



THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

**Delivered by the Right Reverend Derek L
Eaton
QSM, MA, Dip Theol,
to the First Session of the Fifty-second
Synod
of the Diocese of Nelson**

**This address is in two parts.
Part One, the Synod Sermon,
Given at Christ Church Cathedral on
Thursday evening the 3rd October, 2002
and
Part Two at Nelson College for Girls on
Friday 4th October, 2002.**

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS (Part 1)

THE SYNOD SERMON

(Thursday evening – 3rd October, 2002)
Christ Church Cathedral

Looking to the future – a generation for Jesus

(Let's fight for our kids!)

Lord, take my lips and speak through them
Take our minds and think through them
Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you
and for your Son Jesus Christ our Lord – Amen.

As we gather this evening in our Cathedral we are family, with each local church or parish in the diocese represented. This Eucharist is an appropriate way to commence our Synod —it signals the most important aspects of our corporate life, it puts the Lord of the Church, our Saviour and our God, right at the centre of our deliberations. We celebrate together His death and resurrection – the very touchstone, the very basis of all that we are and do. I trust that each of us is convinced of that fact.

“Eucharist” means thanksgiving. So we gather over these Synod days to give thanks for the past and for the present, and we look forward to the future with anticipation.

So this service should be the high point of our Synod – coming together and celebrating the Lord's presence in our midst. For some, this occasion may be too formal and for others there may not be enough formality. But I beg you to forget the incidentals and worship Him and seek His face and His will for these days and for the future.

THE MISSING GENERATION

The theme of our Synod is “Looking to the future” with special emphasis on the younger generation, specifically those forty and under.

Arguably that is where the future lies and if we are going to impact our communities, our nation, our world, let alone survive as a church, we are going to have to take a realistic look at where we stand today and what we can do to capture a missing generation for Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow morning I have invited a group of ordained people all in that age group to share something of what they are doing – their passions – and where they think the Church needs to be heading.

All of them I suspect will be younger than the average age of this Synod. They, along with many of their peers, will be the flag carriers – not only of today – for some are already leaders – but of tomorrow. The future, in a sense, is theirs. The responsibility of reaching this generation for Jesus Christ is primarily theirs. We need to listen to them and to support them.

“A generation for Jesus”. This evening I want to come at this in a slightly unusual way – by going back to our reading from Nehemiah and giving you some background to that passage.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

In the year 587 BC the Babylonian Army invaded the ancient Kingdom of Judah and sacked the city of Jerusalem. Most of the adults were killed, many of the women being abused and raped beforehand.

The mighty and glorious Temple of Solomon, built four centuries earlier, was demolished. The surrounding territory was pillaged – the invaders sowing salt into the fields so that they wouldn’t produce again.

The following year the Babylonians began carrying off into slavery the young adults and the children who had survived – the girls to become concubines and domestics and the boys to be trained as servants and warriors. A few of them, the brightest and the best, were educated for positions of leadership in the expanding Babylonian Empire. The prophet Daniel was one such young man.

The small number who were left behind in Jerusalem and Judah, in what had been their homeland, were forced to attend the occupying military command. For the most part their lot was the worst of all. They were conquered slaves in their own country – left to eke out a meagre kind of livelihood on a devastated land only to have their efforts subject to seizure and severe taxation. Forced to pay tribute to pagan oppressors, they were denied religious freedom, economic security and any of the dignity and glory that had been theirs as Yahweh’s chosen people – you can imagine their turmoil and depression.

This went on for a generation, and then as had been prophesied by Jeremiah some of the exiles – for the most part their children and grandchildren – began returning home from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The Babylonian captivity lasted about seventy years. Those who returned began immediately the task of rebuilding the temple. By now the Persian Empire had risen to its full ascendancy. Cyrus the Great had conquered Babylonia.

Cyrus was a tyrant but largely benevolent towards the Jews. He permitted them to go back home but never again would they know the glory, the splendour, the power, and the wealth of ancient Israel. They were a defeated, subject, captive people and the exiles who returned to Palestine had to endure the military authority of one occupying empire after another, along with abuse and ridicule.

Of course, as you know, the majority of Jews who survived were scattered among the nations as a result of both the Babylonian and prior to that - the Assyrian conquests.

Some of them were assimilated, but most retained their Jewish identity as servants and slaves with a hunger for freedom, like that of any oppressed people anywhere in the world at any time. The cry “next year in Jerusalem” began to be a refrain heard amongst Jewish people around the then known world.

