Melbourne Synod 2019

No doubt many of you will have read comments and seen articles about what happened at Melbourne synod in these last days. Here's my summary:

The opening service was the best synod service I've ever been to. It was absolutely beautiful: the hymns, the readings, the preacher's sermon - all really wonderful and uplifting.

We quickly dealt with some minor legislation, received some reports (reports of organisations are received but not commented on at Melbourne's synod), and passed about 15 motions formally. That was Wednesday and Thursday nights. Friday night, after the orders of the day it was on to the three motions to which objection had been called:

1. The motion whereby we welcomed the Confessing Anglicans in NZ and prayed for the bishop who was being consecrated for them today. The mover's speech used the extended simile of refugees to describe the Confessing Anglicans in NZ, and to appeal to our compassion to welcome them. A number of people attempted amendments, none of which were successful. The debate was awful: brave people yet again put themselves on the floor; the middle evangelicals who usually would rein things in put up a speaker who swayed the vote towards a yes with a dreadful analogy about mediating between fighting friends, or a couple who were divorcing; the Archbishop completely stuffed up chairing the debate - at several points we didn't know what we were voting on. The vote came to a count of nametags (which are coloured by house here), and the vote was something like 190/230: carried. I left the floor at that point because I was so angry and distressed: the one NZ Maori priest who spoke to the motion suggested there was a wider context to do with how the NZ church is, and did not support the motion - and then the Archbishop invited him to pray for us and for the NZ church once the motion passed.
2. A motion whereby we expressed our sorrow at the actions of the Diocese of Wangaratta in making moves towards permitting the blessing of civil unions. One of the bishops spoke against the motion, because of the complexity around the situation: in actual fact, what +Parkes has done is to kick the issue to the next level, to get clarification from the Appellate Tribunal, and he believes he has done so within the boundaries of the bishops' statement from earlier in the year. Wangaratta has done nothing wrong. The bishop's words were ignored. The vote was taken: the motion passed by about 20 votes.
3. A motion which came to us in an amended form from that on the business papers, which asked us to affirm our bishops in making the statement at the bishops' conference. The motion was further amended to add a second clause picking up on the fourth paragraph of the bishop's statement which establishes that all people are welcome in our churches and we commit to caring for them (essentially - I'm paraphrasing as I don't have the statement in front of me). By this stage it was all over, and the motion passed easily.

It was obvious throughout the triumphal crowing in the back by those who wanted these motions. They were organised, they ensured that everyone who had a vote showed up and made it count, and they made sure everyone toed the line and voted in a particular way. Heaven only knows that the elections are going to reveal; I know from what a couple of people on the other side said in the lead up to synod that they weren't prepared to let any non-evangelicals get voted on to anything if they could help it.

At the end of the motions and before the final formal motions of thanks, one bishop from each "side" got up, made a statement acknowledging the pain, diversity of views etc etc (this was at my prompting, because I felt we needed something to acknowledge people were in deep pain), and prayed for the gathering. They then led us in the greeting of peace. I found that a cathartic moment, because I love many people whose views differ from mine deeply, and this synod has broken those relationships, some beyond repair. In reflection, I see it as a forced violence underlining the smug conservative agenda with a smug humility, a nod in the direction of the grief and pain many of us are feeling.

For this is not just another dirty synod with blood on the floor. It feels to me as though we have lost the war: the Trojan Horse has let the Greeks in, and it's as the Cassandras in our midst prophesied years ago: they're on their way to the citadel. The next Archbishop of Melbourne will probably be another Sydney puppet sympathetic to GAFCON. We have five years to work to see that not become reality, or at least to ensure a moderate person is elected.

In the meantime, there will be General Synod, and then next year's Synod, at which I am sure these issues will dominate (given that our synod is after GS). Those who are in the devastated category are talking about mobilising soon in order to help people understand what these motions are really asking well in advance of synod, and to plan how to minimise damage. We are talking resistance - mindful that we not engage the violent strategies of the other side.

I think what this does is to issue a wake-up call: a call to turn not to fear and anxiety as the motivation, not to the urge to "other" those who would see us kicked out of our church, but to fall on our knees in prayer. This is the work, ultimately, of the Spirit of God. It is Christ's church, and its future is God's business. Our job here and now is to go deeper in prayer, to be ever more eager to preach the good news and introduce people to Jesus, and to not flag in our zeal to do these things.

As I said through my tears to the folk at St Margaret’s on Sunday: we are people who believe in resurrection, and so we have to believe that on the other side of this death there is new life. We just don't know what that looks like yet.

Keren Terpstra

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