

THE FUTURE BEGINS NOW

An address to the 2006 AGM of the Anglican Church League (20th July 2006)

Peter G. Bolt

Tonight I address the AGM as a member of the ACL and the executive editor of the ACR (don't you love all these abbreviations!).

The ACL (Anglican Church League) and the ACR (Australian Church Record) both have a long history, stretching their roots back to the 1880s.¹ Throughout that history, ACL and ACR have worked together in the same cause. For the broad aim of both could be expressed quite simply: We seek to ensure that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be proclaimed in the future, and so we seek to have it securely passed on in the present. For the future begins now.

It is, of course, a truism to say that the future begins now. What we do now, in the time that we call 'today', will be one of the things that will help to shape the future.

We all know that we human beings are not perfect. We make mistakes. We have our blindness, our pride, and our countless other failings. We are weak. We are sinful. And so although we know that our actions in the present moment have a part to play in shaping the future, we also know that, as we shape the future, it will be 'for better and for worse'. We must therefore continually pray that God gives us the future that arises from his mercy, rather than a future arising from his judgement, that we or our land or denomination may well deserve.

¹ The ACL was founded about 1909, but with links to other associations with similar concerns back into the late 1880s. The ACR continued the work of *The Record*, founded in 1880. See further, D. Robinson, 'The Origins of the Anglican Church League' and 'The Church Record Limited and The Record', both soon to be published in a collection of Bishop Robinson's *Works*.

The fact that human beings so easily go astray, makes associations like the ACL and the ACR necessary. These two institutions inherited from our evangelical past continue to work together in the present, in order to ensure that the gospel will still be heard in the future.

Although we share a common history and a common goal for the future, the ACL and the ACR have different roles in this gospel endeavour. If I can put it simply, without being too simplistic, the ACR is about Persuasion, and the ACL is about Politics. We need to ensure that the future has plenty of preachers who continue to proclaim the apostolic gospel, and so all Christian people need to be persuaded about that gospel. That is what the ACR seeks to do, to help shape people's thinking and lives in a gospel-centred way, that is, evangelically.

But it is senseless to have preachers with no platform from which they can preach. And it is the role of the ACL, broadly speaking, to ensure that the Platforms we have in the various organizations in the Diocese of Sydney remain open to those who will faithfully continue to preach the apostolic gospel and evangelical truth, and that those same platforms remain closed to those who will not.² That is Politics.

Now, of course, both Persuasion and Politics need to be done Properly. There is Improper Persuasion, such as the mere use of slogans, or sarcasm, or ridicule, or empty rhetoric, or simply listing alternative opinions, or false dichotomies, etc etc etc. We all know Improper Persuasion, because it is all around us everyday in contemporary pragmatic, market-driven, consumer-oriented Australia.

² Mark Thompson, the current President of ACL, has recently described 'ACL's core business for nearly one hundred years' as being, 'promoting gospel-minded men and women for positions of responsibility within our diocese so that our diocese in turn continues to serve the gospel ministry of our churches'; 'A Moment of Enormous Challenge', *ACL News* (July 2006), p.1.

And, of course, we are all too aware that there is also Improper Politics. So, for example, what if someone joined the ACL, fully aware that they do not actually stand for what this organization stands for, but they join simply to white-wash it from within and to radically change the kind of things it stands for. That would be hugely unethical and such a person would be lacking in all kinds of personal integrity, let alone godliness. But if that happened, of course, it would be an example of Improper Politics.

Improper Persuasion and Improper Politics often go hand in hand, and they arise when people think and act like human beings, instead of thinking and acting like God (cf. Mark 8:33).

But, despite our human tendency towards what is improper, we also recognise that, by God's grace, there is also Proper Persuasion and Proper Politics. And, if we are to take the apostolic gospel, which we have inherited from the past, on into the future, then it is absolutely essential for us to engage in Proper Persuasion and Proper Politics in the present. For the future begins now.

In the rest of my address, I want to indicate three reasons why the future begins now; each with its own corresponding implication for understanding our own task in the present time. And then I will return to the AGM of the ACL.

1. The Future begins Now, because of the times we live in.

The Lord Jesus began his ministry with the words, 'The Time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1:15). From that moment, human history would no

longer be marked by merely Chronological time. No longer would human history be solely characterised by the simple patterns and rhythms that had gently rocked human beings to sleep for centuries: buying and selling; marrying and giving in marriage; working and sleeping; seedtime and harvest; being young and growing old.

With the arrival of the Messiah, it is time for the sleeper to wake up, and rise from the dead (Eph. 5:14)! Now human history is characterised by Apocalyptic Time, for it is sharply divided into BC and AD; into the time of promise, and the time of fulfilment; the time of mystery, and the time of manifestation; the time of darkness, and the time of glorious light; the time under the shadow of death, and the time illuminated by the appearance of life and immortality in the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10): the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Titus 3:5).

