</sup> 1998 the then Lambeth Conference was led in Eucharistic worship by the Bishops of the Anglican Church in Japan. August 6<sup>th</sup> is the Feast of the Transfiguration; it is also the date of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. That Eucharist led by the Japanese Bishops was thus always going to be a very moving experience.

The Service was doubly moving because the preacher invited by the Japanese Bishops was a woman priest of the Church of England, Susan Cole-King. She was the daughter of Bishop Leonard Wilson who had been the Bishop of Singapore when Singapore fell to the invading Japanese army in February 1942.

Bishop Wilson was interred in Changi Prison and tortured by soldiers of that invading army. He suffered greatly. But he remained steadfast in his Christian devotion and practice. The Bishop spoke of his experience in a BBC Broadcast Talk in 1946. This is part of his recollection:

I remember Archbishop Temple in one of his books writing that if we pray for any particular virtue, whether it be patience or courage or love, one of the answers that God gives to us is an opportunity for expressing that virtue. After my first beating I was almost afraid to pray for courage lest I should have another opportunity of exercising it, but my unspoken prayer was there, and without God's help I doubt whether I should have come through. Long hours of ignoble pain were a severe test. In the middle of that torture they asked me if I still believed in God. When by God's help I said 'I do', they asked me why God did not save me, and by the help of His Holy Spirit I said, 'God does save me. He does not save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but He saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it,' and when they asked me why I did not curse them I told them that it was because I was a follower of

Jesus Christ, who taught us that we were all brethren.

I did not like to use the words 'Father forgive them'. It seemed too blasphemous to use our Lord's words, but I felt them, and I said, 'Father, I know these men are doing their duty. Help them to see I am innocent'. And when I muttered 'forgive them', I wondered how far I was being dramatic and if I really meant it, because I looked at their faces as they stood around and took it in turn to flog, and their faces were hard and cruel and some of them were evidently enjoying their cruelty. But by the Grace of God I saw those men not as they were, but as they had been. Once they were little children playing with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parents' love, in those far-off days before they had been conditioned by their false nationalistic ideals and it is hard to hate little children. But even that was not enough. There came to my mind as I lay on the table the words of that Communion hymn:

Look, Father, look on His anointed face,  
And only look on us as found in Him.

And so I saw them, not as they were, not only as they had been, but as they were capable of becoming, redeemed by the power of Christ and I knew that it was only common sense to say 'forgive'.<sup>1</sup>

Upon the ending of the war and after recuperation, Bishop Wilson resumed his ministry as the Bishop of Singapore. When celebrating one Confirmation, he encountered as a candidate kneeling before him one of the Japanese soldiers who had been one of his torturers in Changi prison. It was an extraordinary moment for the Bishop to confirm as a committed Christian a person who had so physically violated him in prison.

As Susan Cole-King recounted her father's glad reflection of this extraordinary Confirmation Service there was not a dry eye amongst all

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<sup>1</sup> A broadcast sermon by the Right. Reverend J. L. Wilson, Bishop of Singapore. London: The Listener. October 24th, 1946.

the bishops and their spouses gathered in Eucharist at that Lambeth Conference. The Japanese bishops were especially tearful. The story of Bishop Wilson was not recounted by his daughter in remonstrance but as evidence of the power of Christ to transform suffering so that it did not defeat and destroy.

And of course her sermon was preached in the context of the Eucharist where The Great Thanksgiving Prayer reminds us that Jesus 'on the night that he was *betrayed...*' instituted the sacrament that gives us our identity and socializes us into that identity. Part of Christian identity is a coming to terms with suffering, even -dare I say it- an expectation of suffering?

Certainly the Gospels make it clear that suffering is part of being a disciple of Jesus, although that is not very publicly made known by the Church. We too have been seduced by our culture's reluctance to face suffering as a norm of Christian experience. It is as if we seek for a perpetual anaesthetic to keep us happily numb. And as the Church, our facing the fact that suffering can be a corollary of faithful discipleship is not readily recognized or accepted.

There is in the Gospel of Mark with its sharp crisp delineation of discipleship an unexpected twist to the rewards of being a faithful disciple. Jesus, in responding to Peter's self-congratulation in having left all to follow him, says dead-pan

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,<sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions...

Persecutions -suffering. People suffer for the Church and within the Church.

