

Pastoral Letter II, April 2nd, 2020

Hi Everyone

In talking to a few of you during the week, I was reminded of the priority of sharing with you my experience of the communities of Cobargo, Narooma, Bodalla and Bermagui. I had intended to reflect about this with you, during Lent, in the context of the Sunday liturgies: Corona put an end to that. So, I would like to use this letter to explain to you a little of the experience, what was achieved through it, and what may be achieved in the near future.

In essence the job became two-fold. The first was to address the communities themselves— both the church communities and beyond the churches into the broader communities. The second, was to address something that I had not anticipated: the future of the Mt Dromedary Parish.

The Legacy of the Fires

The legacy of the fires is quite dire. In my work, I concentrated upon the immediate area of Cobargo, engaging with the immediate church communities – Uniting, Anglican and Catholic – while also talking with the farming communities which form parts of each of those denominations, in addition to the local business communities, with whom I talked in their premises in the main street and a few outside of business hours.

The broad sense I developed is that of shock. People were and are still dealing with the actual events, telling stories of what happened, when it happened and how it happened, as well as their responses: defending their homes, their animals, their businesses and their lives. The discussions took me back to my work in earlier countries, marked by political disasters, rather than natural ones. In both these situations, the responses were similar, as people retold the events, time after time as a way to mentally and emotionally process them.

The other dimension of the conversations, almost invariably involved their experience since the events: in particular, the response by charities, insurance bodies, and governments. Of the three, insurance companies seem to be doing a competent job in promptly addressing the damage to people's lives and properties. On the other hand, charities and in particular governments have not done especially well. The anger and despair were reserved especially for the latter, as people spoke scathingly of Centrelink. At the time of my leaving, payments due to many of the folk were either late or uncertain. The sense was that, having gone through the recent events, that some special consideration might have been given to swift processing. It seems however that red-tape has prevailed. In all, there was and possibly still is, a sense of deep disaffection that simmers.

One of the bright spots is that the recommendations of the Canberra Regional Presbytery, in which the parish lies, are 'on the money'. A working team from the presbytery and the NSW Synod, were on the ground just a few weeks before I arrived, and their appreciation and understanding of what was required to address the challenges, was accurate. Accordingly, I confirmed those responses as such and look forward to the corporate body, Uniting channelling their resources into the area promptly.

The Ministry of Mt Dromedary Parish

One of the real difficulties in the area, indeed all along the south coast of NSW, is a number of parishes and congregations that are well distanced from each other, and that have little to do with each other, because of quite separate histories: for example Bateman's Bay and Moruya are quite different to Narooma and Bodalla. Equally, Cobargo is quite different to Narooma, even though they are in the same parish, while Bega is different again. Moreover, the financial strength of these congregations is inadequate to finance a minister for each, meaning that there needs to be cooperation between them, different and diverse as they are. These last years have seen attempts to find ways forward, but the tyranny of distance mitigates against closeness between congregations and effective ministry itself.

The time spent, especially in the last half of my time in the region, was to examine alternative possibilities including the development of united parishes between the Uniting and Anglican churches – the Anglican

churches are part of the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese, while simultaneously, suggesting ways for increased finance for the Mt Dromedary Parish for ordained ministry from the Uniting Church itself. The strength of the Mt Dromedary Parish is that it is an active place, where creative people work to good effect. Indeed, their involvement in the community is ‘mind-blowing’ as they provide community meals through a weekly dining event called “Monty’s Place” and an Op-Shop which exists not as a money-generator for the parish, but to genuinely serve the people of the area: and all of this without formalized ministry agents such as ministers and the like.

The Future

As to our relationship with the people of Mt Dromedary Parish, Corona has clearly conspired against it in the immediate term. That nevertheless remains our goal, as we like them, batten down, for the next few months, in the expectation that there will be life and much to do on the other side.

Remain safe and God bless you all!

Geoff