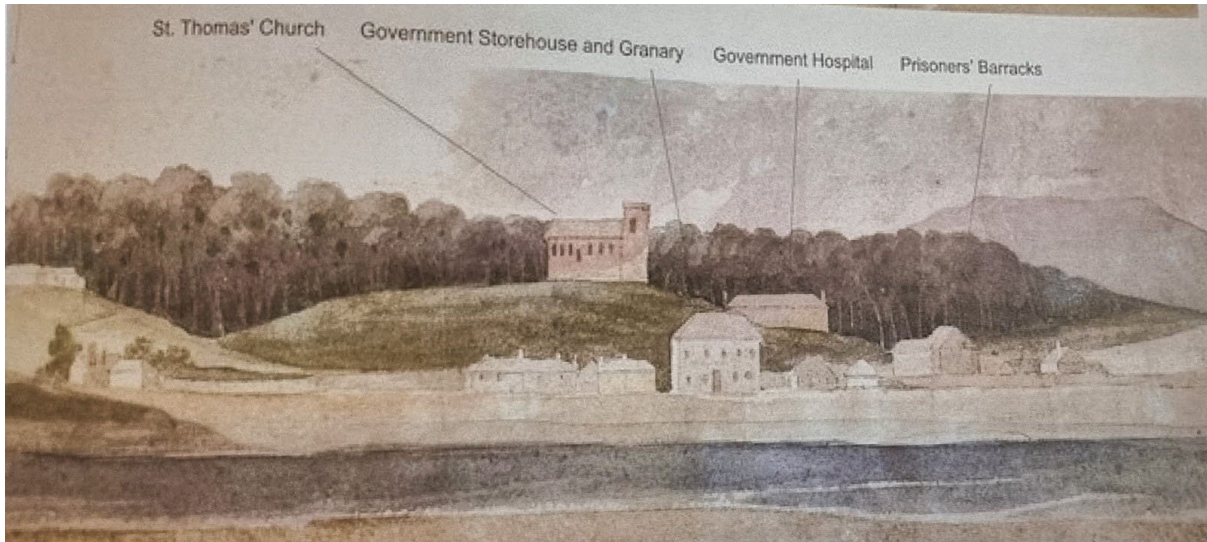


**Sermon Preached at the Synod Eucharist,
St John's Coffs Harbour, Friday 28 June 2024
The Feast of St Peter and St Paul – Apostles and Martyrs
Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton**



*Early view of St Thomas' Church, Port Macquarie. Augustus Earle 1825 or 1826.
State Library of New South Wales.*

As we gather for this thirty-eighth Synod we might be mindful that one hundred and ten years ago, the very first Synod of the Diocese of Grafton was meeting in June 1914. But of course this year we remember too that there has been an Anglican presence on the North Coast for much longer than that. As Governor of New South Wales, Lachlan Macquarie was impressed by reports of the region around what we now know as Port Macquarie. Noting its valuable timber reserves, its suitable farm lands, and its seaboard location, Port Macquarie was established as a penal settlement in 1821. Today we are in awe of the breathtakingly beautiful lands of the Dughutti and Birpai peoples, with rainforest, mountains, waters and coastline.¹ But for Macquarie and the colonial administration at that time, it was simply land to be exploited and used for its economic and practical value – eventually convenient as one of only two places for secondary punishment of particularly hardened convicts in New South Wales outside Sydney.

The foundation stone of St Thomas' Church Port Macquarie was laid on 8 December 1824, at a service conducted by the Reverend Thomas Hassall who had been appointed as Chaplain to the settlement in August of the same year.

The founding of St Thomas' in 1824 was significant to what would later become the Diocese of Grafton and was part of the emergence of thousands of parish churches across the country as the colony began to grow.

Stuart Piggin and Robert Linder's book *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740-1914*ⁱⁱ describes in detail the drive to build churches and establish parish communities across the country during this period. The authors describe it as a period of "alarming growth". In the 1860-70s there was a craze for building churches, and soon spires and steeples occupied many skylines. Many of our churches here in Grafton Diocese were built during this period, including Grafton Cathedral. Churches at Wauchope and later Kempsey soon emerged as daughter churches of St Thomas' Port Macquarie.

A huge amount of energy, effort and money was spent raising funds and constructing churches in every community – big and small. Many communities, including smaller towns, had at least four church buildings in their streets – most likely Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian. Maybe you can think of the town or suburb where you grew up – most likely there were churches of at least these four denominations present and active at that time. In the early days, church attendance was strong, with about 80% of the population of Victoria (for example) having close contact with one of the Christian denominations.

The building of churches was part of what those generations saw as their vocation to build a Christian nation - to put the church building and the parish at the centre of community life.