Back in Jerusalem conditions were very severe. Another seventy years comes and goes and then one-day word comes to Susa, the winter residence of the Persian Kings, from a Jewish traveller named Hananiah concerning the desperate situation back in Jerusalem. He says, “Survivors there in the Province (that is in Jerusalem) who had escaped captivity and exile are in great trouble and shame And the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” (Neh.1:2-3)

These were the two great symbols of ancient Israel and Judah - the Temple itself and the wall around the city of Jerusalem. The one signified that God was in the midst of His people, and the other, they felt, protected them against attack from the outside – against invasion and compromise. Both the temple and the wall, as I’m sure you know, had great symbolic significance for God’s chosen people.

The Temple had now been rebuilt and there was the sense in which the Lord was in the midst of His people, even under those very difficult circumstances. But the wall was in ruins - there was no protection.

Spiritually, economically, politically, culturally, socially and sexually, the people of God felt that they had been turned into mere chattels, violated by any other nation that wished to trample its way through their land and their once holy city.

Well – all that by way of background – that’s where the Book of Nehemiah begins. He says, “When I heard the words of Hananiah I sat down and I wept and I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

Although Nehemiah was only a young person and a cup bearer (a waiter on tables if you will) to the King of Persia, he had vision. He asks God for the privilege of personally overseeing the rebuilding of the wall of the city of Jerusalem, and God grants his request.

It’s a tremendous story and with that much background you can read the book of Nehemiah and it will make sense even if you are not familiar with it

Our first reading this evening recounted the immediate opposition that came against Nehemiah and his team of builders as soon as they began their work. It also tells of Nehemiah’s response to it. He says, “I stationed people according to their families with their swords, their spears and their bows and I said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes. (4:15)

And the next paragraph, if we had read further, would tell us that the builders each laboured on the work with one hand and with the other held a sword.

It's an interesting image. Doing the work of rebuilding the wall with one hand and ready with a sword in the other – to fight if need be.

THE CHALLENGE FOR TODAY

My sisters and brothers – I ask you to open your eyes and take a look around at the society in which we live and the Church of Jesus Christ in the midst of that society. And as you do so, will you pay particular attention to what's happening to the young people, the children and the young adults, the generation that is largely missing in our churches?

STARTLING FACTS

- Do you realize that in any week in New Zealand, three young people will take their own life by suicide? We have the highest suicide rate among young people of any developed country in the world (OECD) and of course the number of attempted suicides are far greater.
- New Zealand has the second highest teen pregnancy rate in the developed world
- 22.5 young adults and teens get abortions per day – that is almost one every hour of the day and night.
- If our percentages are anything like those in the US, who we always seem to follow, then every hour:
 - 1 ½ children will run away from home.
 - 7 ½ children will be victims of broken homes
 - 6 children will be beaten, molested or otherwise abused by one or both of their own parents and
 - 18 will take some kind of narcotic drug.

I think it was in a recent issue of the Listener that I read that in a 1950's survey of high school teachers they identified the major problems in schools as:

- Chewing gum
- Talking in class
- Running in corridors
- Disobeying instructions
- Not putting rubbish in the wastepaper baskets.

A similar survey was done in the mid 1990's. The major problems were identified as:

- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Teen pregnancies
- Suicide
- Rape
- Robbery
- Bullying
- Assault
- Arson

May I submit to you that the walls of our society are in terrible disrepair and obviously that fact affects everybody? But I submit to you that the principle victims are the children and young people. Are we in some way failing them?

While it would be simplistic in the extreme to think that youth ministry – even in the broadest and fullest sense of that term – by itself – would be sufficient to deal with a social problem of that complexity and magnitude and one that pervasive – it would be equally simplistic to suppose that it couldn't be a strong foundation upon which to begin building.

This diocese has for years identified one of its main priorities as ministry to young people and as our synod approached it seemed good to hold that priority up once again. Every year in my president's address, we have highlighted this important facet of the Church's life.

BECOMING CHURCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Far from being peripheral to the Church's concern, children and youth ministry is absolutely essential for helping the Church realise and fulfil its mission to the community and to the real world out there. In this light, you could say that young people's ministry means becoming Church, with young people. It means focussing many of our ministries and resources upon this unique stage of life (with its distinct tasks and social context) and actively engaging young people as disciples in the mission of Jesus Christ and His Church.

