

'THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH'
THE ACL SYNOD DINNER
Monday, 11 September, 2023

Introduction

After twelve and a half years in the parish of Northbridge, my final service as Rector was on Christmas morning at the end of last year. I cried for most of Christmas Day. And I cried on and off through the month of January. And though the shape of my grief has changed as time has gone on, it's nevertheless been my constant companion through all of this year. I suspect it will continue to be for some time. And that's because I absolutely loved being a pastor in the local church at Northbridge. It has always seemed to me to be a spectacular privilege to be set apart for service as a shepherd of Christ's flock. Of course, the work of leading a church is often hard, and stressful, and emotionally taxing. But it's also full of encouragement and joy, and even on the toughest days it remains an immense honour to serve the Lord Jesus in it. On many occasions through the course of this year people have asked me whether I miss pastoral ministry now that I work in a very different role. And the answer is always the same. You bet I do. I miss it terribly.

So if when you received your invitation to this dinner you found yourself thinking it was strange that the ACL would ask someone to speak on this topic who's turned his back on the local church, I hope I'll persuade you this evening that nothing could be further from the truth¹. In fact, when I was invited to speak about the importance of the local church my first reaction was that I couldn't think of anything I'd rather talk about.

And so I want to speak to the topic this evening under three headings. First, the importance of the local church in the purposes of God. Second, the importance of the local church in the life of the diocese. And then third, the importance of the local church in the life of every believer.

¹ In fact, I think my recent change of role has actually given me a unique perspective to share.

1) The Importance of the Local Church in the Purposes of God

So, to begin I want to talk about the importance of the local church in the purposes of God. And I'll draw here particularly on Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

- the fruit of his saving work

The first thing to say under this heading is that the church is the fruit of God's saving work. All of us were at one time dead in our sins and deserving of God's wrath. Yet in his loving mercy God sent the Lord Jesus to save us. But he didn't just rescue us in order that we might be individually right with God. Rather, his gift of grace is our adoption into his family². And so we are drawn not just into peace with God, but also peace with others³. God's purpose, according to Ephesians 2, is the creation of one new humanity in which every hostility, and especially the hostility between Jew and Gentile, is put to death by the cross⁴. And this new humanity, Paul says, is a 'household'⁵. And he likens it to a holy temple in the Lord⁶. Ephesians 2 climaxes this way: 'And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit'.

This is the end towards which the saving work of Christ is directed- the unification of all under Christ⁷, and, in particular the unification of his people in his house. This is why when Paul speaks of headship in chapter 5 he points husbands to the model of Christ who is 'the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour'⁸. You notice there that he's not simply the Saviour of individual believers but the Saviour of his

² Ephesians 2:1-10; and see also Ephesians 1:5

³ Ephesians 2:14-18

⁴ Ephesians 2:15-16

⁵ Ephesians 2:19

⁶ Ephesians 2:21

⁷ Ephesians 1:10

⁸ Ephesians 5:23

church. And his Lordship over all is for the benefit of his church. In chapter 1 of Ephesians Paul wrote that he is the 'head over everything for the church'⁹.

The church then is the fruit of God's saving work through Christ. And by virtue of being so, the church becomes a demonstration, 3:10, even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, of just how wise God is. This is God's eternal purpose in Christ¹⁰.

I don't expect anything I've just said to be controversial. And yet, curiously, in our time and place, people seem to often speak less about the church as the fruit of God's work and more about the church as the agent of God's work. That is, people in our circles often speak as if the local church has a primarily missional value. And the kind of input that seems to often come from church consultants has this flavour too. And I have to admit that this thinking troubles me. Of course, the gospel of Jesus which forms the church also vivifies the church and it propels the people of God¹¹ to be zealous for the work of his gospel in the world. And, of course, the local church proclaims the gospel and expects outsiders to come into her midst and to be exposed by the gospel and so fall down and worship God- 1 Corinthians 14¹². Yet in Paul's writings that prospect seems more incidental than purposeful. And I want to put it to you that the idea that the local church has a primarily missional purpose is an idea that's hard to find in the pages of the New Testament. And when we speak as if this is its purpose I worry that we confuse church and gospel. What I mean is that it's the gospel which is the

⁹ Ephesians 1:22

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:11. Note that the word 'purpose' is also used significantly by Paul in 1:9 and 1:11. The use of the word in the NIV in 2:15 is not, however, in the Greek text.

