



Anglican Diocese of
BENDIGO

Synod Charge

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*This is a lightly edited transcript of the
video sent to synod members in May 2020*

2020

Introduction

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord!

It is good to be with you even if it's only through this printed address or the accompanying video.

Friends, this is my third charge as Bishop of the Diocese of Bendigo and it is sad not to be meeting in person even though I'm glad that we do have the opportunity to use technology like this to keep in touch. We're not able to meet in person as we usually do and we're not able to do all of the things that we would normally expect to do as part of Synod. The election of office holders, the discussion about great things that we need to grapple with as a church and making decisions, the praying together and the worshipping, well we can't do that because we're not gathered in the same way.

But one of the aspects of Synod that we often leave behind in needing to talk about things and needing to elect office holders is to hear reports about how we as a Church, as God's people in this part of the world, are seeking to be faithful to him - seeking to live out our mission. So this is where the focus of synod 2020 will be - to hear reports, particularly those that are aimed at giving a picture of how we are living with and through the great times that we are in, through this pandemic

You'll remember that the mission of the diocese is *to transform society through the gospel of Jesus Christ by building healthy, mission-shaped faith communities*. What a great mission! Friends we are not a church with a mission, we are a mission with a church. The way that God has chosen to do his work in this world is to call us together. God has set his mission and that is to transform the whole world through Jesus Christ and he has given us the great privilege and responsibility of being his agents, being the great witnesses to what he has done in Jesus in the exact places where we live. I love our diocesan mission because it captures that sense of being sent out by God to do the work of God right where we are planted.

It was with this in mind that I shared with you my dream for the diocese, and this is that we would have *a congregation worshipping God in every community*. As we seek to be the people of God wherever we are planted we have two tasks. One is to worship God well; to take God at his word and to tell God how good God is. And the second is to tell others how good God is and to help them share in the vision of the world where we take God at his word, hear his promises, trust Him well and revel in the life given through Jesus Christ his son. What better way to transform society than to see congregations worshipping God in every part of our diocese.

And so as I speak with you today, and as you hear reports from around the diocese as the months progress, I hope that you will see this vision and this mission being fulfilled, little step by little step, even in extraordinary circumstances like the one that we are in now.



As I begin today I wish to acknowledge the Dja Dja Wurrung People, the Traditional Owners of the land around Bendigo, the place where I now sit and acknowledge all of those Indigenous and First Nations people throughout our diocese. I wish to acknowledge their elders, past and present, and pray for their leaders emerging. Our First Nations people have cared for this land as custodians for many years. For that I am grateful, and for their leadership in this place long before I was ever dreamt of, I thank God.

Pandemic

It would be hard to begin any address at the moment without working through the reality of this pandemic. We are living in the midst of a unique time. The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is unique in our lifetime and indeed there haven't been many times like this even in the history of human life on this planet.

The last remembered time was immediately after World War I when the Spanish Flu ripped through the world. And as we think about the effect of the coronavirus pandemic upon us, we see that there are all sorts of effects that have been wrought by the coming of this virus. There's been great disruption to the way that we do things. Whether it's disruption in our community life; businesses that have had to close because it's not safe to be open, jobs that have ceased because the income isn't coming in, or whether it's shops that haven't had food or essentials stocked, or whether it's medical services that have been difficult to get into, or whether it's simply entertainment and relaxation that we haven't been able to participate in because we couldn't get too close to other people.

It's caused great disruption at a society level and it's also cause disruption personally. Even close friends and family haven't been able to meet for a long time with the specific aim of keeping each other safe – how ironic! Not being able to be with people we love, because we care for them. There's been great disruption, but there's also been great disruption in our church life. From mid-March we've not been able to open the doors of our churches to public worship. What a great change to the way that we understand ourselves as Christian people and our role within society. We've had to rethink the way that we do pastoral care, rethink the way that we nurture each other as disciples of Jesus, and rethink the way that we organize our structures so that we remain focused on our mission and also able to be engaged in that mission - to provide ministry, to pay the bills that keep coming in. There's been great disruption caused by this pandemic.

And this disruption has been a source of worry hasn't it? Whether it's been worry prompted by the financial impact, whether it's been worry prompted by care for others, or whether it's been a personal worry. Worry about falling ill and whether we'll be able to withstand the rigors of fighting off the coronavirus. There's been a great sense of worry. And there's been worry in our churches as we've been concerned for those whom we haven't seen but know might be struggling, worry that we're fulfilling God's desires for us, worry that we're able to meet the needs of those who we can see struggling, and worry that we won't be able to continue.

