



Bishop's Charge Synod 2020 Diocese of Dunedin

*"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."
(Ex 1. 8. NRSV)*

2020 is proving to be an interesting year...

Our ways of both **being** and **doing** church are finding themselves tested in ways we would have not thought possible just last year, and in ways that our ancestors of 151 years ago - when the Diocese formally came into being – simply could not have conceived, or even had the vocabulary to deal with Zoom... COVID... "virtual meetings"... to name a few.

But this is where we are, and we are dealing with it all as best we can, and in ways that are never going to suit all of us.

This is a recorded "Charge" for Synod, and I am delivering it from a written script, a way of presentation I find challenging, but the choice for this year – and "yes": for those who have gently reminded me in the past – there will be a written record of what I am saying for the posterity we imagine (or hope) will follow us.

I'd like to read a verse from the scriptures, from the Old Testament –

"...a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

This verse, from the very beginning of the book of Exodus, is setting the scene for us readers about the people of Israel, God's people, living in Egypt in a time of difficulty and change. The book of Exodus goes on to describe how God calls Moses, deals with Pharaoh, and how the people of Israel leave a state of oppression and slavery and move on into something new. Promises that God would act, and work **in ways unknown** to the people of the time.

All that we know that led up to this point in the life of the Israelite people is written in the book of Genesis, and it begins by showing us the somewhat convoluted journey taken by humanity. Starting from a **generalised**, pre-historical time – featuring (in places) the seemingly fantastical imagery of gardens with trees giving life and the knowledge of good and evil, talking serpents, giants, floods and the like; we are taken to the **specific** calling of an individual – Abram.

What follows is the miraculous, supernatural coming of children and the beginnings of a dynasty.

We are shown the growth of a family which had in many ways developed **against** (or despite of) the natural trend of expectation, into being a numerous, prosperous, influential group of people, all seeing themselves as descendants of one couple – now remembered as Abraham and Sarah.

This people retained a distinct identity, and were claiming a unique relationship with a God who had made them enormous promises, and surprisingly blessed them. They even found themselves to be assets and blessings to others.

As if to demonstrate this, the story leads us on to Joseph: taken from this people as a slave into exile, but rising to provide the means of salvation to both his family – including his treacherous brothers - **and** the people into whom he had been sold into slavery. And we don't need to rely on the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical to see how in Egypt Joseph pretty much saved the day. He had been given a dream, he held on to it, and lived with it, despite how the circumstances of occasion could have led him away into despair.

Joseph was influential, honoured, and he served Egypt. Even **saved** Egypt. His family had been welcomed in as honoured guests and were respected, and prospered.

And then "...a new king arose who did not know Joseph...."

Our society, here in Otago and Southland is at a point where exciting things are certainly happening.

But it is increasingly a society that has lost contact with the church.

I suspect I am saying nothing new when I tell you that we no longer hold an automatic **privileged** or even a **recognised** place in society.

Where once church – and that includes all churches – were seen as being integral parts of the community, they are now seen as having little relevance, that is if they are actually seen at all.

Where there was once a widespread, if basic, understanding of Christianity, that is now not the case.

As an example: fewer and fewer people are familiar with the Lord's Prayer – once a fundamental for many school children.

How open and enthusiastic are we to teaching others to pray?

- perhaps as we were once taught
- perhaps in **new** ways, just as we are continuing to learn to pray ourselves

So what might it mean today to be a Christian, or to hold Christian values?

What does that mean for **individuals**?

And for the **communities** that those individuals make up?

And for the **society** around about them?

A new King has arisen in Egypt: and just as the privileges and respect that went with Joseph and his people had largely evaporated by the time of Moses, so too with us today.

Yet it is into this situation that Moses was given a new understanding of God; he received a new call and commission and; he became a witness to God doing new things.

That is a pattern I see repeated again and again throughout the history of the people of God.

The God who has always looked like Jesus Christ –which is something the church is constantly needing to remember and live and demonstrate – continues to call and to commission and to challenge individuals and communities.

