

The Thirty-fourth Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Ballarat



Presidential Address

The Right Rev'd Garry Weatherill
Bishop of Ballarat

2025

King Charles I had his head chopped off in a public execution on 30th January 1649. This followed a trial by the majority of the House of Commons. Members of the House of Lords did not participate in the trial and lamented the execution. When the executioner had completed his work, the King's head was allowed to fall from the scaffold to the ground, and many people cut locks of his hair, or dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood as souvenirs or as relics. The supporters of the Parliamentarians were pleased that the tyrant was dead. The supporters of the King were devastated that God's regent on earth had been killed. Historians still debate these two positions, although there is some agreement that Charles was clinging to a medieval world view and Parliament wanted a new world where power was shared much more. Even in our own Cathedral we have an old banner celebrating Charles I, King and Martyr.

Who was right- Parliament or the King? Any discussion will involve beliefs, truth and a search for knowledge.

There is no easy answer. Passionate supporters of the King and the equally passionate supporters of the Parliamentarians are both examples of Epistemological Hubris. Both groups believed they were right, both were sure that they were servants of the truth, both believed that their knowledge and understanding was full and correct. From our perspective we might be able to see that both groups had a somewhat exaggerated belief in their knowledge and expertise to discern the truth. Both groups displayed an unwarranted certainty of the righteousness of their position and neither side was willing to acknowledge their own limitations in reaching the conclusion of their dispute.

The conclusion was disastrous for the King. It was also disastrous for the people of England who then struggled under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell.

It's easy for us to see the epistemological hubris, the proud or arrogant belief in one's own ideas when we look at an historical incident like the execution of Charles I. It is not so comfortable when we search our contemporary world or our own lives for examples of Epistemological Hubris.

The tragic and devastating conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinian residents of the Gaza strip demonstrates Epistemological Hubris with all its terrifying results every evening on our television screens. The Hamas terrorists and the Israeli government both betray exaggerated self belief, unwarranted certainty, a commitment to their version of "truth" and a refusal to acknowledge limitations in their understanding of meaning and reality. For most Israelis this means living in fear and anger, and for the Palestinian people it means more than 60,000 deaths and the obliteration of thousands of homes and a hope for peaceful coexistence. Epistemological Hubris is not just a fancy idea - it helps us to understand why such inhuman devastation is even possible. The rhetoric on both sides is appalling.

Within the wider Church, the same principles are at work. We can see that easily in others, like the Exclusive Brethren or the North American Amish communities; living apart from the rest of humanity because of their perception of knowledge, truth and belief from their own narrow perspective. But the same failures are seen in our own Church too. The recent announcement of Bishop Sarah Mullally as the next Archbishop of Canterbury brought the usual flurry of commentary from those conservatives opposed to women as leaders in the Church or those who disagree with her support for blessing of same sex marriages. The Primate of Rwanda and the current Chair of Gafcon called on her to repent. Likewise, more liberal Anglicans have decried her as an administrator, not a scholar, and not well experienced in the Church. Where do we find belief and truth and sound knowledge when we are all such experts in Epistemological Hubris?

Even in our families we fall into the same traps. We can see the faults of others very clearly and this reinforces our own certainty, but this is not a Christ like way to build our families, our church congregations or healthy communities of diversity. "Othering" seems to me to be always lurking on the horizon, especially when our own sense of certainty or security or prosperity might be under threat. Sadly, we often treat the Holy Scriptures the same way. Those who don't share our way of reading and understanding the Scriptures are suspect, or revisionists or enemies of the true Gospel. Preaching easily turns into teaching my way to respond to the Biblical narrative. Competing

theological traditions "other" their opponents, rather than seeking to understand how truth is perceived and experienced differently.

For those of us who seek to follow Jesus we don't have to search far for his response to Epistemological Hubris. The most devastating negative criticism in the Gospels is directed to the Scribes and the Pharisees - those who claim to be God's chosen ones, and who define themselves by their religious purity, and cannot see the work of God anywhere but within their own closed world view. Jesus defies all this "othering" and breaks the power of Epistemological Hubris by reaching towards widows and fatherless, healing an unclean suffering woman, dining with a short despised tax gatherer, speaking frankly with a Samaritan woman, raising his putrefying friend from the grave, embracing a condemned criminal as they share their deaths, forgiving those who have participated in his crucifixion- the list is long.

