

Sunday 26 June 2022

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the 175th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Dioceses of Melbourne, at St Paul's Cathedral

Readings: [Ecclesiastes 3.9-22](#); [Luke 9.1-11](#)

What is the legacy of 175 years of the establishment of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses of Melbourne, and what might our future bring? It is remarkable that our two dioceses were established on the same day on 25 June 1847 – one by Letters Patent granted by Queen Victoria, the other by a Papal Brief granted by Pope Pius IX in Rome. By the time he arrived in Melbourne six months later, the first bishop of the Anglican Diocese, Charles Perry had promptly lost his copy of the Letters Patent. They re-surfaced – miraculously – in a second-hand bookshop in London in 1930 and are now safely kept in our archives. This temporary loss did not hinder Perry from engaging his Catholic counterpart, Bishop James Goold, in formal proceedings on the use of the title 'bishop of Melbourne'. The Colonial Office determined that both had the right to carry the title, which is why there are two Archbishops of Melbourne in our sanctuary today.

How would we go about assessing our 175-year legacy? Our [first lesson](#), from the book of 'the Preacher' – Qohelet or Ecclesiastes – places the idea of the remembrance of human endeavour, very much in the context of time and eternity. Our reading is taken from the greater reflection on times and seasons that encompass the third chapter of Ecclesiastes – for everything there is a season, the Preacher tells. For things that build up as well as things that tear down. For things

that directly benefit us, and things that harm us. Time itself is a gift of God, and the remembrance of things past, too, is God-given, for 'he has put a sense of the past and the future in their minds' (Eccl. 3.11). Discerning what is good for us, and what is harmful, too, is a gift of God, the Preacher knows. The discernment of goodness and justice, and the recognition of wickedness and injustice are gifts of God, too. As is the calling that each of us enter into: God gifts humans their work, the 'business that he has given to everybody to be busy with' (Eccl. 3.10).

The world that the Preacher describes is neither a dreary place of drudgery – there is great meaning to be found in honest labour; there is reward and pride to be had in work well done – nor is it a Paradisical state of bliss – there still is injustice, even in those places where we would expect to find justice and truth to be spoken; wickedness still abounds. The world that the Preacher reflects on, then, is one where goodness and wickedness exist side by side, where choices are to be made that have an effect on the lives and wellbeing of others, and where the only certainty is death, and the only constancy is our hope of eternity – another gift that God gifts his people.

Here in this world, our first lesson tells us, our legacy is uncertain. What is certain are only the gifts that God gifts, the Preacher explains: the gift of our breath and our spirit; the gift of our calling and the enjoyment of our work; the gift of sustenance and companionship, and the gift of time and eternity. For the Preacher, it is that final gift – the sense of past and future in our minds – that is the most ambivalent. If people only had a sense of the presence, there would be no need to re-examine the past, or fear the future. But because God has given us a longing for eternity in our hearts, we humans have a longing for something greater than ourselves. The ambivalence of the gift of knowing time and longing for eternity is this, the Preacher believes: God alone can rightly see and know all time; we only ever grasp glimpses of the everlasting. Only the things that God does, endure forever. The things we do, pass away like our breaths. 'What gain', indeed, 'have

the workers from their toil?' (Eccl. 3.9). In the end, for the Preacher, satisfaction is gained only from entering into God's call, the 'business that God has given everyone to be busy with', coupled with the hope that our work may be reckoned unto us as righteousness (Eccl. 3.10).

The same Preacher, of course, also knew that, having acquired a sense of past and future, humans would make it their business to record and reflect on the past, and plan for the future. He concludes Quohélet with the warning that 'of making many books there is no end', and that 'much study wearies the body' (Eccl. 12.12). The desire to document and assess, to judge the past and have it shed light on the present, or shape our plans for the future is common across so many cultures, because we have been given the gift of time. Yes, we share the same end as all who bear the breath of life within them. 'All have the same breath, and in this way humans have no advantage over animals', the Preacher knows (Eccl. 3.19). It is the gift of the sense of past and future in our minds, and the gift of eternity in our hearts, that differentiates humans from the non-human creation, the Preacher explains. The Deanery cat, for instance, has a continuous sense of the present, her claims that she has never been fed are made with the same earnestness as they were five minutes before her dinner. The task of reminding her that there is a past in which her dinner was served and eaten, therefore, falls to those of us with the sense of the past and future in the mind.

