

# Response to the Bishop's Charge to the Second Session of the Fifty-first Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle

## Introduction

Thank you to Bishop Greg for the extensive thought and work which has been expended in producing the Charge to Synod for this session. For me, it is a most unexpected opportunity to make a formal response and I am conscious of the responsibility this opportunity represents. I have been praying for the insight and grace to use this opportunity as God would wish. In making this response, I wish to make clear that I do not purport to speak for others or from any 'platform', but I do pray that this will be an opportunity for communication, to make a space to open dialogue between brothers and sisters in Christ about issues which are critical to the body of Christ in this place. In preparing this response I have also consciously called upon the touchstones of Parker Palmer's Circles of Trust approach which I have studied and practised for some years.

At this stage, I would like to offer an invitation. For those who have a deep and pressing need for, or attachment to, technology; be it phone, ipad, laptop, or something I have not even heard of, put it aside for the next few minutes. This is an invitation and nothing more. Take the time to be present here among us, fully present in mind and heart and soul. It is in this time of being present that we may become fully conscious of God's presence in us, and his words for us in the depths of our hearts.<sup>1</sup>

## Two preliminary points

First, Bishop Greg's charge has chosen as its central theme, "Love your neighbour".<sup>2</sup> In the range of neighbours chosen by Bishop Greg and the examples of contemporary Christian outreach in this Diocese, he reaffirms and highlights the indispensable role of the Samaritans in all of its programs and activities. I wish to add my own acknowledgment of the extraordinary and outstanding work of Samaritans and to record my deep respect for its retiring CEO. Mr Shevels, I honour you for who you are and all you have done to shed the light of Christ in dark places.

The second preliminary point in my response concerns the use of language. As I have been reflecting on the Bishop's charge, words and phrases have come thick and fast. What I think this suggests to me is that in his charge this year, Bishop Greg has given us something to stir the soul and not just the mind. For me, this is a very good thing. Many of the phrases which have been with me during this time of reflection are words of Scripture and you may hear these woven throughout my response. For me this is very important for in Scripture do I come to know what God is asking of me in my Christian journey.

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<sup>1</sup> With grateful thanks to Abbot Philip OSB: <https://christdesert.org/2015/10/the-abbots-notebook-for-october-17-2015>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22: 34-40: But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him *a question*, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'" "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'" "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Several words arising in my time of reflection have become very pressing and I should like to share them with you as I respond to more specific themes in the charge. They are gift, blessing, pilgrim and authenticity. A second set of words complements the first. These are audacity, agony and passion.

## **The Pilgrim Way**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in England was a time of great upheaval, great progress, great questioning, in many ways like our own, although very different, too. It was a time of a movement towards universal literacy. It is clear from research of that time that two books were prized above all others. One was the Bible (King James Version) and the other was John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was originally published in 1678. With its powerful allegory of the journey of the pilgrim, Christian, from the City of Destruction through the Wicket Gate to the Celestial City, it was to be found throughout the country in homes large and small and where there were no other books at all, it was *The Pilgrim's Progress* that stood on a shelf beside the family Bible. It influenced the thinking and the Christian lives of young and old from all strata of society about what the Christian life was and how it was to be lived. The story exemplified the Christian life as a journey, with stops and starts, times of turning aside, of refreshment, dreaming, discouragement, encouragement in seeking to walk the "straight and narrow", alone and with companions, and overcoming temptation.

By contrast, in our own time, a majority of the communities in which we live exist with virtually no books in their homes. Houses are full of electronic noise from morning to night, from televisions, computers, ipads and the like. The noise is delivered in sound bites, sterile, passive and unedifying. In our shallow, base, celebrity culture, Christian's companions in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Faithful and Hopeful, have been replaced on our journey with "Feelgood" and "It's all about me." Our guides on the journey are ever eager to present us with a gift of "issues", so the pilgrim becomes a man, woman or child "with issues" to carry onward.

One of the most insidious dangers of our modern pilgrim journey is the tyranny of a path paved with 'relevance'. In order to take a place at the common table of society, we must sport our membership of the relevance club. When Christians engage in community conversations they must first jump over the socially-imposed hurdle of relevance. It is a trap for us to stop on our Christian journey and improve our fitness before breaching this illusory hurdle of relevance. I personally shall be remembering this as we continue the conversations seeded by Bishop Greg's questions to us in the charge.