For what does the gospel tell us? That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; he gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And, because he was the obedient servant of the Lord who was willing to pour out his life so that many others could be justified before God (Isa. 53:11), the Father raised him up and gave him the name that is above every other name (cf. Phil. 2:5–11). And after he rose from the dead, he stood with his disciples and told them that they were to go into all the world, preaching to the nations the gospel of the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47); making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

Thus the apostolic mission was launched, and the apostles began to preach, to teach, to write, to persuade men and women to take hold of the grace of God in Jesus Christ; to receive the forgiveness he won for them on the cross, and to begin to truly live, for the first time in their lives!

The apostolic mission was conducted with a very clear view of the times in which we now live. In the very first Christian sermon, the apostle Peter explained that since the resurrection of Jesus, and his installation at the Right Hand of the Father as Lord and Christ, these are the last days (Acts 2). The apostles saw themselves as those 'upon whom the end of the ages had come' (1 Cor. 10:11). The time is short, for now the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29, 31). Towards the close of the New Testament, the apostle John can even say, 'Little Children, it is the last hour!' (1 John 2:18). Since the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the whole creation is now groaning forward, longing for the day in which the Sons of God will also rise from the dead and receive the redemption of their bodies (Rom. 8:18–23). The whole universe is now crying, 'Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus' (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20)

The future begins now, because of the times in which we live. In Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, the future has already invaded the present. These are the last days. And in these last days, it is the time for the apostolic mission. Forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to the nations.

2. The Future begins now, because people are all around us

Jesus once told his disciples, 'lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest' (John 4:35; cf. Matt. 9:37–38). When he said that, he was not displaying great powers of socio-cultural analysis. When he asked them to 'lift up your eyes and see' he was not asking them to check the statistics from the ABS and the latest National Church Life Survey reports. This is a theological analysis. The fields are white for harvest, because, at last, the Messiah has come to bring light to the world!

If we lift up our eyes and see, this means that every time a person stands in front of us, the future begins now. As they stand in front of us, we should see them from God's point of view and say: 'Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the time of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2). Whenever anyone stands in front of us, they represent an entire field that is white for harvest. They may be only one person, but behind them stands their friends, neighbours, relatives, workplace, sphere of influence, network, etc. And so they represent the future: where will the gospel take them? And as the gospel takes them there, where will they take the gospel? Whenever someone stands in front of you, therefore, it is a time for ministry.

And so, 'exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "Today", [...] "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:13 and 15). God has placed this person in front of us in the present time, so we might serve them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as we serve them with the gospel in the present moment, a whole new future for them begins to open up. And a whole new future for all those who belong to the harvest field in which they happen to be standing.

The future begins now, because people are all around us; and that means it is a time for ministry.

3. The Future begins now, because we have something to faithfully pass on

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he was urging his younger friend to keep on going for the gospel, despite the suffering that will inevitably come along. As part of his advice to Timothy, Paul urged: 'what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also' (2 Tim. 2:2).

This verse is about training.

At the present time, there is a lot of talk about Training in the Diocese. This is not a recent phenomenon. From the early days of the white settlement, Christian people have seen the need for the training of people to do the work of ministry. Moore College itself grew out of this vision to see young people trained in the principles of Protestantism — young people being defined as those aged between 16–23 years old according to Thomas Moore’s Will. Training is a good thing that we have always been interested in.

But if you listen to some of the buzz going around, the present focus on training may have generated a number of unfortunate side-effects. This is not surprising, since we so often think like human beings, rather than thinking like God. And so it is entirely probably that we will also think even about Christian ministry in worldly ways, rather than spiritual ways. And so, in pragmatic Australia, amongst this talk of training, many seem to think that Christian training is about picking up skills, or learning processes, or ways of doing things. People even talk now of ‘doing’ Church, and every year I hear our own graduates talking about ministry as if it is a ‘job’.

And what if you don’t have the relevant skills? Even though training should mobilize people for ministry, too great a focus on the need for training can become a strait-jacket; it can actually de-mobilize people. I was involved in a conversation where someone expressed some difficulty in praying. I was appalled to hear another in the group immediately respond, ‘Maybe we can have a training course on how to pray’. So much for the spontaneous heart-response which cries ‘Abba, Father’! It made me wonder, can we create an environment where everyone is frozen, because they feel skill-training is essential for every aspect of life, even turning your relationship with your heavenly Father into a technique that has to be learned!

In such a skill-seeking environment, a person's training becomes 'theirs', and so it reflects upon their own sense of identity and importance. In such a context, there can be more than a little source of pride, perhaps even arrogance, in saying, 'I have been trained'.

One step further down that road is to cease to see any need to learn from others: 'I don't need any more training; I know it all'. Now there is a successful training programme: It has created another God!

