



2016: Synod Sermon and Charge

In the charge to Synod last year, one of the goals I put forward was the hope that *'Synod would morph into an annual celebration of what God is doing across the Diocese rather than a three day business meeting. It will become more and more a time of inspiration – giving power to an Anglican movement rather than maintaining the institution.'*

As a response to this, one of the changes that we are bringing to this Synod is combining the charge within this sermon.

As a preamble I want to reaffirm the challenges laid out in my charge last year – which were given out with the service sheet. They will be the focal point for the remaining years of my episcopacy. Instead tonight I want to focus on where we find ourselves spiritually as individuals, as parishes, as a Diocese within the great whirlpool that is Western Christianity – and use the Gospel reading to suggest a way that we, as a Diocese, affirm the centrality of Jesus in all that we do.

Have you ever had a crisis of faith?

I experienced one just over a month ago in New York.

Hilary and I had decided we would take the opportunity to visit our daughter who lives and works in Washington DC.

Katie was thrilled we were going to be spending three weeks with her – getting to see her new apartment and meet some of her friends.

She also decided that while Mum and Dad were there she'd take us across to New York for a weekend and book tickets for a Broadway Musical.

We arrived in New York late on Thursday night by train and found our way to the apartment very close to the Empire State Building that a friend had given us for the weekend.

Saturday morning we went to ground zero – the powerful memorial to the events of 9/11 on the site of the twin towers.

Then that evening off to see the show we had chosen to go to - a show that has been playing to packed houses in both Broadway and the West End and next year is coming to Australia. It has won nine Tony awards and one Grammy award and has received rave reviews.

I knew that I would probably be challenged by the show – but I wasn't prepared at the extent of the challenge. The second big chorus number (I can't use the language here, but I think you'll fill in the gaps) was called 'F*** you God!' A baptism scene that began in a very tender way was suggestively sexualised – in fact the whole show was very highly sexualised. I'm not sure whether the show is usually like this or whether it was ramped up because the weekend we were there coincided with the end of Gay Pride week.

However, to the audience, who gave it an enthusiastic standing ovation, it was brilliant entertainment. They loved it!

Although there *was* certainly some justification for the parody, Hilary and I left the theatre feeling that everything we have given our lives for had been dragged into the gutter – it was quite an intense feeling of loneliness.

It was close to midnight as we walked back to the apartment.

New York is called the city that never sleeps, and Time Square is the epitome of it – a mass of humanity (the huge majority thirty or forty years younger than us) bathing in the lights from the hundreds of moving screens that cover the facades of the buildings.

Many of the younger folk were quite intoxicated. It's really hard seeing some of the beautiful young women having difficulty standing, and young men of all nationalities roaming the packed streets in groups singing at the tops of their voices. In one corner a solitary character stood silently holding a cardboard sign that said, 'Repent and be saved!' It was just an ordinary Saturday night in one of the pleasure capitals of the world.

When I woke the next morning I made a cuppa and put my headphones on to listen to one of the Christian Music stations I had loaded onto Pandora.

The song that was being played had the refrain, (sung over and over) 'Jesus you are making all things new' – Jesus you are making all things new.

And at that moment I felt a deep sense of despair. This was my moment of crisis.

'Jesus you are making all things new?' Yeah right!

I believe totally and completely in the sovereignty of God in and over the whole of Creation.

I believe in the redeeming grace of God through Jesus Christ.

I believe in the sanctifying, empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

But I wasn't seeing it!

I was listening to a Christian band singing confidently about Jesus making all things new but I was experiencing a theatre packed with people revelling in the ridicule of Mormonism specifically – but evangelical Christianity generally - and thousands of young people out on the streets desperately searching.

Jesus, *how - where* - are you making all things new?

Ephesians tells us of God's plan to bring all things in heaven and on earth together – the whole of creation – under the headship of Christ.

Where?

Our greed has raped the earth of oxygen created by deforestation; fossil fuels that maintain our standard of living have created global warming that has in turn created extreme weather conditions – burning up hundreds and thousands of acres in Australia and in south-western states in the US while, at the same time, flooding island nations right on our doorstep.

Jesus is making all things new?

Do we actually need Jesus?

Donald Trump is adamant that he is going to make America great again: by 'bombing the hell out of ISIS' and by building a wall right across America on the border with Mexico to stop all these drug smugglers from pouring into the US.

And is the song just wishful thinking here in Aotearoa/New Zealand?

Census figures show that Christianity continues to decline – while, conversely, incidents of domestic violence, child abuse, teenage suicide and loneliness have continued to rise – reaching the highest levels within the OECD.

Jesus is making all things new?

There seemed to be a huge credibility gap between what was being sung and the reality of what I was seeing all around me.

This was the crisis of faith that hit me in New York a few weeks ago.

There is a sequel to the story that I may come back to.

But I was led to wonder whether this experience was unique to me or (in one of its many disguises) is an experience that is familiar to all those in ministry – a crisis of faith that hits us when the promises of Jesus that inspired us (and continue to inspire us) are not found in the church, let alone in the world around us.