Theologians are quick to speak of Original Sin and perhaps an appreciation of Epistemological Hubris helps us to grasp what this deep seated resistance to the ways of God actually means. Perhaps, too, we might begin to see God's invitation to be coworkers and his friends sets us free from the need to be right in order to be something more like the full measure of the stature of Christ. We are not absolved from thinking deeply, searching thoroughly, listening expectantly, participating fully, but we are invited to hold our positions lightly, to try to understand those with whom we most deeply disagree, and commit ourselves to love those whom we most easily "other".

Some personal reflections

On October 3 next year I will celebrate my 70th birthday and according to the Acts of the Diocese, I am required to relinquish my office as 10th Bishop of Ballarat on that date. As long as my health continues to improve I intend to continue until then, although I have accumulated a great deal of Long Service Leave. I hope to be at the General Synod to be held in Melbourne in August 2026 and to continue to serve on the Standing Committee of General Synod, the Executive of the Standing Committee, the Appellate Tribunal of our Church and participate in the Bishops Meetings until then. I am required to

give six months notice of my intention to vacate the See and that will be the trigger for the Board of Electors of the Bishop to begin its work.

The last 18 months have been very difficult for me and there have been some negative consequences for the Diocese as well. I am very grateful for the work of the Registrars, Peter Jarvis and more recently Tony Mould, to the Vicar General, Bishop Scott and the Archdeacon of Ballarat, Fr Michael, who have carried extra burdens during this time. Fr Michael came to hospital at least twice a week for the whole nine months I was in care and said Evening Prayer with me. This was extremely important to me, as were the prayers and care offered by so many people around the Diocese. Cath Zala has been a great personal support to me, and I am also particularly grateful to Jill Gale.

During the whole time I was in hospital, most of my stipend continued to be paid from our Stipend insurance, and since my partial return to work in February, the insurers have continued to pay 50% of the Bishops' stipend. That has just concluded. The Must Trust provided me with a wheelchair friendly unit in the Must Homes in Barkly Street where I have been happy and comfortable and where there are no stairs. This has been at no cost to the Diocese. I hope to return to Bishop's House in Soldiers Hill around Christmas time this year. Pivotal in caring for my material needs and covering many of the gaps in our Diocesan Administration during the last 18 months has been the Chair of Property and Finance, Mr Mike Robins. He is wise, practical and tenacious, and we all owe Mike a great debt of gratitude - Thank you Mike.

Finances

You will see from the Financial Statements that the Diocesan financial situation has been very difficult. Primarily this has been because of the cost of Civil Claims and Redress claims concerning abuse in our organisations. At present, since 2015 we have paid out just under 6 million dollars to civil claimants and to the National Redress Scheme, set up by the government. We anticipate about another 1 -1.5 million dollars remains to be paid to those claimants of whom we are aware. We cannot know if there might be more cases that emerge, although I remain hopeful that the worst of this wave is

coming to an end. Most of the claims are more than twenty years old, and there are significant legal costs involved in every case.

I have been at pains to shield the Diocese from this information because it is very disturbing and because some of those who have been offenders have been much admired people in our diocesan community. This may have been a mistake, but it is important that you understand the amounts we are dealing with so that you might begin to grasp the precariousness of our finances and the need for rationalisation of properties. As far as possible the burden of these calls on our resources have been shared across the Diocese. Some people, like the small and faithful congregation at Sebastopol have sacrificed their much loved parish and its community to assist us to meet our obligations. And most places will be asked at some stage to share that burden. The Diocese has planned for this situation for the last ten years, and we accumulated funds as much as possible, but have now disposed of all the properties in Ballarat and one at Warrnambool because the built up reserves were exhausted.