The suffering we face as the Church in Australia and in this Diocese is not the traumatic physical suffering such as Bishop Leonard Wilson endured so faithfully and so edifyingly. Our suffering will be the pain of change and of letting go our past revered and cherished practices and ways of being the church that have so contributed to our development as Christians and as Anglicans.

In speaking in this way, I am not in the least minimizing the reality of this emotional suffering. Letting go can be painfully disturbing. Yet the entire history of the Church from its initial decisions at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15 is this kind of adaptation to the energetic leading of the Holy Spirit. The story of the early church is the story of letting go in order to move on and to keep pace with the mission generated by the Holy Spirit.

Those Jews who first became believers in Jesus and yet kept their Jewish practices as we observe from Acts<sup>2</sup> must have seriously wondered if the Holy Spirit was trashing their religious heritage. I imagine that their thinking wrestled with anxious questions like, 'where will these changes end?'<sup>3</sup>

We do need to read deeply and carefully the Book of the Acts of the Apostles to understand the dilemmas of change that faced the first leaders of the fledgling Church. Those first Jews who became believers in Jesus Christ were people of a very conservative religion. Theirs was a religion that had defined its identity by conservation.

Change was extraordinarily difficult for them as we can detect by the sharp opposition of the pious to Jesus' healings on the Sabbaths. Conservation had engulfed the religious sensitivities of the Scribes and the Pharisees. They were not able to recognize that Jesus was doing what the Father was always doing, as the Gospel of John succinctly noted.<sup>4</sup>

The full recognition by those first believers that Jesus was the Son of God was gradual and most likely somewhat painful as they accommodated their experience of Jesus to their inherited tight monotheism. It might have at first seemed to them that they were becoming polytheists in concluding that Jesus was the Son of God.

Declaring Jesus as Lord would not have been an easy spontaneous declaration. It would have involved real mental struggle. It was a theological shift for them of massive proportion. It was a deep change. Theirs would have been a mix of suffering and joy as they understood their commitment to Jesus as Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> See Acts 21: 17-26.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Peter's dialogue in Acts 10.

<sup>4</sup> See John 5:19.

There is real suffering within the Church at the moment and it is here too in this Diocese. There are people who want deep change in the Church because they sense the Church is failing in its mission. There are others who resist change because they love the Church as it is. Those who advocate deep change must realize that the Church can only change if there is deep change in them. And that personal change can involve pain.

The deep change required of each of us is the first word on the lips of Jesus in his public preaching: *metanoia*<sup>5</sup>. It is translated repentance in most English Bibles.

The brilliantly faithful English priest who so heroically worked in the East End of London for over thirty years, Kenneth Leech, says of *metanoia*

It refers to a complete change in values and in consciousness. Its closest Greek word is *paranoia* which means to be out of one's mind. *Metanoia* means a revolution of the mind, the personality, so that we see things utterly differently. This calls for not only personal but structural change, for a new form of community.<sup>6</sup>

'Seeing things utterly differently' requires deep change. And although the provocation to such deep change can be sheer joy, there is the inevitable pain of wrench as we learn new behaviours and leave old patterns behind.

We cannot underestimate the painful wrenching that those first deeply Jewish disciples experienced as they followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. In our accustomed state of religious settlement we may be resisting the pain threshold of necessary change (*metanoia*) and so be in danger of forfeiting a new form of community that the Holy Spirit is birthing as a sign of God's mission now.

As a man I have watched birth; I have not given birth. But despite all the pain involved in birth there is normally final incredible joy. The

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<sup>5</sup> See Mark 1: 15 – 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

<sup>6</sup> David Bunch and Angus Ritchie [Eds]. 2009. Prayer and Prophecy –the Essential Kenneth Leech. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p. 94.

Holy Spirit is birthing new structures for the Church and there is pain. But birthing does lead to joy. So despite whatever suffering each of us experiences, and experiences differently, there is the prospect of joy at the hands of God.

Deep change and the prospect of joy is the trajectory of this Eucharist.

That was the ultimate experience of Bishop Leonard Wilson. From his faithful witness retold by his daughter in her sermon to the Lambeth Conference of 1998 Robin and I both experienced the truth of what Saint Paul wrote to the young church at Philippi,

‘God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.’

This realization changed our lives. It was a moment of deep change. This is the deep change ahead of this Diocese, ‘the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.’