



ADDRESS

by

The Most Reverend Dr Phillip Aspinnall

Archbishop of Brisbane

to the

Third Session of the 79th Synod

of the

Diocese of Brisbane

Saturday 28th June 2019

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Welcome to this Third Session of the 79th Synod of the Diocese of Brisbane.

Some people dread going to synod. Some find it boring or just plain irrelevant to what they see as the real work of the kingdom of God. Others find the conflict and politicking destructive. Still others ask how a body the size of our diocesan synod can hope to achieve anything.

I can appreciate these sentiments and similar thoughts have crossed my own mind on occasions. And yet I have also experienced some profoundly positive moments in synods. There have been moments when courageous people naming the truth have helped the

church to face its responsibilities. There have been moments when synods have caught new visions and committed themselves to step out in faith. There have been moments of forgiveness and grace that have been reconciling and healing and touched people deeply.

A great deal depends on the attitudes with which one comes to synod, on the perspective one adopts, on one's frame of mind and sense of expectation and anticipation.

The word itself comes from two Greek terms. The first is the prefix *syn*, which means together: so synthesis is bringing together ideas; synoptics is seeing or viewing things together, synonym is a word that goes together with another word because it has a similar meaning. So 'syn' meaning together. And the second term is *hodos*, meaning a road or a route or a way. So in conjunction those two terms mean that synod is to do with being on the road together, journeying together on the way, finding a way together, discerning together a way forward.

Remembering that underlying meaning casts synod in a bit of a different light and points to possibilities of different ways of going about being on the road together or finding a way together.

The way we're most familiar with is a kind of parliamentary model with rules for operating loosely modelled on what happens in our Westminster-based parliaments. We have standing orders that mean things are done in a certain order and in a particular way. Motions are moved, seconded and debated. Laws are made in the form of canons following

a special procedure. Sometimes the synod resolves itself into a committee that has different rules again. And by and large this way of working serves us pretty well. Decisions get made reasonably efficiently and once you learn the rules and get used to how it all works you can follow proceedings and understand what's going on.

But there are some downsides to this traditional way of doing things. Some people become skilled in the procedures and can be tempted to use the procedures to silence or outmanoeuvre others. Some are slower to get on top of the rules or less experienced and can be reluctant to enter the fray in case they make a mistake.

The parliamentary approach can also feel very adversarial with people being required to speak in favour of a motion or against it, when at times what they want to do is contribute something they think is important without necessarily having come to a final position on the motion. The adversarial character of debate can get in the way of coming to a common mind, coming together. Winning and losing can seem more important than discerning a way forward.

Some people can feel a bit daunted at the prospect of getting to their feet and putting into words something they feel deeply about with four to five hundred people looking on. Public speaking isn't everyone's cup of tea.

On the other hand some are very comfortable and practised at speaking in synod and are very generous in sharing their views on virtually every topic discussed, if you know what I mean. So sometimes fewer than the full range of voices are heard.

Another aspect of our traditional way of working with motions and canons is that a debate at synod is launched by a clear, well thought through, proposal of some kind, which people are invited either to agree with or to oppose. But what about topics that seem to be important but are complex or unclear or not sufficiently understood yet, so that there is no concrete, specific, thought out proposal to consider? It can be tricky to deal with those complex things in motions or canons.

So while our traditional way of doing synod usually works pretty well, it's not without its shortcomings and limitations.

Over the last few years, following the annual synod, members have been invited to provide feedback on the experience. They've been asked to reflect on whether they felt engaged in the synod and with the topics discussed. Last year people said, more or less, yes, they did feel engaged. But it was commented that we finished at lunchtime on the Sunday and we had more time available which could have been used constructively. Some observations concerned the way we deal with reports and whether that could be more engaging. And a question was raised about whether we use all the gifts and abilities that synod members bring to the best advantage.

Diocesan Council considered all the feedback and comments and looked at options to ensure synod provided ways for all members to be asked for and given opportunities to contribute their views; and ways in which synod could tap into the vast array of knowledge, expertise, gifts and experience present in the members of synod to further God's mission in this diocese and beyond.

As a result of this feedback Diocesan Council is recommending that a significant part of our time during this session of synod be given to coming together in a different way, to an experiment. And the framework for the proposed experiment is what's known as open space dialogue.

You've already received pre-reading material about open space so you have some idea of the principles and intention of it, but let me underline some of the ideas that strike me as key.

We are all being invited into a space for conversation that is open. There is some structure and some process, and we will be guided through it by our two expert facilitators Michael Wood and Brendan McKeague, but openness is the key. You are invited to identify topics that you are passionate about and to meet with others who share that passion to see if conversation leads to a way forward together.

It's open because you can raise any topic you wish and you can move from one topic to another if you wish during the open space sessions. How this happens Michael and Brendan will explain, but the essence is you choose what would like to invest yourself in.

And investing yourself is another key principle of open space. The point of the conversations tomorrow is not to generate motions for synod. That's not completely ruled out. It could happen, but it's not the goal. The goal is that you speak with others about a shared passion and actively claim your own God-given gifts and capacity to do something about it. Open space is intended to be an empowering experience. You can act, together with others, to make a difference. Open space invites each one of us to claim our own agency, to be proactive, to take responsibility in collaboration with others to make a difference in relation to something we're passionate about.

It's true that we are all operating within frameworks of various sorts. There are church rules and canons and Diocesan Council and commissions and all that. But there is still enormous space for synod members in collaboration with others to take action together without needing permission from anyone else or decisions of any formal body. True, some actions will need formal decisions but many more do not. You are free agents in many respects to discern God's call and respond to it. So I hope our open space experiment empowers you to claim your own agency, to take the initiative, to take responsibility and to make a difference.