Once again I want to call ourselves (this diocese) to a renewed commitment to the younger generations. Offering the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only hope in a world gone mad. Presenting Him so attractively and positively that a counter culture of allegiance to Him will rise up among them. Discipling our kids and young adults so that they can help rebuild the walls of society in spite of the fierce opposition of secularism which offers so little hope.

Some of you may be aware of the extensive research (Dr Paul Thoms) that supports the following startling conclusions.

Nineteen out of every twenty people who ever become Christians do so before they reach the age of 25 – which means that if we don't reach them while they are children, teens or young adults – if we don't reach them by age 25, we are probably not going to reach them at all.

One person out of twenty becomes a Christian after the age of 25 and yet it's on those who are over 25 that we spend more than 90% of the Church's resources, time, effort and ministry. Isn't there something, somehow wrong about that?

By and large, we have lost our teenagers and young adults. The Anglican Church is gentrifying. Our median age is getting older and older, every year there are fewer and fewer young people. We may keep some of them until they are eleven or twelve and then they're gone. If we lose our young people – our kids (the ones we already have), let alone anybody else's that would be a tragic failure.

It may well be the worst failure of the Church. Worst of all because the children God entrusts to us are our primary responsibility. Listen to what God has to say. "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart and you shall teach

them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise again". (Deut. 6:7).

Worst of all, because the children should be our easiest mission field. Why? Because God has promised "train up a child in the way that he or she should go and when they are old they won't depart from it". (Proverbs 22:6)

Yes there may be some slippage. And yes, some will return to the Way. But too many, far too many – tragically too many – are gone. Worst of all, because if we fail to pass on to our young people what has been entrusted to us – we will have broken faith with all those who kept the Faith from one generation to another.

So this is not a new word I am bringing to Synod tonight – it's a very familiar word. It's a word, I think, we have endeavoured to honour – we have had large winter camps of teenagers. (Greg and Netta Latham have been working with our young people for the past six years. They leave this valuable ministry at the end of this year). We must build on the efforts of by-gone years.

Another encouragement is that in a decade we have gone from having the oldest average aged clergy of any diocese in New Zealand to having one of the youngest. This year I have had conversations with several young people of high school age, enquiring about ordained ministry – there is hope. But our synods, our vestries and committees that generally do the deciding are usually bereft of young people.

Are we listening to the younger generation today – those under 40? They could probably tell us why they are absent so often from our worship services.

Admittedly we lose lots of young people to the main centres where we find the universities and tertiary institutions located, but let's not forget that there are something like 8000 students attending Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology. There are also those in the Greymouth Polytech to say nothing of the students in our primary and high schools.

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT

I believe we need to hold this up again and renew our commitment. Turning that commitment into dollars, prayer, people and initiatives to reach a generation for Jesus.

Paul gives a charge to the young Timothy in his second letter. He says, "That which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust the same to faithful people who shall be able to teach others also". One generation to another – Paul to Timothy to faithful people, to others and to others and to others and to you and to me – we're part of that chain. And it's now our turn – our responsibility is to pass it on to the next generation.

In addition to that series of transfers of one to the next did you hear the apostle saying in tonight's Epistle reading, "I'm sure that what was first in your grandmother Lois, and then in your mother Eunice, is also in you"? There's another line of influence in Timothy's life – Lois to Eunice to Timothy. One generation to another. The goal of each one is that the next one following, will know Jesus.

When Nehemiah heard that the wall of Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people were in great trouble and shame, he did not say, “I’m only a cupbearer – what can I do about that?” He didn’t say, “I’m just one insignificant person – what can I do about that?” He prayed.

We are told that he confessed his own sin and that of his forebears. Then he cried out, “Lord, what can I do?” Can you see the difference? Not, “What can I do about all this?” But, “What can I do?”

And God gave him grace and favour with the King, with financial resources, with organisational ability and the courage to overcome external opposition and internal fear and apathy on the part of the people themselves. He said in effect – “It’s time to rebuild and fight for our kids – our young people”.

Listen again to these words we read. (Nehemiah 4:14) “Do not be afraid Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your kin, fight for your sons and your daughters

One hand on the trowel and one hand on the sword and in 52 days they completed the task.

We can do it. We must do it for the sake of our children – for the missing generation – for the future of the Church. Will you fight for our young people?

I am very excited about the future. It may not be a comfortable one for some of us. Will you stand with our young people – the younger generation as they help to rebuild the broken walls of society?

The future is theirs. They deserve all the support we can give them.