This was the vocation of Australian Christians of all the mainstream denominations during that period. What God had called them to do in their day.

In many parts of the world today, new churches are still being built every day. At Bishops' gatherings, Bishops from Africa and Asia often report how many new churches they have consecrated recently. I'm usually rather quiet on these occasions. I asked my PA Maree Collett to check how many churches I've *deconsecrated* since I came to Grafton as Bishop in late 2018. The answer was that I've deconsecrated 23 churches since 2019. Most of these had been built during the period of public prosperity referred to earlier, such as All Saints Lawrence (1868), St Paul's Coramba (1898) and St Cuthbert's Ellenborough (1907).

Looking back, whether it's back to the first Synod 110 years ago or to the foundation of St Thomas' 200 years ago, can be a cause of celebration but it's also a burden. We're reminded that this ongoing story on the North Coast has highs and lows. It's a story of lives transformed and given to Christ, hardships like flood, bushfire and pandemic faced and overcome, of vibrant Christian communities contributing to wider civic life, of schools providing excellence in education, of loving service, of social justice through Anglicare and parishes. But sadly it's also a story of segregation and dispossession, of being complicit with violence and forced removal, and of child sexual abuse. A rich and diverse story, with much to celebrate but also, much to lament. What is our story moving forward? What will define us?

In the Gospel reading, we see Peter struggling with vocational questions. What work was this Jesus calling him to?

Jesus asks Peter three times, *do you love me?*

You may know that in the Greek there is more than one word for love, and two of those words are being used in this conversation, which, when looked at in the Greek appears to be at cross purposes.

The word Jesus uses when he asks Peter, do you love me? is *agapeo*. The selfless love that Jesus himself has made known to the world. The holy love of God.

But in his reply, Peter uses a different word for love, *phileo*. The love expressed in human friendship. It's still love, but not the total, self-forgetful love that Jesus was talking about.

Stephen Cottrellⁱⁱⁱ says that the conversation could be translated like this:

Jesus: *Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*

Peter: *Yes, Lord, you know that I am your friend.*

An inadequate reply really, which Jesus must have found disappointing, so he asks again: *Do you love me?*

Peter repeats his first reply: *Yes, Lord, I am your friend.*

So Jesus patiently asks a third time, but this time he graciously adapts his language to something that Peter can understand: *Do you love me as a friend?*

The penny drops for Peter: *Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.*



Jesus sees to the heart and sees who Peter has become. He says, *feed my sheep*. In other words, become the one who will supply the needs of my people, the rock on which I will build my church.

Peter's story includes his three-fold denial of Jesus. Of course, Jesus knew this, but he didn't want that to be the end of Peter's story. Peter was to be defined as the rock on which Jesus would build his church. Jesus invites him to a new identity and purpose within the continuing story. Now that he has come to realise his vocation in Christ, Peter will find the strength and the resources to be the rock.

We might have a different vocation to our forebears, but we have much in common with them.

We too are inspired by the God who gives hope, courage and strength to serve him and to carry out his mission on the North Coast.

In our Epistle reading tonight (2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18) we hear that *the Lord stood by me and gave me strength ... so that the message might be fully proclaimed*. Like Timothy's, our mission too is to fully proclaim the message. To find new ways of ministering and of engaging with the people and communities of the North Coast – not to build *churches*, but to build the *church*.

Looking at St Thomas' Port Macquarie now it's easy to forget that, when the foundation stone was laid 200 years ago, they had little idea where they were headed. Apart from looking at the architect's plans, they couldn't have conceived what their church and its parish community would grow to become. The vibrant, life-giving Christian community it is today. This year's Bi-centenary of St Thomas' is a time of celebration and thanksgiving for the whole diocese.

Like Peter, we've already been part of the story, but like him we've reached a turning point where we have a renewed vocation and purpose. As a diocese we have a plan and purpose – it's called *Daring to Live into God's Future*.^{iv} What we discern as God's future for us defines how we want to be part of God's ongoing story on the North Coast today. What will define us? What part will you play, what part will I play?

May clarity of our vocation and purpose come from attentiveness to God's wisdom and will and be driven by the hope that is in us.

Footnotes to Sermon

- i. The book *Baal Belbora: The End of the Dancing* tells the story of the dispossession and massacre of the ancient people of the Hastings, Manning and Macleay districts. Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited: Sydney 1981.
- ii. Monash Publishing, 2018. This book was the winner of the Australian Christian Book of the Year in 2019.
- iii. Stephen Cottrell, *On this Rock*. The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2003.
- iv. <https://www.graftondiocese.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Restructuring-for-Mission-and-Ministry-Daring-to-Live-into-Gods-Future-for-Us.pdf>



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