And with that disruption and with that worry also comes annoyance. I know that even in myself I'm annoyed at the things that have had to change; and then annoyed at myself for being annoyed because I know that they had to. Simply not being able to go for a ride like I was used to with people whom I've enjoyed - I know exactly the reasons why - but it doesn't make it any easier to deal with does it? But that worry and that annoyance, all prompted by the disruption that has been caused, comes down to a challenge that this virus has posed to us and our way of life: Whether it's a challenge to the habits, the daily and weekly habits that we have, or deeper than that, a challenge to the values that are so wrapped up in how we see ourselves and our role in this world.

It's true to say that the coronavirus has challenged who we are, how we see ourselves and how adequate we are for the situation. Indeed, we here in Australia have lived in an extraordinarily settled period of time and exercised an extraordinarily high degree of power and capacity to have a hand in

our fate. It's been deeply distressing, hasn't it, to learn that there are things out of our control that might even take charge. And wrapped all in amongst that has been the sadness and pain that has come from seeing sadness and suffering wrought at such a great scale.

So whether it's the sadness of seeing the effects in places where the virus has spread so much more rapidly and deeply than in Australia, or whether it's closer to home; whether it's personal experience of falling ill or knowing someone, maybe even someone you care for deeply, who has fallen ill, we must admit that this has caused great sadness and pain.

Now friends before we go any further would you join me in a prayer written for the coronavirus time:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
You taught us to love our neighbour,
and to care for those in need
as if we were caring for you.
In this time of anxiety, give us strength
to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,
and to assure the isolated of our love,
and your love, for your name's sake.*

Amen.

*God of compassion,
be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation.
In their loneliness, be their consolation;
in their anxiety, be their hope;
in their darkness, be their light;
through him who suffered alone on the cross,
but reigns with you in glory,
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

(both prayers are sourced from <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-parishes/coronavirus-covid-19-liturgy-and-prayer>, 20/5/2020)

Process

Friends, times like this coronavirus pandemic amplify the need for us to be focused and to pull together. And it's with this in mind that I wish to say how grateful I am to our clergy.

I don't know if all of you realise that at the beginning of the coronavirus the clergy were faced with an enormous task. The task to not only think through how they operated as people who are used to a certain pattern of life, but also the task of thinking through how to best serve you.

As the pastoral leaders within this diocese your clergy were able to come together to work through a common way of approaching the needs of this time. We have seen over the course of these last months exciting work to preserve good ministry both within the bounds of our church communities but also accessible to many others outside of our church communities, and for that I'm extremely grateful.

Similarly you may not know that in March, when it became very clear that our patterns of life would have to change, I called our clergy together to give me advice as to the best way of dealing with the necessary changes, the necessary procedures, in order to keep us and everyone else safe. They gave great advice and helped me to map out the great diversity of activities that we do across the diocese and I trust that advice has been helpful in formulating the guidelines for us meeting together or not meeting together, the guidelines for us caring for each other whilst being apart, the guidelines for what we can do and can't do during this time. We have a great clergy cohort, a great clergy team, and I'm so grateful for their activity and their work under God.

I'd also like to say how grateful I am for the Registry team, led by Naomi Fountain our Registrar and General Manager. They consistently go above and beyond the call of duty to be able to gather information, to be able to process the necessary administration behind the scenes so that as parishes all of you may have what you need to be God's people where you're planted. They are skillful, they work hard, and the level of their output far outstrips the resources that they have in order to make it happen. I appreciate them greatly and I hope you do too.

Friends I'm grateful because these teams choose to work together. It is a great joy to be able to work together. Not only do we get the sense of harmony that comes when teams of people pull towards a common goal, but we also discover that harmony within the Church is an artefact of the gospel, and an adornment to Jesus Christ. The great gospel of Jesus tells us that the reconciliation that he brought between us and God the Father spills out into our lives one to another. There is no more Jew, nor Greek, nor slave nor free, male nor female, in God's family (Gal 3:28). Because indeed all are unified in Jesus. Yet, working together is not a given. It needs to be done by choice. So I'm so grateful that your clergy leaders, that you Registry team and indeed your lay leaders across this diocese have chosen to work together through these extraordinary times. As I said it's an artefact of the gospel of Jesus and indeed an adornment to Jesus Christ himself when we, his people, choose to work together.

Now friends it has actually a greater impact than simply making life go more smoothly now. It shows out a close alignment of our mission, in other words, what it is we think we're doing, with our institutional processes. As we have chosen to work together, we seek to make the most of the resources that God's given us so that we might do what is most important as God's people in the here and now.