¹¹ I note that Donald Robinson saw an important distinction in the New Testament between the 'church' and the 'people of God'. See Chase Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox: Exposition, Analysis, and Theological Evaluation*, p.64, pp.80-81. Robinson argues that the church has 'no face to the world' (p.85), and that its members operate in the world as a 'dispersion' (p.87). Yet he sees a role for the church in evangelistic mission that encompasses prayer, the call of missionaries into service, and fellowship through financial support (p.89). See also Kuhn's analysis/critique of Robinson in this area of his thought- especially on pp.95-96, p.103, and p.124.

¹² 1 Corinthians 14:25

primary agent of God's mission in the world and not the local church¹³. And I worry too that when we think and speak like this we become foggy in our thinking about church- in ways that might have a number of unhelpful implications. Because church is not merely a means to an end, but a glorious end itself.

I don't have time to flesh this out further now. But I'd love to encourage us to think more on this. A great way to do so would be to engage thoughtfully with the work of former Archbishop Donald Robinson. And there's no better way to do that than to read Chase Kuhn's superb book called 'The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox'- a book I think should be required reading for all Sydney clergy. But whether or not you accept my little theological challenge here, my main point, I trust, is clear and uncontroversial. The local church is the fruit of God's saving work.

- an earthly manifestation of a heavenly reality

But because it is, we also need to say that the local church is an earthly manifestation of a heavenly reality- a heavenly reality which is both future and present. Listen again to Paul in Ephesians 2: 'And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.'¹⁴ So, in the coming ages the members of the heavenly church will taste even more of God's grace. And this is our future hope to which the indwelling Spirit points¹⁵. But this is also our blessing right now, because of our union with Christ. We have been raised with Christ and are seated in the heavenly realms in him. A present reality. In Christ, we've come to the heavenly Jerusalem¹⁶. We're there.

¹³ I have discovered that Donald Robinson himself made precisely this point in his essay 'The Diocese of Sydney and its Purpose' (in *Donald Robinson Selected Works- Volume 1: Assembling God's People-* p.315).

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:6-7

¹⁵ See Ephesians 1:14

¹⁶ See Hebrews 12:22-24. The author of Hebrews also refers to this as 'the assembly of angels, the church of the firstborn'

So, the local churches of which we're a part are visible manifestations of that invisible heavenly reality. And this is to speak of a wonderfully profound double truth- that as we meet physically week by week Christ is spiritually present with us where we are and at the same time we are present spiritually where Christ is¹⁷.

- a provision for the sustenance of his people

But the other thing to say under this heading is that in the purposes of God the local church is not only profound but practical. It is not only a signpost to the wisdom of God and to the heavenly gathering that all God's people enjoy. It's also God's provision for the sustenance of his people. The church in heaven is singular and continuous. The churches on earth take many forms and only gather intermittently¹⁸. And yet in every place where the Lord's people do gather, the risen Jesus empowers them to serve one another in love, as his word works within them. So, by our propinquity¹⁹- our nearness to one another - we comfort, encourage, teach, and correct each other for our maturing in the likeness of Jesus²⁰. This too is the manifold wisdom of God. For not only is the church an earthly expression of the eternal unification of all the saints under Christ. But it is also the chief locus of his sanctifying work in his people- the arena in which we taste his love in the love of others, and in which we bless others just as we have been blessed. May God be praised!

¹⁷ As per D.B. Knox- See Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.153

¹⁸ D. Robinson- see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.67. I am using this language at this point slightly differently from how Robinson did (at least in his earlier writings). I am not persuaded that the church only exists when it is gathered. So my point is not that there is only an intermittent church, but that it only *gathers* intermittently. Yet this is still to underline something that distinguishes the earthly church from the heavenly one.

