

**Sermon on the occasion of the Diocese of Wangaratta Synod Eucharist
Friday 13th May 2016, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Wangaratta.**

**Conducted by The Right Reverend John Parkes AM, Bishop of
Wangaratta.**

The standard textbook on Luke Acts when I was at theological college was the magisterial work of Hans Conzelmann. The English title does not fill the reader with a sense of eager anticipation to dip into its pages. The Theology of St Luke seems fairly pedestrian. But the German title is much more exciting and points to Conzelmann's real insight into Lukan theology. Die mitte der zeit - the middle of time.

Conzelmann describes time in three phases. From creation until John the Baptist is the first phase. The time of the church is the third phase. And at the heart is the middle of time - die mitte der zeit - which is the fulcrum around which all of history turns. The middle of time, the Christ event makes sense of all that has gone before, and all that will come; from creation to new creation.

The beginning of Acts represents the point of transition from this history defining Christ event into the third phase - the time of the church. Luke begins by recounting Jesus' charge to the disciples. He tells them that they must wait in Jerusalem until they had received power from the Holy Spirit, in order to be witnesses to the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is followed by the Ascension.

In obedience to their Lord's instruction, the disciples returned to an upper room in Jerusalem. And there they do what all disciples should do as they wait upon the Spirit to guide them forward. They pray. This is where the reading assumes a sharp edge for this session of Synod and our strategic

planning exercise. Peter announces that it was necessary, according to Holy Scripture, to appoint a disciple in place of Judas the betrayer.

There's no doubt that the significance of the twelve lies in its allusion to the 12 tribes of Israel, and the new Israel brought into being through Christ. But doesn't it strike you as particularly significant that the first item of post Ascension business is the reorganisation of the twelve. Clearly apostolic structure is a very important reality in the early church's mission!

Peter sets out for us the qualifications needed in such a replacement. One of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection. There are two nominations. Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. We know nothing of either of them. This is their one mention in the Scriptures. Eusebius notes that Matthias was one of the seventy disciples of Luke 10:1. That may be so - there is no scriptural evidence to support the assertion. Later tradition claimed that Matthias was a missionary to the Ethiopians.

The method chosen was the sacred lottery. Which might seem pretty haphazard to us. There is, of course, plenty of scriptural warrant for this method of election, and it has the advantage that it does leave space for the action of God.

So, the first business of the early church was the election of a new twelfth disciple. There are three dimensions involved in this. The horizontal dimension, the vertical dimension and the personal dimension. I'm not overly fond of spatial metaphors, but being aware of their limitation we will play with them for a moment.

Horizontally, it is clear that structure matters. The purposeful structure of discipleship for the life of the church is vital to the church's mission on earth. And this clearly relates to the exercise we are engaged in at Synod. What is God's structural will for us as we seek to carry out God's missionary purposes in the Diocese of Wangaratta into the 21st Century? The structures we have inherited are creaking and groaning. We do not seem to be well organised for the task of preaching the Gospel in our time and place. Yet structure does matter, and in our prayer and in our planning we need to struggle together to shape the church for its way forward. We are not alone in this task.

There is a vertical dimension to the story as well: discerning God's will! God's will is crucially important for informing our structures of mission in the world today. As well as working together we must be praying together, inviting the Spirit of God to be at the heart of our strategic planning. The fundamental mistake that we can so easily make is to persuade ourselves that it is all about us. The Church is not ours. It is God's. If we forget that deep truth for even one second then our puny efforts will come to nothing.

Allied to the horizontal and the vertical dimensions is the third or personal dimension. In the midst of all this talk about structural and strategic planning, how do we discern God's will for our lives? Three observations may help.

First, we know the framework of God's will for our lives in this world: we are called to love God and to love our neighbour (cf. Matthew 22:36-40 and 1 John 4:20-21). All the decisions we make about our lives ought to be framed within these two great commandments. Our lives are not our own to do with as we please. We are called to love God by loving our neighbour. This is the framework in which our lives ought to be lived. And the measure

of our love is the measure shown by Christ. This is what our Gospel tells us. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Second, we know we live our lives under the canopy of God's forgiving love. I can't stress too much the importance of this truth. I don't believe that God's specific will for our life is revealed to many of us. As Paul tells us in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). We can pray earnestly for a clear revelation of God's will for us, but few of us will have our prayers answered. So, following the advice of Martin Luther, we will have to choose our path boldly. Inactivity is not an option. We are not rabbits frozen in the headlight. We don't often know for certain which is the right path. We choose, knowing that God's forgiving love will sustain us in the midst of lives' many decisions.

Allied to this second point is a third, and it is this. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In Romans 8:28 we read, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..." God is at work in the midst of our decisions, working to make the best out of our decisions. That sometimes the decisions we make are not the best does not separate us from God. As people claimed by Jesus Christ and committed to Jesus Christ, we choose, we decide, and we act.

We act in the assurance that God's love is all embracing So that with Paul we can know that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor

things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May God bless us richly in our meeting together. May God make known his will for us as a Diocese and his people individually. And as we are blessed may we in our turn be a blessing to the world. For Christ's sake.