

The Bishop's Charge

To the 2nd Session of the 144th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
Given by the Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell
Saturday, November 3, 2018

+IN the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think it's really fitting that our Synod happens in the context of a service of the Eucharist because, the meaning of "Eucharist" is to give thanks. And what better place to start than that?

First, I'd like to express my gratitude at not only one huge celebration at my Consecration but another just a few weeks ago at my Seating. Both services were beautiful, and very different from each other: one a Provincial service and the second a Diocesan – showing the liturgical and theological diversity of our church. And I loved them both. For those of you who were able to be in attendance, thank you for being there and sharing them with me.

And for all the arrangements for those services and just in the general run of things, I am more grateful than I can say for the support of the staff at Cathedral Place: in serving this diocese – and their bishop so well. There are simply too few words to express my appreciation – and I suspect yours too – for people who display such a constant and deep loyalty and offer service to our church. This is a time when we are all bringing our best creative thinking to the work we do and they consistently do that every day.

And in recognition of that diligence and dedication, I am delighted today to confer the title of Honorary Lay Canon of Christ's Church Cathedral on Ms. Jody Beck. Jody, as you know, has been a faithful servant of this diocese and has exercised a crucial ministry among us for many years as our Treasurer and Director of Finance. Thank you Canon Jody.

But the thanks do not end there!! Thank you to Canon Alison D'Atri, Dean Peter Wall, Canon Marni Nancekivell, Canon Terry DeForest, Canon Bill Mous, and Canon Christyn Perkons. My special thanks to all the staff who serve at Cathedral Place – many of whom are here today. But in particular I would like to acknowledge our Property Manager Derek Smith and his team. As you are aware, after Synod today and regular services tomorrow, Bishop Jo Fricker's funeral is on Monday. These are demanding days for the Cathedral Place team and we're grateful for their hard work.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and honour our outgoing Secretary of Synod: Marni Nancekivell.

Marni's dedication to ordained ministry in the Diocese of Niagara over the past thirty years is deeply appreciated. Her ministry responsibilities have been quite varied, from serving as parish priest to Director of Transitional Ministries, to Secretary of Synod and Director of Safe Church. She has made significant contributions over the years to the stewardship of our collective decision-making bodies of synod and synod council and various building and property-related projects. I am personally very grateful for Marni's gentle on-ramping of her new bishop. I have often called upon her experience and she will be missed. But I believe she has a plan for her retirement – it probably begins with a nap, I suspect. And we pray God's blessing on her as she makes that transition. So thank you Marni.

And of course, we welcome Canon Bill Mous as our new Secretary of Synod. Bill will commence these new duties at the end of December. Welcome Bill.

But most of all, I would like to thank all of you. Your welcome as I have made my way around the Diocese, and as I've attended important events has been so warm and so generous. Thank you for that. It has been a delight to meet you and to hear about your ministries. It has been humbling to receive your confidence and to carry your hope. May God continue to uphold us all in Niagara.

16 Thus says the LORD,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
17 who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
18 Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild animals will honor me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

We pick Isaiah up this morning in the 43rd chapter – one of the most beautiful and most quoted sections of the prophet because its message is full of comforting -- and challenging -- promises of redemption. In these verses, Isaiah reminds us that the God that walks with the people of Israel today is the same God of yesterday who caused the waters to part and allowed the people of Israel to go dry shod through the seabed. A miracle. A work of power. This is the same God that sent the plagues, that made Moses eloquent, that held off Pharaoh's forces so that the children of Israel could be safe – and could ultimately pass over into the promised land, this is the God who caused water to course forth in the desert and who caused manna to fall from the heavens to feed the children of Israel. These are mighty deeds. A glorious and storied past.

So it's interesting in the light of all that, that Isaiah, says next, "Forget the Former things – do not dwell on the past": that's amazing actually. Because their past was so illustrious; so impressive and so part of their identity.