¹⁹ D.B. Knox, see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.176 (fn. 127)

²⁰ This is why in Ephesians 3 Paul speaks of us grasping the dimensions of Christ's love 'together with all the Lord's holy people'. This is why in Ephesians 4 Paul speaks of us using the gifts given by the ascended Jesus, speaking the truth in love, and so building each other up into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. This is why in Ephesians 4 and 5 Paul speaks of us using our words to benefit those who listen, getting rid of bitterness, rage and anger, being kind, compassionate, and forgiving, living as children of the light, and seeing the Spirit's work in us overflow in song and heart-music that gives thanks to God for everything. And this is also why in Ephesians 6 Paul speaks of the need for alertness in the face of spiritual danger, an alertness that means we always keep on praying 'for all the Lord's people'.

2) The Importance of the Local Church in the Life of the Diocese

That's the importance of the local church in the purposes of God. But secondly tonight I want to speak of the importance of the local church in the life of the diocese. Because it's vital that we have a clear understanding of what the diocese is in relation to the local churches that are a part of it²¹.

And in the first place we should acknowledge that the diocese is not itself a local church, but a fellowship of local churches²². The fellowship that exists between churches, of course, flows out of our common fellowship with Christ²³. In a sense, we're all united to Christ and thereby united to each other. And yet the language of "unity" in the New Testament is primarily reserved for the oneness experienced in the local congregation²⁴. And it's the language of fellowship that the Bible usually uses when it speaks of the relationships between different churches²⁵.

In the New Testament this fellowship is characterised chiefly by generosity. And this generosity is expressed in prayer for other

²¹ Bruce Ballantine-Jones says the following in *Inside Sydney: An Insider's view of the changes and politics in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, 1966-2013*, p.268: 'What this examination shows is that apart from looking after parishes, there has never been a clear and consistent idea about what the purpose of the Diocese should be, nor how those in charge of the central administration should use their instruments of power to accomplish whatever it was thought they should do. This lack of clarity often led to decisions being made on intuitive or political grounds.'

²² At this point I note that Donald Robinson's earlier writings seemed to suggest that the Diocese is not a 'church' at all. Yet, in a paper written for the Finance Committee of the Diocesan Standing Committee in 1990 he articulated a more "developed" view which saw the Diocese as 'the church of God which is at' Sydney. In this essay he seems to lean heavily on the use of the word 'ekklesia' in Acts 9:31 and 1 Corinthians 10:32. Yet he also acknowledges that our Diocese has developed such that it can no longer assemble in one place ('as did primitive churches') and the locus of the regular functioning 'as the church' has 'moved' (a strange word, I would have thought!) to the individual congregations in parishes. See the essay 'The Diocese of Sydney and its Purpose' (in *Donald Robinson Selected Works- Volume 1: Assembling God's People-* pp.312-317).

²³ D.B. Knox, see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.157

²⁴ And to the one heavenly church as well. Though obviously there are exceptions (eg. John 17)

²⁵ See Acts 2:42 (though this could perhaps be read as a reference to a "local church"), Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 1:7, 2 Corinthians 8:4, 2 Corinthians 9:13, Galatians 2:9, Philippians 1:5, Hebrews 13:16, 1 John 1:3, 1 John 1:7. This is contra D B Knox who says that the local church is essentially 'fellowship' (see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.166). I am more aligned at this point with D Robinson who thought the 'unity' language was inappropriately used in relation to the relationship between Christians of different churches (see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of...*, p.37, pp.76-77).

Christians and churches, in financial provision for one another, in the sharing of leaders, and occasionally in leaders meeting together²⁶. This is the New Testament's vision for generous fellowship in the mission of God.

Of course, in our day this kind of fellowship exists between Christians of various denominations and in a whole range of parachurch settings. And yet a diocese like ours can rightly be seen as one expression of this kind of Biblical fellowship. Put simply, the diocese is a vehicle for 'cooperation between local churches' and it includes 'the organisations that facilitate that cooperation'²⁷. But the distinction between the diocese and the churches remains important.