How then do we approach the next phase of our pilgrim journey which Bishop Greg has spread before us in this year's charge? Here are five thoughts drawn from my own reflections on loving my neighbour.

1. The way of the Christian pilgrim, in 2015, in Australia, in Newcastle and the Hunter is profoundly countercultural, but I believe it is profoundly relevant to the continuing cohesion of our social institutions and relationships.

Someone wise counselled some centuries ago:

"Your way must be different from the world's way, the love of Christ must come before all else."<sup>3</sup>

2. Unlike our contemporary obsession with dichotomy, God's ways are the ways of both/and, not either/or. For example, God's love for me and the world I know to be both fierce and tender.<sup>4</sup>
3. The way of the pilgrim is a way of hospitality (both giving and receiving) for it is in hospitality that I not only might "entertain angels unawares"<sup>5</sup>, but it is there that I meet Christ in the other.<sup>6</sup>
4. The way of the pilgrim is a way which includes the burdens on our backs and with our issues at the forefront. I would wish to approach this aspect of the journey in the same spirit as I approach the throne of grace, with boldness, in order to receive mercy and to find grace.<sup>7</sup>
5. The contemporary way of the pilgrim is a journey in mission and in partnership with fresh expressions of Church. Above all, I am on a journey marked by authenticity. C.S. Lewis said, "The prayer preceding all prayers is, "May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to."<sup>8</sup> Authenticity as the body of Christ will be the measure of our mission and fresh expressions.

## Sexual abuse

I have two final short responses to the charge. The first is on the subject of our response to the ongoing effects of historical sexual abuse in our midst. I endorse and strongly support the principles of transparency, safety and care which Bishop Greg has so clearly enunciated in his charge. We need to commit to transform ourselves by God's grace into a community which can "listen with the ear of our hearts".<sup>9</sup> My further response is a reflection on the approach we should model in response to those who seek not only acknowledgement of the evil which has happened to them, but are also seeking reparation in the form of monetary compensation. The forgiving father in the Gospel of Luke,<sup>10</sup> and Jesus himself in the Gospel of John,<sup>11</sup> have clearly said, "All I have is yours." These are challenging texts and they are joined by another which suggests, to me at least, the way in which our compensation to the victims of sexual abuse should be conducted. Jesus said: "Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure-- pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."<sup>12</sup>

## Circles of Trust

Finally, Bishop Greg has called upon each one of us to look inside ourselves and discern how we will act to face the past and shape a healthy future. For myself, I am committed to the work and

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<sup>3</sup> *Rule of Benedict* 4:20-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Song of Solomon* 8:6.

<sup>5</sup> *Hebrews* 13.2

<sup>6</sup> *Rule of Benedict* 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Hebrews* 4:15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Joan Chittister OSB *The Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer*, p 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule of Benedict* Prologue 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Luke* 15.31.

<sup>11</sup> *John* 17.10

<sup>12</sup>

vision of the Center for Courage and Renewal. I am a facilitator in training of their Circles of Trust approach which is designed to create safe spaces for our shy souls to show up.

In conclusion, I will share both a quote from Parker Palmer and Terry Tempest Williams which I believe illustrates why this work is an authentic gift and blessing to us at this time, and also Parker Palmer's 5 habits of the heart which I believe will help to guide use on the "straight and narrow" path towards a healthy future. First the quote:

*The human heart is the first home of the Church. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we be loving? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our brothers and sisters in Christ to join with us in our determined pursuit of living into the Kingdom of God?*<sup>13</sup>

### **5 Habits of the Heart**

1. We're all in this together
2. Appreciation of otherness
3. Capacity to hold tension creatively
4. Sense of voice and agency
5. Capacity to create community

I pray that we may use these gifts as blessings for us all on our pilgrim way.

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<sup>13</sup> With apologies to Parker and Terry as I have changed a few words from the quote from *Healing the Heart of Democracy* to fit my current theme.

## Circle of Trust touchstones

- ***Be present as fully as possible.*** Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- ***Give and receive welcome.*** People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- ***What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.*** This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- ***Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.*** Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- ***No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other.*** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- ***Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions*** instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- ***When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.*** If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- ***Attend to your own inner teacher.*** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- ***Trust and learn from the silence.*** Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- ***Observe deep confidentiality.*** Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- ***Know that it's possible*** to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.