But we must not forget that Isaiah was speaking to a people in Exile. A people who had been defeated and demoralized by invasion; whose former glory was in tatters, whose image was dented

and bruised -- and they were enslaved in a foreign land – a land that did not recognize their God and their status as a chosen people.

Isaiah says to them – they, who might have expected to have derived some comfort from their past – to live on it and to squeeze every drop of prestige and importance and confidence and energy from it - to what? To forget it – and not to dwell on it.

Actually, as one scholar says, “that there are two words in Hebrew for “forget.” One means to “cover up” the memory. The other is to completely “blot out” the memory. The one used in this passage means to “blot out.”

So, these words: “do not remember” don’t refer to the absence of memory but to freedom from memory. Now that’s interesting.

Well, this sounds like a baby out with the bath water statement. But it’s not really.

Do not get bogged down in your past would be a little closer to its meaning.

Now our pasts – our personal and our corporate pasts are important, because they speak to our identity, our foundations, the ground we grew from, the things that formed us for good or for ill.

However, when we allow our pasts to be determinative of our future, when they control our future, that’s when they become problematic. If we are so taken by how things used to be and can’t let go of that mirage, then we will miss whatever the new thing is that God is doing in our present.

Remember that old saying – called the 7 last words of the church:

We tried that but it didn’t work.” That. That’s called getting bogged down.

“See, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?”

And all that begs the question for us – who read these words by faith and in our own context thousands of years later, how do we hear them? Well, it makes me wonder about our own collective past – and makes me ask, what do we do with this glorious Anglican past of ours? Because it’s no secret that we are at a critical juncture in our church.

In fact, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has said that we are living in a time that is similar to the Reformation. A time when we are being asked to re-invent ourselves yet again – as we have done over and over again in our history. That’s kind of how the Reformation worked – it was indeed a re-formation of the church and of her leadership. So, it seems it’s time to tame the past and take the best of it forward into our future.

When we were thinking about a theme for this Synod, it seemed to me that it might be helpful for me to reflect on and hold up some of this work of Re-Formation or even better, the work of Re-Missioning that I was seeing around the diocese – because perhaps I was seeing it with fresh eyes.

So what have I seen that’s new? Well, in my short six months I’ve seen:

Tremendous creativity in our parishes - and the corollary - growth where there is creativity.

What do I mean by creativity? Well, lots of things. I mean creatively inhabiting what is best of our tradition and restoring meaning to our actions where we’ve perhaps taken meaning for granted. You see, we can’t take anything for granted anymore. In a post-Christian world, there is no common language or worldview so the things we used to take as read: for instance: stable church attendance

because you can't be formed if you're not there; or a culture of giving – as a response to God's work in our lives to name just two commonly known Christian disciplines, can no longer be assumed. I've seen an acknowledgement of this fact and a renewed commitment to a teaching ministry in our parishes so that we do what we do with integrity, and mindfully.

I have seen the creation of new opportunities for people to engage with Christian faith and practice and intentional spiritual formation like the excellent work that Canon Dawn Davis is doing through Revive. And through vibrant liturgy that makes the transmission and teaching of the faith its primary aim.

I have seen a creative intentionality in the active engagement of new constituencies – such as through our Mandarin Ministries. And also through the truth and reconciliation work that Archdeacon Val Kerr is doing while also connecting with Indigenous Peoples both locally and beyond.

I have seen the generous offering of our resources, our time, our skills to those who are living on the margins – often in unseen or unthought-of pockets of hardship – Gospel work such as our Migrant Farm Workers Ministry.

And I've seen the renewal of interest in upholding again the places where we have long supported those who live in poverty – like St. Matthew's House.

But that's just the beginning. "I am doing a new thing" has taken on deeper meaning as I've engaged some of the cultural changes that are underway. So what else have I seen?

I think I have seen an encouraging letting go of the programme mindset and the cultivation of a much more relational stance toward our communities. Because when we figure out that we can't -- and probably shouldn't -- do it all, it concentrates the mind rather on what we can be doing as church. Because it is as church that we will have the greatest impact in our culture.