As we've seen, the local church is, wonderfully, a manifestation of our eternal future in Christ. Whereas a diocese or denomination, like any other parachurch ministry, is simply a good way for us to operate as we collaborate in mission²⁸. If our heavenly future is characterised by perfect unity and perfect fellowship, a diocese is an innovation designed to serve those who for now do not experience the perfection we wait for, but who are separated by distance, and difference, and even disagreement. The diocese is inter-church fellowship while we wait for the Lord Jesus to bring an end to our divergence and to replace it with nearness and oneness of mind. In this sense a diocese is always going to be a kind of retrieval ethic. It expresses the desire to retrieve as much good as possible from a situation which will always be marked by the limitations and brokenness of life in this world.

²⁶ Mikey Lynch's summary of inter-church cooperation (with New Testament references) is very helpful at this point. See *The Vine Movement: Supporting Gospel Growth Beyond Your Church*, p.88. It's important to also note that the New Testament also speaks, significantly, of Christians/churches experiencing 'fellowship in suffering'.

²⁷ See Lynch, *The Vine Movement...*, p.85.

²⁸ I accept that it could be argued that a diocese is a 'church' in the sense that Acts 9:31 and 1 Corinthians 10:32. But this is, at best, a secondary way in which the New Testament uses the 'ekklesia' word group, and, in any case, would represent a use of the word that is largely foreign to most people today, and therefore potentially confusing.

Another way of looking at this is to say that the local church is God-ordained and it entails God-ordained responsibilities for its members, and for its leaders. A diocese, on the other hand, at least as we experience it, is not ordained by God since it is not envisaged by the New Testament writers, and so its responsibilities are determined simply by godly wisdom²⁹. That is to say, for example, that the role of bishops, at least as we understand them, is not able to be *discerned* from the pages of the Scriptures³⁰ but rather should be *determined*- by us according to our needs³¹ and with regard for our Anglican formularies and history³². It's also to say that the key function of those in diocesan leadership is the service of the churches which are at the heart of the fellowship. So in my own case, I don't say to people that I've moved from a role serving the local church into a role where I'm now serving the denomination. Rather, I say that I've moved from a role serving the local church to a role serving the local churches. The change of role does not constitute a difference in the object of my service, but in the number- from singular to plural.

Of course, in our particular diocese at this point in history, our fellowship also includes organisations and schools with whom we work to make disciples for Jesus. They're not churches. And so, like the diocese, these organisations and schools are not God-ordained, though they are, by

²⁹ See the discussion in Lynch, *The Vine Movement...*, pp.164-169.

³⁰ I think this assertion is supported by the work of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission in their report entitled *An Evangelical Episcopate: Purpose and Nature of Episcopal Leadership* (August 2018).

³¹ This is in distinction to those who are elders (the original "episkopoi") in local churches whose responsibilities *are* the subject of divine revelation.

³² It's interesting to note here that the Anglican Ordinal articulates the threefold order of ministry (bishops, priests, deacons) very carefully: "It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy Scriptures and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministry in Christ's Church...". Surely "from the Apostles' time" is a brilliant turn of phrase. It does not say "from the Apostles' teaching" but rather "from the Apostles' time". That is, the earliest known bishops (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp) were alive during the time of the Apostles (e.g. John). So the Ordinal does not say "the threefold order is precisely there in the New Testament" but it does say "the threefold order is compatible with the New Testament and has been in practice since the Apostles time". [I owe this observation, with gratitude, to Dr Mark Earney]

virtue of history and providence, a gift from God in our gospel collaboration³³.

What I'm saying is that the diocesan fellowship of which we are a part is a good thing. It's a wise way for us to organise ourselves in the last days. And it's an endeavour filled with promise and possibility as we seek to see the gospel grow together. Indeed, the New Testament invites us to creativity and imagination as we think about how this kind of fellowship might flourish between us- with a generosity that really does cause the gospel to grow. But the diocese will always be at its core the wisdom of people in service of the churches- which are the wisdom of God.