I think probably the shortest open space experience in history is recorded in the gospels. It's actually there in all four gospels. Remember when the apostles came to Jesus worried about the crowds who had been with them all day but had nothing to eat? How could they possibly be fed? Jesus asked the apostles, 'Why are you asking me? You give them something. What do you have? What's to hand? Use that.' And Jesus gave thanks to God for five loaves and two fish, the apostles divided what they had among the people, everyone ate and had enough and they collected twelve baskets of left overs (Mark 6.30-44 and parallels). Amazing. Take responsibility. Use what you have to hand. Act together with those who share your concern. You'll be amazed at the results.

So the goal is not to produce motions for synod, or recommendations for the Archbishop or Diocesan Council. The goal is not to dream up a long list of things for someone else to do. The main thing is about you, and collaborators who share your concern, deciding to take steps together.

It's open space because no-one knows exactly what conversations will emerge. It's open because you can participate in as many conversations as you choose. It's open because no-one knows what the outcomes of any conversation will be. It's open because conversations don't end with the end of the time allocated for the process on Saturday. Conversations will continue throughout the rest of the synod, through the breaks, while you're travelling to and from synod and even after synod is over.

This ongoing process of dialogue and shared exploration at many different levels is close to the heart of Anglicanism. Anglicans are deeply devoted to the scriptures because we believe that, through many and various ways, God has given them to us and they reveal God to us. But the scriptures need to be approached with care and understood properly. We believe that God has also created human beings with the capacity to reason. Richard Hooker, probably the greatest Anglican theologian of all time, said that reason is not simply the ability to draw logical conclusions. It's much more than that. It's the God-given capacity to discern, to apprehend divine wisdom in the scriptures, in creation and in society. And as we engage in deep dialogue it's important to remember that we belong to a church in which things can change; things can happen for the first time. We need only to think of the remarriage of divorced people in church, the admission of children to Holy Communion, prayer book revision, the ordination of women and so on. But as Richard Hooker reminds us just because change is possible doesn't mean change is desirable. In fact we should be slow to change what's in our heritage and in antiquity and do so only when there is a very good public reason.

So the architect of Anglican ecclesiology, Richard Hooker, saw clearly this dynamic of dialogue at the heart of Anglicanism. Human reason moved, shaped and guided by the Holy Spirit can apprehend the divine wisdom that permeates all things. But, because of human blindness, sin and frailty, humans still need the revelation of God in Christ that comes through the scriptures. And this relationship is very nuanced because the scriptures themselves need to be approached carefully and, what Hooker called, 'collected' by human

reason. And all of this happens in the context of, in dialogue with and with profound respect for Christian antiquity and heritage.

We will begin our experiment with open space dialogue tomorrow with a very broad, open question. It doesn't close off any possibilities or fence off any no-go areas. 'What is God calling us to be and to do, at this time?' And each of us can begin to tease that out in the light of what concerns us at the moment in our church and society.

It might be the vitality and health of our faith communities. In our recent history the church has been rocked, shocked. We are all concerned about church decline. It's been going on for a long time, more than a century, but in recent decades it has accelerated and we know many of our small faith communities are struggling to survive. We haven't helped ourselves at all by our own shocking failures revealed in abuse scandals.

You might be passionate about the vital leaders we need to lead us into the future – lay leaders and clergy. What sort of leaders do we need? Where will we find them? Can we interest the intelligent, capable, energetic young people in our schools in the possibility of lives of service, ministry and even ordination?

Your concern might be that the church seems to be completely polarised and stuck on issues around gender and human sexuality. It seems almost impossible to have a conversation without things boiling over. Can we find a way forward or will these issues see the church fracture and split?

Or your concerns might be more with the world around us rather than internal issues.

The shifting place of the church in the wider community might worry you. It seems many want to marginalise the church, push it to the edge, and silence its voice. How come what we have to say doesn't sound like good news to many in our society these days?

Can Australians find ways to reconcile with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, heal the wounds of the past and address the ongoing legacy of poorer outcomes in education, incarceration, health and well-being?

In a world of terrorism and conflict, how can people of all faiths and none live together in harmony and peace? And what role might the church have to play in that?

Environmental issues and climate change are a top priority for many.

In the face of all these big questions, and many more besides, 'What is God calling us to be and to do, at this time?

Every synod, but especially this one, is about 'Can we find ways forward together?'

The emphasis on 'together' is crucial. It affirms the nature of the church as the body of Christ and the unity of the church as something fundamental. As St Paul reminded the

church in Corinth (1 Cor 12), no one part of the church can say to another, 'We don't need you.' And as he reminded the church in Rome (Romans 12) we who are many are one body in Christ. Individually we are members of one another. God gives diversity and variety so that the one body can be full, complete, healthy and vital.

This is a fundamental attitude we're invited to adopt as we enter into open space dialogue. Our minds and hearts need to embrace the expectation that each other person here bears gifts from God for building up the body of Christ to serve God's mission in the world. We should look expectantly for those gifts in each other and see each other as gifts to the body.

The emphasis on 'a way' reminds us, as does the epistle to the Ephesians (2.19), that we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom trying to spread the civilisation of heaven on earth. This requires us to order our own life together faithfully and to respond faithfully to the challenges thrown up by our day. Thinking those questions through sometimes will be difficult, even painful. But the way is something we discern together by speaking the truth in love.

At root synod is not an exercise in power or politics. At a fundamental level it is a spiritual endeavour in which we open ourselves to God and seek to discern together God's will for us.

What is God calling us to be and to do, at this time?