Speaking of resources, another thing I've noticed, which is not on the positive side of the ledger as it were, is a narrative of scarcity. This is troubling for many reasons. Now, I get it. We all know the realities in our parishes. Fewer people, and fewer dollars with which to do ministry. But I am glad that the image on the screen is an organic one: of a green shoot, of the grapes of harvest. I'm glad because it speaks of the results of tilling the soil and planting and looking forward to the harvest. Because I'm convinced that one of the new things we are being asked to do is remember that if we plant – and do some watering – that God gives the growth!

So, in the coming year, as we seek to renew our culture of Stewardship: stewardship of relationships, as well as financial resources, we need to ask ourselves: "is the story we are telling ourselves in our parishes about scarcity and survival or are we speaking regularly about what God is growing in and through us? About what God is doing outside the walls of our buildings in our geographical parishes and how we can join that work?" Because one of those statements is connected to renewal and mission and carries the hope of new things -- and the other has an investment in a past that binds - that strives to maintain the status quo.

Here's another new thing: You have heard me say at both the Bishop's Company and at my Seating that we need to have a singular focus on the leadership (both lay and ordained) of the church in the future in the coming days. That's true and we'll hear something about the good work that is being done about that later in our agenda too when Ms. Cheryl Bergie and Canon Martha Tatarnic speak to us. But we also need a focus on supporting our present clergy in this time. So, to offer food for the journey, our clergy and licensed lay worker days and our annual conference for the foreseeable future – are being shaped with theologically and missionally driven content. These collegial times are provided for refreshment, and for spiritual and intellectual stimulation, and not least, for

fellowship – something that is a priority in times of change and transition so that we can support each other.

And we have made a change to the funding of the Clergy and Licenced Lay Workers Conference – it is now being fully funded instead of partially funded. This is part of our work of supporting and offering the possibility of learning new skills for a new time so that they can be passed along to the whole church. It also frees up professional development monies for additional in-service experience and education. Acquiring new skills for a new normal is an essential part of engaging in a process of adaptive change. We need to walk through this process together and we need resources to support each other. It is our collective responsibility to support our leadership in this way.

I am also seeing the nurturing of a culture of experimentation – what does this mean? It means simply that we are trying new things. Again, later in our agenda you'll have the chance to see a short video. In that film and in the days ahead I am and will be asking us all across the diocese to commit to participate in One Thing – one spiritual practice, or Christian education tool or missional action that will help renew and enliven our relationship with God. The idea is that we will begin to share stories, participate in workshops and take on spiritual practices and celebrate the God who has given us more than we can ask for or imagine. This will all begin in Epiphany. So, look out for the video – it'll be shown at the end of our lunch break today.

This is all part of the work of renewal and mission. And in that work, we are seeking best practices and contextualizing them for Niagara. There are a wealth of resources and processes out there in Churchland that have already been developed for every area of renewal. And we need to take advantage of the best, most apt fit for our own context. This will mean that we'll have to shed a little chauvinism and be willing to engage with the work of the wider church here in Canada, and in some cases in the UK and the US – and globally where applicable. The Communion is working very hard to produce resources for intentional discipleship and the gifts of the global church have much to teach us about ecclesiastical diversity and understanding. And we need not to be slow or reluctant in accepting those gifts of learning and understanding from elsewhere.

I think I am also beginning to see a general loosening of our love affair with bricks and mortar: The property we own as a Diocese is a strategic asset, it's true. But perhaps not in the ways we used to think about it. The fact is, churches have life cycles. They were and are planted according to key demographics, they have a beginning to their life, a middle and an end. The truth is, very few churches live for a century and fewer still live to see two – unless it is this venerable and beautiful cathedral that we are meeting in today. Parishes and church buildings are meant to spring up where the mission fields are. And when it is very clear that they have come to the end of their life cycle it is incumbent on us – the stewards of those resources – to redeploy those assets as needed for a new mission field - as intended by their founders: Christians who gave money to the church to be the church.