In the bigger scheme of things the COVID crisis, societal indifference, internal divisions (or anything else) will not be able to defeat or overcome us.

Already many of us are seeing how being church is changing, and embracing it.

Remaining true to the fundamental, foundational elements of our faith, we are seeing how this is working out in our Diocese, and in our time.

The pioneers of our church and our diocese wanted to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a people who had never realised it; they also sought to care for each other, and to serve in remote and isolated locations.

They wanted to live and worship, to serve and enjoy God in all the places they had travelled to and settled in. The statutes and canons and procedures we still have today were put in place not as hurdles to negotiate, but as features to facilitate and ensure the safe and smooth running for the church. To provide for the church to grow, and to continue its work.

I believe we need to stay close to their original intention, which was to allow us to continue with this mission.

The sacrifices made by our forebears were significant, and the diocese that has developed from it is serving us well, and we are seeing today new ways that God is growing his kingdom.

Richard Johnson and Jonathan Wood are showing us the importance of relationship.

[That little video clip](#) of some of their thinking, calling, commitment and activity really excited me.

The relationships that are growing from their ministry are follows on from the church reaching out to others.

Yet the people they are feeling called to are those who cannot, or will not, go into church buildings, neither do they fit into existing regular structures. It is into this setting that Jonathan and Richard are making relationships.

This is a reflection of the activity of a God who goes to extraordinary lengths to bring us into an ongoing relationship with him.

John Graveston – our Diocesan Child, Youth and Family Educator has recently started a Young Adults Group. From within this group there are developing friendships, and yes, **relationships**. From this setting is coming opportunities to engage with God.

- it is somewhere to practice prayer
- to ask questions
- to come as you are – part of an existing church group, or as someone from no faith or church background.

John was perhaps most excited by one member who told him that being part of this group was the most connected to church they had ever felt (This person does not claim an Anglican connection!).

This is an expression of Church, but one without its own building, or having to meet on a Sunday.

Some of my predecessors as Bishop would have had to rely on only occasional visits to most of the Diocese, and even then, sometimes on horseback.

Today I have the ability to share Morning and Evening prayer with folk from all parts thanks to the technology of Zoom – and even to welcome visitors from overseas. Someone in the Diocese shared with me how the Zoom service provided the first time they were able to share in a Christian service with a close family member living overseas, and who had come to faith recently themselves. I hope that excites you. It made me quite emotional.

I am looking how we can use this sort of technology to provide contact, relationship and teaching to some of the more remote parts of the Diocese. Perhaps involving a mentoring scheme that takes people from where they are, and brings an educational opportunity tailored to their current place on the Christian journey. A mentor who might at one level be teaching someone how to pray, and explaining what the bible is; and at the other extreme encouraging someone else into engaging with tertiary level theological study.

The opportunities are out there!

As we look to repairing the recent fire and water damage done to the cathedral, I believe we have a great chance to look at what can be imagined and attempted, and this has come at a pivotal time for us.

At the heart of the vision that is underpinning the restoration and development of the buildings is the desire that the Cathedral become a place better equipped and suited to **serve** the city, parish and diocese.

**Using the near disaster to build something better.
Retaining some of the identity and practices that help to define us,
and have sustained us over many years, but looking to express this
today in new and fresh ways.**

Our diocese is bigger than Dunedin, and just this week I received a request from one of our smaller parishes, one that has no dedicated clergy person, and noting an aging and small population, but asking the question how can they reach out to the more vulnerable members of the community.

A great question, coming out of a specific setting and addressing a specific need.

There are new opportunities, there are new ways that are enabling our foundational values of prayer, reading the bible and living out the risen life of Jesus Christ to be experienced and practised.

In the time of Moses there did indeed arise a new king who never knew Joseph.

We are living in times when some of the practices and privileges of our past are now over...

But we are seeing ways in which we are still being called to be God's people, we are learning to live with new challenges and in new circumstances, and we are being reminded that we are still people who are to live and proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

Amen

Bishop Steve Benford, 12 September 2020