It certainly led me to reflect on whether there is a crisis of faith that is paralysing Western Christianity which seems to have lost confidence in the power of the gospel to bring all things on heaven and earth together under the headship of Christ?

Why was it that the Church seemed so invisible and irrelevant in that New York weekend?

It certainly feels as if we have become tired - trying to swim against the tide of 21st century life and finding that we are further downstream from where we started?

I know I'm not just having a conversation with myself: as your Bishop I am very aware of those of you who share a similar story and understand the experience and the questions I have described.

I want to tease out some insights from the Gospel tonight that spoke powerfully to me as I began to process my 'New York state of mind.'

Matthew's account of Jesus walking on the water offers us a vision of the radical faith into which we have been called Jesus walking on the water that give some insights into the radical faith to which we've been called.

Jesus has just fed a crowd of four thousand people and he puts the disciples into a boat home while he dismisses the crowd and then he heads further up the mountain by himself to pray.

Note it is Jesus who puts them into the boat and sees them off – I'll come back to this.

Evening comes and the disciples haven't made much headway on the journey – they are a considerable distance from land and really struggling against the strong wind that had come up and the waves that are buffeting the boat.

Then the next verse (and note the time frame) *'just before dawn Jesus went out to them.'*

These disciples have spent virtually the whole night struggling with the boat – by themselves!

I wonder if this is the dark night of the soul?

Is this where we find ourselves – out in the great sea of contemporary life – struggling to make any headway – and trying to do it totally in our own strength?

'Just before dawn – Jesus went out to them walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said and cried out in fear.'

One New Testament scholar who I have deep respect for is David Garland. In two of his commentaries he draws our attention to an interesting addition that is found in Mark's account of this story.

In Mark 6 we read that, *'Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about **to pass by** them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost....'*

He was about to pass by them? Was he just playing sort of game with them (as some commentators have suggested).

Garland suggests otherwise. He points out that the Greek word for 'passing by them' is *'parerchomai'* (par-er-khom-ahee) which is a technical term found in the Greek translations of the Old Testament to describe a theophany - those moments God, in all his glory, becomes visible – usually as a prelude to the call he was about to place on an individual or a people.

It is used in the passage where God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock *'while my glory passes by.'*

It's also used when Elijah is taken up a high mountain because *'the Lord is about to pass by.'*

And it's the same term used in this passage from Mark's Gospel.

What the disciples are seeing from the boat is the full glory of God – the fullness of the divinity of Christ.

No wonder they were scared stiff. Every time that the glory of God is experienced it is accompanied by an incredible sense of awe – almost bordering on fear.

Can I just quote what Garland writes in his commentary on the passage?

'Jesus is not pulling off a staggering visual stunt to amaze his friends. Rather the miracle attests that God himself has visited us in the flesh. This spine-tingling, knee-buckling reality cannot be captured by a jaded Hollywood and may even be overlooked by modern Christians who have lost their sense of awe before the holy.'

Radical recommitment – or radical faith begins with a radical confession.

In Jesus all the fullness of God is revealed.

We sing songs about Jesus being our best friend. We speak of him as 'our companion on the journey.' We sit in our comfortable seats – or not so comfortable pews - and listen to good sermons about our good God.

But we never get down on our knees in awe of the one 'who wrought our full salvation.'

When was the last time this Synod was driven to its knees in awesome wonder at the glory of God revealed in Christ?

When was the last time we were overwhelmed by the amazing grace of God?

There's just a little bit more to this part of the story because Jesus calls out to them in their fear and says *'Take courage, It is I.'*

Jesus is using the divine name for God – It is I – or more correctly translated 'I Am.'

I have spent so much time over the past year speaking on the key passage in the whole of Mark's Gospel – the question Jesus asked his disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?'

Radical faith does not begin with knowing all **about** Jesus – it begins with knowing Jesus, fully human, fully divine.

Radical faith is birthed in this spine-tingling, knee-buckling reality.

Yet in so many of the gatherings within the Church Jesus is never mentioned except as the tailpiece to a prayer.

The church has domesticated Jesus – far from the picture we see of the glory of the divinity walking on the water in the middle of a storm.

No wonder we don't see things being made new.

There's no power in the Western Church's Jesus to transform anything!

Radical faith begins with a radical confession of a radical God.

Meanwhile the disciples are still in the boat. It's still very stormy conditions, and it's Peter who calls out to Jesus – Peter - always the one to respond without thinking of the consequences - *“Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.”*

Notice the doubt that is in his voice *‘Lord if it is you.....’*

And Jesus simply says ‘come’

So Peter climbs out of the boat.

John Ortberg wrote a delightful book called ‘If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.’

This is, for the purpose of this message, the second mark of radical faith, radical discipleship – getting out of the boat and walking on water because Jesus invites us to do so: to step out of the comfortable, safe, familiar – into the unfamiliar, unknown and uncomfortable.

And to do so, leaving our security blankets behind – whatever they might be.

Remember when Jesus sent out the twelve disciples (in Matthew 10) they were told not to take any cash or credit cards. And no bag, because they were only allowed the clothes they were standing up in - and nothing for them to lean upon.