Let me give you one simple example of how this is playing out in practice. As the financial demands of this pandemic have played through we have instituted a process where there the Diocesan Office is able to provide help so that all the parishes have the means to be able to continue in ministry at the levels that they are accustomed. Yet this requires increased reporting from parishes back into the Diocese so that we can foresee where there might be troubles ahead and so that comfort might be

given to those who carry the can or bear responsibility for the whole work of the diocese aren't left isolated and exposed.

Yet this sort of reporting has not been a regular thing has it? It's something that is new. Parishes aren't used to reporting into the diocese more than annually so the idea of frequent reports on a budget template that's been set down is a new thing. Yet as I, with our new Finance Manager Richard, have sat down in video conferences with Rectors and Treasurers from around the diocese we have discovered, to our great joy, people glad to work together, willing to put up with some of the frustrations that come with having to reformat a budget into a different shape, and also some of the worries about what a diocese might do with this information. Indeed, people have universally said that it's been a good process and one that helps to harmonise what we do together so that we might achieve more.

I see this as a great step in which our processes help to enhance our mission as our institution aligns with what's really important, and this is keeping ministry happening where you are. In order to demonstrate my willingness to be involved in this I'm beginning this year to give certification for those things for which I'm responsible and for which you rely on me to do. This is a new thing. So, as part of the later reports you'll receive is a certificate for those things which you rely on me institutionally, and missionally, and personally. In a very simple and clear way I'll lay down those points at which I'm responsible to you so that you might have confidence that my activity aligns with what is important in the life of the diocese.

Possibilities

Processes aren't the be all and end all. Indeed, what we do in order to help ministry happen is actually only secondary. It is that ministry itself upon which we must be placing our attention so that we might be the people that Jesus has called us to be. It's with this in mind that I'd like to talk about some possibilities that I can foresee even in the midst of this time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the course of this pandemic I've been amazed at the way that God has worked in and around Christians all around the globe, and especially within our diocese. Never in my lifetime have I seen the numbers of lay leaders actively and thoughtfully engaged in pastoral care as I've seen over the last few months. Never in my lifetime have I seen the number of Christians who have been prepared to talk to their friends about having hope in Jesus and being available to pray for and with other people. And never have I seen the great depth of kind action, one person to another, spread because people love Jesus.

Friends, in the midst of a sad and dreadful situation this is actually great news and this is where God's call to us to have life to the full because of Jesus Christ is being seen (John 10:10). It's with this in mind that I suggest a couple of possibilities for us as a diocese. As we've been forced to think through what is it that makes us the people of God, rather than what the holding structures and or the things that encourage us to live out our life are, we've discovered that there are plenty of opportunities to tell people about Jesus, to grow in our love and affection for Jesus, and to share good deeds - even if we can't meet. And whilst we yearn for that time when we might be able to meet face to face with people again, we've seen that there are plenty of opportunities to reach out. And so it's a good time for us to be reminded of that question I posed to you last year, and that is to help us work through what of all the resources that God has given us are bread in our saddle bags, that give us nourishment for the journey, or lead that weighs us down. So what is bread that will help us be fit for the next step, and what is lead that will drag us away from the journey we must follow?

Now one of the great things that we've been able to do as a whole diocese came out of last year's Synod, and that is to deal justly with those who have been abused in the life of the Church. I can report to you that over the course of this last year I've had the privilege of meeting with a number of people who have survived abuse within the Church, to be able to offer them settlement or redress in a financial form for the hurt that they've received, but more importantly to apologise, and to apologise without strings attached for the hurt that they received. Friends, this has been a privilege to me and it's been an example of where I've been able to act on your behalf to fulfil a great possibility of being a church that is willing to make good on the wrongs that it has done.

I see that we have another possibility to be able to enter into renewed relationship with another group of people who we have often ignored or forgotten, and they are the First People's of this land. I foreshadowed last year that I look forward to a time when we might be able to practically engage with the First Peoples of the various parts of our diocese to be able to grow in relationship and practical works to help them. Friends, I have a great vision of what we might be able to do, a vision that will help us to refresh our Reconciliation Action Plan, a vision where we might be able to use what we have to be able to enter into partnership with the indigenous peoples spread across our diocese. This vision is fairly straightforward and it is that we use some of the resource that we have, the great resource of being a literate people who often have time, capacity and a willingness to serve so that we might be able to join with young indigenous people to help them grow in their capacity as readers.