You may have heard that the Diocese of North Queensland has gone into receivership because it is unable to meet its obligations under the National Redress Scheme. One consequence may be that every Diocese will be levied to cover this debt. I do not think this situation is likely here in Ballarat, but we are less financially secure than we were when I came to the Diocese. We have endeavoured to preserve parish funds and therefore parish incomes from those funds, but there will be some reduction in parish incomes as a result of the sale of our rent producing properties.

Sometimes complaints come from parishioners or clergy that the Diocese is a drain on the local churches. Nothing could be further from the truth and it is demoralising to the staff and to the Property and Finance Committee who are working very hard and making very difficult decisions in order to protect parishes. We continue to run the Ministry Fund, which has not been impacted by the Claims situation. This Fund pays 25% of the stipend of every Parish Priest so that parochial costs are much less than they would be otherwise. A very small number of wealthier parishes pay more to the Fund than they receive back, but for the most part, every parish benefits very significantly

from the Ministry Fund. We continue to pay more on Parish investments than is available through any of the big banks. The return on Parish Investments in our pooled Diocesan Funds is always higher than what is available commercially because we are not seeking to make a profit for shareholders. There is a very small percentage paid to the Diocese for the management of those funds and for the distribution of the appropriate share of the pooled income.

In all these financial matters as with organisational and structural questions, the underlying principle is to make as significant payments to the parishes as possible. The Property and Finance Committee and the Bishop-in-Council always aim to serve the parishes first. Without parishes and active congregations, the Diocese has no reason for its existence.

Ministry Matters

It is unlikely that there will ever be a return to a situation where most parishes have a full time, stipended, seminary trained parish priest who moves from Parish to Parish over a lifetime of ministry. This is a natural consequence of several factors.

- Very few young men and women are offering as candidates for ordination, with the intention of a lifetime of service in parish ministry. Most of the people I have ordained in my 25 years as a bishop have been over thirty years old, and some have been "second career" clergy, beginning in mid life. There are exceptions, but when I was ordained in 1985 four of the five candidates were under 30 years old and this was normal. But in urban dioceses as well as regional and rural areas the age has gone up steeply, and some who come down this path are not seeking full time or fully paid employment in the Church.
- The capacity for parishes to sustain a full time priest has diminished. There may be many reasons for this, but one is certainly connected with diminishing congregations and subsequent financial strains. The abuse crisis, and also I suspect the COVID years have damaged our capacity in moral, as well as financial areas. I am interested to note that there

seems to be a resurgence in church attendance in many places since COVID 19.

- There is a direct link between the tenacity and quality of the clergy, the clerical capacity to be creative and energetic, and the authentic connection between priest and people that impacts directly on the health and attractiveness of individual parishes. Too often, some clerics have moved often as if they “still haven’t found what they are looking for.” New clergy need to be well formed in their priestly life. This is not about academic achievements, but about loving God, God’s people and the life of a parish cleric. Like faith, these things are caught rather than taught, and yet we have little capacity to form clergy in parish placements.
- We have some great priests in this Diocese, some as Parish priests, but others as Ordained Local clergy, non-stipendiary priests and retired or self sustaining clergy. This mix is likely to be the norm as we move into the future. It makes the work of discernment and formation part of the life of every parish community. It also sets us free from one way of experiencing priestly or diaconal ministry, so that vocations can be explored in a variety of contexts. I do not believe we will ever not need full time professional well trained peripatetic priests, but there will be more variety in the future and the professional clergy will have greater roles as facilitators or enablers of the ministry of others.

A Year of Anniversaries

This is the 150th year since the foundation of our Diocese in 1875. I know that the diocesan 150th prayer and hymn have been used in many places, and that the Stretch Sunday suggestion that each congregation should enjoy a colonial meal was met with great fun but limited participation. The Cathedral’s offering for the 150th celebrations was a wonderful choral Mass attended by about 200 people from across Ballarat and further afield. Various local events have carried a 150th logo and the Grammar School had a whole of Senior School Eucharist. The final event will be a Diocesan Mass at Christ Church, Hamilton in November on the Feast of Christ the King. I encourage

every congregation to be represented at that service, bringing a parish or congregational banner. The clergy will concelebrate the Eucharist and then there will be a picnic together in the Botanic Gardens BYO food and folding chair. If the weather is inclement Monivae College has offered us a large dry and comfortable hall at the school, with plenty of parking. It will require some commitment, perhaps car pooling or a bus or mini bus, but I believe this is a unique opportunity for us to celebrate all the good things about the Diocese of Ballarat and the joy of serving God in this wonderful part of Creation.