This has all sorts of implications. It means we understand our Synod to be an expression of our fellowship within the Diocese, and the resolutions of the Synod as the decisions of the churches taken together- for the benefit of the churches and the schools and organisations with whom we relate. And this reality is reflected in the membership of our Synod as well. Those who make decisions for the benefit of our fellowship are chiefly those drawn from the churches.

It also means that the way we think about the role of diocesan leaders, and professional services, and policies and procedures will always entail a careful balance of both empowerment and restraint³⁴. That is, our Synod should look to empower those who've been entrusted with the responsibility to facilitate cooperation. But at the same time we should exercise a cautious restraint that means we don't invest in these people and structures the kind of power that will overwhelm the freedom of the churches to chart a course for ministry at the local level. And in this particular forum I should say that this is exactly the responsibility every Synod member must exercise- to consider in what way we are getting that balance between empowerment and restraint right, for the good of God's churches and for the glory of God's son.

³³ This is a reality that's easy to take for granted but which is, in fact, a rare gift of God- one to be recognised, received (with humble thanks), and then resourced.

³⁴ I owe this vocabulary to Mikey Lynch. See *The Vine Movement...*, p.95.

3) The Importance of the Local Church in the Life of Every Believer

And so thirdly, and finally, I come to the importance of the local church in the life of every believer. And here I want to simply spell out the implications of what we've already seen tonight, the implications of what God's word says to us.

It is of course a gift of God to belong a diocese which honours the Lordship of Christ in the truth of his word, which seeks to preserve the gospel for future generations, and which seeks the fruitfulness of the gospel in this generation. It's a great gift. But is it not an even greater gift to belong to a local church where the deep riches of God's wisdom and grace are seen and experienced like nowhere else? God in his golden providence has given us a diocese like ours for our good. But it seems to me that he has made the church family to which each of us belong, not just good, but essential to life.

The local church- where God's people benefit from the gift of the Spirit in the life of others and not just their own. Where we hear the truth of God spoken by others in words we would not have chosen ourselves. Where we encounter people so different to us that we learn what it really means to embrace like God embraces. Where we taste Christ's love in bread and wine, in the same moment as those who taste it with us. Where the word of God is not just discussed but preached so that at least once each week we listen with the humble silence of those who hear their Father's voice.

The local church- where we confess our sins in the company of fellow-sinners and so learn that we are not alone in our failures, nor in our forgiveness. Where we pray together for those things we often fail to pray for on our own, and where we intercede for others and they for us, even in those moments where we're lost for words. Where we find older

saints who've walked our road before us, and younger saints who remind us of how wide our eyes were when we first believed.

The local church- where we laugh with others in their delight, and mourn with others in their grief; and where we find the precious comfort of others rejoicing and weeping with us. Where we find brothers and sisters, familial affection, even amongst those we barely know. Where we come into conflict with each other and learn forbearance, repentance and reconciliation, by which the Lord refines us. Where we are rebuked in love for our maturing. Where we are helped to endure by the words and kindness of others in the midst of our darkest trials.

The local church- where people find salvation, truth, hope, joy. The local church- where the word of Christ dwells richly. The local church- where people who would never rub shoulders but for the precious mercy of Jesus, learn to love each other deeply from the heart; and where that love covers over a multitude of sins. The local church- where God himself dwells with his people. The local church- both painful and sweet, at once turbulent and a place of peace, simultaneously full of brokenness and a stunning foretaste of what's to come. The local church- precisely because it is the very wisdom of God, not only good but utterly beautiful.

Conclusion

I said before that when people have asked me this year whether I miss pastoral ministry, the answer is always "I do". I miss it terribly. But what I usually add is that it's not so much the work of pastoral ministry I miss. It's not so much the role I had and it's blessings. What I really miss are the Lord's people- the precious brothers and sisters who were for so long my family in the Lord, those who were as much a gift to me as I ever was to them.

So I say to you, my sisters and brothers here tonight- this is the importance of the local church. So much so that "important" doesn't feel like quite the right word. This is the glory of the local church. The astounding beauty of the local church. The wisdom of God.

'... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.'³⁵

³⁵ Ephesians 3:20