Can we understand how crazy this act of Peter's is?

In my previous Diocese we had our clergy schools in Akaroa. One year several of the younger clergy decided to go out in a dingy – right in front of the hotel we were all staying in and have a walk-on-water competition. One

by one we stepped out of the dingy – to the cheers of those older clergy standing on the shore and watching us young blokes make idiots of ourselves.

I actually won it – because I managed one and a half steps before totally going under (like all the others).

Bit of stupidity really.

And that's probably what the other disciples thought of Peter when he climbed out – but that's where Jesus was - outside the boat.

I go to so many meetings, nationally, in which I suggest a way forward and I am immediately told that we can't do that – it doesn't fit with the Anglican rules or whatever and yet I'm convinced that Jesus is outside the boat, calling us to take the risk.

Maybe he's calling you to climb out of the boat and just go and visit your neighbours making yourself known to them.

Or maybe he's calling you to pray aloud in Church because he has placed something on your heart.

What is he asking you as an individual – and you as a Church, to step out of the boat and do – because that's where He is?

It may be that this Diocese is going to be asked to get out of the boat!

Radical discipleship involves radical discomfort – to be a water-walker: but it also implies radical trust.

As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus once he climbed out of the boat he was walking over the waves. As soon as he took his eyes off Jesus and looked down at the waves, he began to sink.

Many Anglicans will never experience that sinking feeling because the boat is too comfortable and safe – particularly in a storm.

So nothing ever changes.

The sinking is part of the journey.

So Peter looks at the waves and begins to sink and he cries out – 'Lord, *if it's you* please save me' – no he certainly doesn't. What we get is a yell of terror 'Lord, *save me!*' – no 'ifs and buts' now....

Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him before he goes under and takes him back to the boat and as they climb in to the boat the wind calms right down.

And this is one of the paradoxes of the story. Jesus invited Peter to come to him *out* of the boat. But he saved him *into* the boat.

We're not called to jump ship.

Remember right back at the very beginning of the passage, '*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him*'

The boat was Jesus' idea.

It was the same boat – but something had changed within the boat due to the presence of Jesus.

Instead of a bunch of tired disciples fighting against the wind they were now (if you look at the last verse) a group worshipping together in the presence of Jesus.

Radical faith is the call to radical community – one that is founded upon its worship of Jesus – powerfully present.

It is a community where fellowship means more than a cup of tea following the Sunday service.

Young people in particular are passionate about this – I hope some of you might remember their presentation Synod before last. They don't want pseudo-community – they want to worship with a group whom they do life with; the Body of Christ where we can be honest in our fears and our loneliness and discover a freedom in Christ through them; a welcoming community that cares for the most vulnerable; a community that respects our differences and our doubts and believes and practices the power of prayer.

And this may be a challenge to 21st century Anglicanism that seems entrenched in its comfortable once-a-week formality.

It's challenging but it's life-giving.

It's the faith that we have been called into.

A radical faith in a radical God: radical discipleship and radical community.

And watch Jesus make all things new!

Sequel to New York experience.

So I had a crisis of faith in New York.

That very same morning I had managed to make contact with an ex-pupil of mine from my days as Head of Music at St Bede's College.

David Butler was one of several very musical students I taught during those years.

He won the concerto competition in New Zealand in 1978 and went on to complete a doctorate in Music in San Francisco and became Professor of the Piano at the Julliard School of Music in New York.

He is now Associate Professor at the Boyer College of Music and Dance in Philadelphia.

Hilary and I had become very close to David during those years at St Bedes – he came and joined the St Barnabas choir with us.

But I hadn't seen him for forty years.

It was a lovely reunion and as the three of us wandered around the famous Frick Art gallery that afternoon, David looked at me and asked 'Richard, are you saved?'

In my moment of deep crisis – a pupil from way back asked me if I was saved!

It was as though I had been in that boat in that storm and here was Jesus passing by me in David's question.

I answered him with all honesty 'Yes David, I am saved and I am being saved.'

And then his second question, 'Do you believe in all the fullness of who Jesus is.'

And the scales fell from my eyes in that moment.

Walking out of that theatre – walking through Time Square, I had looked down at the waves and felt myself sinking into a deep despair.

I had taken my eyes off Jesus – I certainly failed to see all the glory of God revealed in the Son. I had domesticated Jesus. And I couldn't see the transforming work that he was doing one life at a time because I was trying to view it from the safety of the boat.

I was frustrated at the inability of people to get out of the boat and take the risk of following where Jesus is leading. And paradoxically I had lost vision of a boat transformed through the presence of Jesus and the worship his followers.

In the midst of my crisis of faith, an ex-pupil from forty years ago was placed in my path and lifted my eyes up from the waves.

We as a Diocese have a unique identity. I invite this Synod to reaffirm that identity that is found in Christ alone.

To commit ourselves to the radical confession of faith in Christ – to radical discipleship that is prepared to get out of the boat and walk on water – and to radical community as the Body of Christ.

And may God bless us as we make this commitment together.

Amen

+Richard
August 2016.

Matthew 14:22-33

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. 25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. 27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” 28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” 29 “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”