In order to remind ourselves that we are much more blessed than we believe, I invite every member of our Diocese to contribute 150 for our 150th. What that 150 is, will be for you to choose - coins, money, cupcakes to sell at church, bottles of homemade sauce, periwinkle necklaces with 150 shells - the idea is that everyone can try to give 150 of something and that any money raised will go to renovate student houses at Newton College, part of the Modawa Institute in PNG. Each house will get a new kitchen sink and a septic tank. These are things we take for granted. So, think and act creatively to share 150 for our 150th. Gifts can be brought to the Mass at Hamilton to be part of the Offertory.

This year is also the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Girls Friendly Society. Here in Ballarat there are no longer girls groups, but former GFS members enjoy their membership of a Townsend Group, which meets for fellowship and supports projects that help women and girls achieve their potential. You will see from Nathalie Stevens written report to Synod the great work that GFS still do in our midst. A celebratory service was held at St John's, Soldiers Hill earlier this year.

Next year will be the 150th anniversary of the founding of Mothers Union. Something exciting was clearly happening in the Church of England in 1875/6!

In November we will mark 50 years since the foundation of the Community of St Mark, which has become the Abbey of Our Lady and St Mark at Camperdown. This is a great opportunity to celebrate all that has been and to seek God's guidance for the future of the religious life in the Benedictine tradition at the Abbey.

There have been many local anniversaries and celebrations. I want particularly to mention the reopening of the little church at Birregurra. The late Dr Trevor Hodson was determined to work towards its renovation and when he received a diagnosis that he was seriously ill, he immediately arranged to provide enough funds to enable the renovation to happen without him. At the grand service we began with a fanfare on brass instruments written especially for the event by his nephew, The Birregurra Fanfare. Thanks be to God for all the generosity of those who support their local churches.

The Ballarat and Queen's Anglican Grammar School.

The last twelve months have been difficult for the School after revelations surfaced of inappropriate physical punishment and bullying of younger boys by older boys in a boarding house. After many enquiries and difficult legal wrangling the school has changed some of the senior staff, some Board members will change and new protective measures are in place to protect students from poor behaviour by other students. Adam Heath and the Board have continued to lead the School with skill and sensitivity during some very difficult times. At my last visit to the School I was delighted to see the boarders getting ready for Sunday evening meals with warmth and harmony. Most parents continue to value the School and its great contribution to their children's lives, while not diminishing that harm and discord has been part of the School experience this year. We were all saddened when former long serving Chaplain, Fr Peter Treloar died earlier this year - his contribution to the lives of many, many students cannot be overstated. I am delighted to be ordaining Deacon Keith Romanis to the Priesthood tomorrow and I am sure he will continue to serve the School with love, good humour and sensitivity.

Nurture of Believers

At the local parish level, there are many opportunities for learning and growth in faith. We are particularly blessed to have a great Ministry Development Committee led by the Rev'd Robyn Shackell. The MDC seeks to provide resources to assist local congregations to grow in faith and knowledge as well as in fellowship. The MDC sponsors Lenten Studies, has produced some good generic material for children who may be irregular visitors in Church and has produced resources for encouraging Prayer and Bible Reading. This year for the second time, the Diocese of Gippsland joined us in the production of the June Bible Reading Challenge. The Rev'd Grant Bullen has explored the mystical heritage of Christianity during several Saturday seminars, and the Rev'd Dr Mark Garner has led Bible studies in person and on line. In September Father Mark was flown to Perth to speak at their Clergy Conference. He based his addresses around the booklet produced and first used here to celebrate the anniversary of the Nicene Creed. Dr Alex Banks has pioneered an evening service in the Synod Hall twice each month that aims to capture the attention of younger people and those who are looking for a simple yet theologically strong worship experience.