This is an important thing for us to understand. It is not good Christian practice for us to hold buildings hostage to our desires to hold on to worldly things. It is good Christian practice to make disciples and to preach the Gospel to the whole of creation. So, we are called to go where the mission field is. We will become a planting church once again. And what does that look like in this time? It looks like understanding the needs of new housing surveys; of underserved inner-city neighbourhoods; strategic small-town locations. These are some of the contexts that we are learning about and planning to engage.

And to better ascertain how best to deploy our precious building resources I have asked Mr. Terry Charters to lead a new committee that will work with our Secretary of Synod and Treasurer on our property portfolio to best and most strategically maintain, sell, re-purpose, rent or restore property based on the best analysis we have available of demographics. This will also include a focus on our continuing plans for the revitalization of Cathedral Place – on which he'll report later in the course of Synod. This group will also have the aim of searching for reliable community partnerships and for income generation plans to support sustainability but also to underwrite future mission and ministry in this diocese. This is the job of tilling the soil and planting seeds for the next season of our beloved church.

And to go with this new committee, I've also conferred on Terry the title of Honorary Lay Canon of Christ's Church Cathedral. We are greatly indebted to him for his many hours of specialized and valuable ministry among us and look forward to all that he has to share with us in the coming years. We'll have a service of installation for him and Canon Jody early in the New Year.

What else have I seen that's new?

A growing appreciation for the shared leadership of the Church – lay and ordained - with a renewed focus on the gifts of our incredibly talented people.

A willingness to partner in community with values-based organizations who in their ways are also attempting to build the kingdom.

A blessed and fruitful weariness with trying to keep up with the ecclesiastical Joneses – which has translated in to a gifts inventory and a reforming of ministry based on our strengths. That is to be greatly rejoiced in.

A tuned ear toward our communities – listening for what they need and how we, acting as the hands and face of Christ – can help.

A reinvention – as we have always responded to adversity – of who we are in, and for this world.

A return to first things – to Jesus, the Trinitarian God, Incarnational presence, core values and beliefs – in which is our eternal enduring strength.

All of this has led us to increasingly ask: “what is it we distinctively do and believe that makes that a special contribution to our geographical parishes?”

This question will be one that we ask over and again as we vision forward over the coming month. And speaking of Vision - We are carrying forward our Diocesan vision into its next iteration. All things have a life cycle and the Diocesan vision which has served us so well for the last ten years has been a catalyst – we are different as a diocese as a result. Thank you to our Vision Advocate, Canon Terry DeForest and to all the vision leaders and volunteers who have been responsible for animating our efforts in this regard.

Here's the thing: we are in a dynamic, even shape-shifting time. I won't promise you that everything we try will work. I can say from experience that it won't. But we'll learn together through the trying. And we'll be diligent with the harvesting of lessons as we go – and responsible with our resources.

We don't know what we'll be when all is said and done. It could be that a culture of experimentation and a “stable state” of constant change may be our new normal. And that could be exciting - I mean

once we've disentangled ourselves from the parts of our past that have bound us - that could be really exciting.

You see, the new wine skins are waiting. They're waiting for that wine.

But remember, it's still wine. It's still the faith of Abraham, Moses and Miriam, Rebekah, David, Elijah, the prophets, Jesus, Mary, Paul, Lydia and Priscilla. It is still the faith that has been handed on to us from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus. The wine is still wine. The Gospel is still the Gospel. But it has worn different clothes in every age. We're still trying stuff on for size in our age. But the Gospel is still the Gospel. Don't forget that. Don't be tempted to shortchange or water down or back off on the content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are all children of God by faith; faith in the Gospel of love that teaches us that we are neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, neither straight nor trans/gay or lesbian, etc, . . . for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Remember that.

The Gospel is not easy. It never was. And we are called to struggle with it – interpret it for our culture – live it for our communities and our people.

And I know that the God who will not let our foot be moved, the God who watches over us, the God from whom our help comes has got us and has got our beloved church. And us. God's got us in this work.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.