On the other side of that equation, those who do the training have also picked up their own kudos. For how can you train others, unless you have experience? And doesn't it take time to gain experience, so how could you trust anyone who is untrained to do anything? This kind of thinking leads to an overvaluing of experience, so that those without experience aren't trusted to hold a certain position, effectively excluding them from ever gaining the experience that they are said to require!

And if you are the trainer, then aren't your skills superior to those who are being trained? And if they are superior, then why should you step aside and let someone else do what you are doing – you may as well keep on going until you die. And so the greying of Sydney will continue.

Like any other sphere of life, our understanding of training needs to be derived, not from worldly human thinking, but from the Word of God.

What kind of training is Paul speaking of here? It is quite simple: "what you have heard from me [...] entrust!" Gospel training is not skill centred, or focused on technique, still less on any kind of market-driven razzamatazz, it is centred upon *content*. Listen to how Paul speaks elsewhere in this letter:

1:8 ¶ join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,

1:12 I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard the deposit he has entrusted to me.

1:13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching

1:14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you

2:8 ¶ Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel,

The apostles have received from God a gospel, a deposit, a pattern of sound teaching, a good deposit, a particular message about Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. And this deposit, pattern, gospel, must be suffered for, guarded, kept, and remembered.

This is not a recipe for innovation; for constantly seeking after what is new. In fact, to do so is to place yourself in danger and in the wrong company. ‘For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth ...’ (2 Tim. 4:3–4).

Notice that you cannot separate the apostle from the apostolic gospel. If you turn away from the truth (like Hymenaeus and Philetus, 2:17–18), then you will turn away from the apostle. But also, if you turn away from the apostle (like Phygelus and Hermogenes and all of Asia, 1:15), you remove yourself from under the apostolic mission that was launched by the Risen Christ. And so, you turn away from the truth that the apostle brings for the life and healing of the nations.

The task of Christian ministry is not to be an innovator, it is to faithfully pass on the apostolic gospel. The first step in this process, of course, is to be someone who listens to God’s Word and learns from hearing the voice of their master. We actually need to work hard at this, for the Bible says we are dull of hearing, blind of sight, dense of

mind, and hard of heart. If we don't understand a sermon, it is fairly usual in our circles for everyone to blame the preacher. 'Can't he learn better skills? Doesn't he understand the techniques of public speaking? What does he think he is doing in this job?' But that is not where the NT puts the responsibility: 'Anyone with ears to hear, let him hear'; 'My sheep hear my voice'; 'Today if you hear my voice do not harden your hearts.'

The apostles were commissioned by the risen Jesus to be his chosen witnesses. In these last days, they were sent to the nations with the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. They carefully passed that message on to others, such as Timothy, and instructed them to keep the ball moving. Thus ensuring that there will always be someone somewhere preserving, guarding, keeping, proclaiming the good deposit, which is the apostolic gospel. This is therefore what training should be all about. Firstly hearing this word: 'the things you have heard from me'; and secondly, passing it on, 'entrust to faithful men'. We have something precious to pass on, and so the future begins now. But the future task of ministry should be no different from the task which our evangelical forebears fulfilled. It should consist in more of the same.

The future begins now, because of the times in which we live. And so, it is the time of the apostolic mission.

The future begins now, because all kinds of people already stand in front of us. And so, it is the time for ministry.

And the future begins now, because we have something to faithfully pass on to others. And so, it is the time for more of the same.

Back to the editor of the ACR addressing the AGM of the ACL. It seems to me that this verse also provides the rationale for both the ACR's task of persuasion and the ACL's task of politics. 2Tim 2:2 is about teaching others – that is Persuasion. It is also about finding faithful people to keep the teaching going– it is about Politics. And, in fact, it puts both those things together. We don't just want one person, or one group of people, to teach, teach and teach again. But, at the same time that such teaching is going on, there needs to be a constant, frequent, steady, careful, passing on, not only of the deposit, but also of the responsibility for teaching it--, to others, then to others, then to more others. There must never be a log jam. There must never be the same tired old names appearing on all the platforms. There must never be the faces attached to those same tired old names looking tireder and tireder as they get older and older. Along with Persuasion must always go Politics, for along with teaching, we must find the next faithful person who will take the good deposit and guard it into the future. And the same principle can be applied to all the diocesan organizations. All of them ought to serve the apostolic mission in some way. All of them provide opportunities for ministry. And all of them ought to serve the preservation and passing on of the apostolic gospel.

And so to our AGM. The ACL now faces the next twelve months of the future. We have the opportunity to select people for various tasks. As we do so, remember that we are in the time of the apostolic mission; the time for apostolic ministry; and the time for guarding and proclaiming the apostolic gospel. It is still a time for

persuasion, and because we must find the faithful people who will guard the good deposit for tomorrow, it is still a time for politics...

(Dr. Peter Bolt is the Editor of *The Australian Church Record* and lectures in New Testament at Moore Theological College.)