What the Preacher is saying is this: God gifts us something of which only God can, in the end, make perfect sense. Only God knows how the myriad events that shape the existence of each individual being belong together, may even work together for good. In this life we only see the partial, it is when we enter eternity that we shall see the complete, our patron St Paul expressed it (1 Cor 13.12). And so it is that when we come to look at the past of our two dioceses, we will see people that have been great catalysts for good, events that have been reasons for growth and

flourishing. The work of women like St Mary McKillop and Frances Perry, for instance, have rightly been recognised by their addition to the Roman Catholic and Anglican Calendar of Saints: St Mary of the Cross for her work that led her from the – then – slums of my suburb, Fitzroy, to teach and welcome the young and poor, and challenge and critique the powerful. Frances Perry for her work that led her to create a place where women might safely give birth, which is why the obstetric wing of the Royal Women’s hospital still bears her name. Their work is part of our shared legacy of righteousness.

But ‘in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well’, the Preacher tells, ‘which is why God will judge the righteous *and* the wicked’ (Eccl. 3.16-17). Our past is not only a story of the good and courageous, the selfless and saints. The past 175 years have seen also actions and decisions that have been wicked, unjust and destructive. The reason our two dioceses were founded in the first place is because of colonialisation. The land on which our Cathedrals and churches, our presbyteries and vicarages, our schools and hospitals stand, is land that belongs to First Nations people. Land that was taken without any compensation at great cost to lives and culture of the people of the Kulin nation on whose lands our dioceses are located. The extinction of language and tradition, the loss of ritual and lore, the destruction of sacred places and hunting grounds, are a wicked legacy of loss that weighs heavy on us, and which calls on us to repent of our past wrongs, by truth telling and careful listening, and by reparation and advocacy.

In the same way, the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable people in our care by clergy, religious and church lay workers, and the systemic attempts to cover up such abuse, is a wicked legacy of loss that has grievously harmed not only the individual lives of survivors and their families, but has brought great harm to our common life. Trust in the institution church has been eroded; and rightly so. I can fully understand the disbelief of many in our society in the genuineness of our

message. The rightful sense of hypocrisy at our calling people to chastity or faithfulness in marriage, while members of our church communities engaged in sexual criminality against the most vulnerable under the cover and protection of their office. The sense of betrayal at discovering that people we trusted and promoted into positions of greater authority did incalculable harm against children, disabled and vulnerable people is the very ‘wickedness in the place of righteousness’ that our first lesson speaks about. True repentance means a change of heart and behaviour, and yes, we have seen much positive action in the past decade. But in order to redeem this wicked legacy, I believe, we need even greater compassion for survivors, need to respond with even greater generosity to their stories and experiences – and that, too, includes financial reparation.

Ultimately, our actions will be judged not by historians, nor by our peers, but by God, our first lesson assures us. God gifts us a longing for eternity, places a sense of the past and the future into our minds. He gives each one of us a calling. He gives each one of us a ‘busy-ness’. It is when we enter into God’s calling and busyness – to work for justice and shun the works of wickedness – that we will receive the reward inherent in these works: ‘to be happy and enjoy doing what is good for as long as we live’ (Eccl. 3.12). The work we do for God is the very reward we can expect, the Preacher tells us. The satisfaction in our toil to right past wrongs, and share in God’s rich gifts – breath and life; a calling and the time to enter into it; a sense of profound connectedness with God that also connects us to all creation – that is sufficient for godly living, our first lesson knows. In the end, *God* will judge how we have used his rich gifts in his service and in that judgement we will find our understanding of how our small contribution to his work in this world has been part of all ‘that which has already been ... and which already is’, because ‘God seeks out’, and makes sense of ‘what has gone by’ (Eccl. 3.15).

As we give thanks for the past, and look to the future of our church, I encourage you to place yourselves confidently into the hand of God. May we together journey on from this place in the spirit of our reading: with our hearts firmly fixed on God's eternity. May we together rediscover the profound unity that each of us has with one another and with God, and in the strength of that gift work to overcome division and distrust. May we together discover the joy that comes from doing what God calls each one of us to do, and in the strength of that gift work to promote his generosity and grace. May we together be equipped to right past wrongs, and in the strength of that gift work to share God's goodness and justice, his peace and his love with those among whom he places us. Above all, may we together discover the constancy and care of God our Father, who, by the life-giving power of his Son and the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, equips us for this ministry and calls us into his future.