We know that for many young indigenous people learning to read is a struggle. Wouldn't it be great if the doors of all of our churches were open once a week to invite those in their communities to come, and to have story time, to read stories together? But friends the reality is we will be the beneficiaries as we grow in relationship and hear the stories of those who come, who discover more

of what it's like to be an indigenous person in their own land yet locked out of so many good things. I'd love to see over the next few years every parish be able to open its doors and make itself appropriately and willingly available to those around so that preschoolers, children getting ready to go to school, might be able to join in and read stories. And I think God will bless us if we do that.

And friends, in order to be prepared for this work we need to keep pressing on in the Diocesan Prayer Adventure that I introduced last year. I said we need to be *talking to God about people before we talk to people about God*. So, who are those three people that you've been praying for? Are there another three that you can add? Maybe there are people who you have met during this time of pandemic, maybe someone who you might invite to the preschool reading group. Who is it that you are talking to God and asking that they may work in their lives too?

Patience

So as I come to conclude this address let me finish with four thoughts about patience. If this time of pandemic has taught us nothing, it's taught us of the need for patience. But patience has all sorts of aspects, and we see different aspects of patience expressed through different parts of Scripture.

One of my favourite books is John's Revelation, that very last book with all of the vivid imagery that talked to a hard pressed people, who cannot control the circumstances of the world that they live in, about how to be God's people there and then. Many of the images speak to one eternal truth that God's people, who are often tossed and turned in a world that they cannot control, need perseverance.

So, my first point is that perseverance is the first part of patience. And perseverance has two characters; the first is hearing and trusting God's promises for his people even when the present circumstances seem out of his control. But then the second character is looking forward to a time when those promises will be fulfilled. The concluding chapters of Revelation show us the vision of God's fulfilled work where people, enriched by their faithful dependence upon God, gather together to sing praises to the one who has vindicated them; who has shown their faith to be not held in vain. So as we are patient we must persevere, trusting in God's promises and looking forward to that time of fulfilment.

But then a second aspect is to be practicing the Christian life whatever the circumstances, even if valued activities are not possible. Just as we are not able to engage in some of the practices that we think are valuable, that we hold so dear, we can look back to characters like Daniel and many of the prophets who wrote while Israel was in exile and a stranger in a foreign land. You'll remember Daniel, who was a godly man, who acted rightly and faithfully. He couldn't go to the temple, the synagogues hadn't been invented yet, he was prevented from the usual acts of worship that an Israelite would've sought to have done. Yet he prayed, he was able to meet and discuss the godly life with his friends, he was able to think through the Scriptures as he had them and he stands out as one who consistently made wise and godly choices. He was the one who worked out what it meant to be, well what we would call a Christian, in a life where he couldn't do things that he valued deeply.

A third aspect of patience is prioritising clearly what we do. And when I think of prioritising what we do and how that has a role in patience I think of Paul; Paul the apostle who wrote so much of the New Testament. Now Paul was a very clever man, he could've worked well within the Jewish world as what we'd now know as a lawyer, equally he knew the Roman world and I imagine he would've been a very good operator in that context. He was good with his hands, he was a businessman, he could operate what we'd now know as a leather workshop. He was also very energetic and durable. He was someone who had a lot of capacity and could've done many great things, yet he was rigorous in what he'd prioritise - what he chose to do. His desire was to see people be enfolded in Christ, that was his phrase, he wanted people to be *in Christ* - whether they were people who were Christian or whether it were those who were not yet Christian. He was prioritising his time on helping them become people *in Christ*. This meant that he was able to be patient in his endeavors with individuals, his endeavors with churches and the distribution of his time. He didn't do all sorts of things which he would've been capable of doing, but he was clear and focused on what he would be able to do, and he stuck with it. And so patience is persevering when we can't change a situation, patience is practicing a Christian life even when some of our valued activities are not possible, patience is prioritising what we do and patience is perceiving then God's call for the future.

There are times when we do need to just pause and wait and see what it is that God would have for the next lap of our life together and I think friends we're in one of those times. But the great thing about patience when we persevere, when we practice, and when we prioritise is that the vision of

what's next will become apparent. We get to see what is in God's heart, we get to see the needs around about us and we get to see the people that God is changing us to be and the next step will become clear. We'll be able to see the next step that we must take on this journey together to be God's faithful people, the next step that we must take so that we might work with God so that we might transform, well not just me, but our society through the love of Jesus. How it might be that we might see worshipping congregations in every community. So friends patience is not not marking time, it's not the second best option that we do when we can't do anything else, it's actually formative as we pay attention to a circumstance that we can't change and discover what God would have for us next when the times change.

So I commend the rest of the reports that will be delivered to you as part of the Synod 2020 and may be peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ his son our Lord.

*And the blessing of God Almighty
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be on you and remain with you always. Amen.*