There is no better way to nourish people in the faith than to encourage opportunities to pray together. If you have forgotten about the Daily Prayer of the Church, perhaps you and your clergy could commit to saying the Morning or Evening Office with some regularity.

Our Catholicity

This Diocese has a strong tradition of holding to a catholic expression of Anglicanism. In many parts of the Australian church, this sacramental and liturgical way of being the Church is under threat. Partly this is because of a "gin and lace" caricature that some Anglo Catholics have encouraged and celebrated. The catholic Tradition within Anglicanism found fresh expression in the Oxford Movement in the UK in the mid 19th Century. It was less concerned with liturgical "frippery" than most people realise. Newman and Pusey and the other leaders of the Oxford Movement wanted to recapture the strong sacramentalism that was part of the ancient Church and they

wanted to equip ordinary people with a strength of faith and confidence that could challenge injustice and build better lives for everybody. This catholicity in serving God by serving others, and expecting the incarnational principles that are at the heart of Jesus life, death and resurrection are at the heart of a modern expression of Catholicity. I don't want to lose the beauty of worship, the otherness of God or the transcendence that music and liturgy can offer, but I want us to celebrate all this with knowledge and deliberate intention. And I want every church in the Diocese to have a serving heart, a deep reverence for creation and a profound gratitude for God's action in and through Christ. I long for our Church to be a place where Epistemological Hubris has no place and where deep humility is our everyday experience of each other.

Thanks

I am grateful to those who serve our common Diocesan life -

- the Registrar, Tony and his predecessor, Peter.
- John Russell who now carries the lofty title of Assistant Registrar!
- Catherine our book keeper and her predecessor, Cheryl
- Mike Robins, Chair of Property and Finance and his team
- the Dean, the Very Rev'd Michael Davies, and Archdeacon of Ballarat, the Venerable Michael O'Brien
- our assistant Bishop, the Rt Rev'd Scott Lowrey, who also serves as Vicar General.
- my Chancellor, Charles Gunst KC, and our Advocate Sally McArthur Clyde
- Michael Iacovino our Director of Professional Standards and Kate Schnerring our new Safeguarding Officer.
- all those who serve on various committees of the Diocese and especially members of Bishop-in-Council

And since this will be the last Synod at which I preside, I want to give thanks to the people of this wonderful Diocese of Ballarat and my previous Diocese of Willochra for giving me the immense privilege and joy of serving you and God as a bishop for over 25 years.

Concluding remarks

I do not believe that every opinion is equally valid, or that truth is entirely relative, but I am sure that our future can only be enhanced and more Christ oriented when we accept the provisionality of all our knowledge, beliefs and sense of truth.

Oliver Cromwell, the leader of those who deposed and executed Charles I was not known as a modernist or a flaky liberal (the term didn't even exist) or a relativist, but it is recorded that he wrote to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland asking them to be careful of absolutes, of Epistemological Hubris.

"Is it therefore infallibly agreeable to the Word of God, all that you say? I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken". (August 3, 1650)

The Jewish mathematician Jacob Bronowski quotes Cromwell as he stands in the mud flats outside Auschwitz, and squeezes mud between his fingers. He goes on to say,

"I owe it as a human being, to the many members of my family who died here, to stand as a survivor and a witness. We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people."

May God bless us with such humility and grace.

Garry Weatherill
10th Bishop of Ballarat
17th October 2025.



Creator God of love,

All time and every place is your gift.

We thank you that you have blessed our
Diocese for the last 150 years, even when we
have failed in our high calling to herald your
kingdom.

Your forgiveness, love and peace sustained
generations of our forebears,

And we rejoice that you still bless us and
invite us to work with you to build justice,
hope and love in Western Victoria.

Inspire us with a new vision and new energy
as we face the future, and help us to trust and
commit to the humble serving path of Jesus,
guided by your Holy Spirit.

Amen.

