

Consecration of Fr Leonard Dawea

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Bishop of Temotu, Province of Melanesia

11 September 2016

I am delighted to be here today, and in particular would thank the Archbishop for his invitation to preach. This is my third visit to the Province, my last being six years ago, to open the extension to Chester House in Honiara. But it is my first visit to Temotu, and it is a particular pleasure to visit this part of Melanesia. On an earlier visit, which included Vanuatu, I managed to reach the Diocese of Banks and Torres and, as on that occasion, I feel as if I am in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This is a splendid, and peaceful, place.

Fr Leonard is one of four members of the Melanesian Brotherhood whom the Diocese of Chester sponsored to study for a degree in Theology at the University of Chester. The University of Chester used to be affiliated to the nearby University of Liverpool, and Fr Leonard's degree in 2005 will formally have been awarded by the University of Liverpool. For the past ten years, the University of Chester has had full University status, and now awards its own degrees. The origins of the University of Chester go back to 1839, when the Diocese of Chester founded a College for the training of teachers for the schools which were being established, to enable all children to have a proper education. Its Christian and Anglican foundation continues, and I am President of the Council of the University of Chester.

Fr Leonard is the first student of either the College or the new University to be consecrated as a Bishop, and I bring special greetings from the Vice-Chancellor, and from the Department of Theology, and indeed from the whole University.

The wider Diocese of Chester remembers Fr Leonard from his three years with us, and from his participation in the mission visit to the Diocese by the Brothers and Sisters from Melanesia, led by Fr Richard Carter. Everyone sends their congratulations, and very best wishes, to Fr Leonard today. We are delighted to have played a part in Fr Leonard's University education.

The formal partnership link between the Diocese of Chester and the Province of Melanesia is now about 30 years old, and it has been a great blessing to us, in so many ways.

Our partnership springs from our common membership of the Anglican Communion, and from the original evangelisation of these islands by Bishop Selwyn, and Bishop Patteson. The story of the establishment of the Christian Gospel here has long been a great inspiration, to very many people.

Bishops Selwyn and Patteson were men of their time – men of nineteenth-century English society. The accounts of their journeys around these islands in the original Southern Cross show an extraordinary commitment and dedication, amid all the hazards which were involved – including regular bouts of malaria.

Bishops Selwyn and Patteson brought a Christian Gospel which was shaped by the English Anglican culture of the nineteenth century. It was expressed in English, and in English hymns, and in the English Book of Common Prayer. The Gospel which was so shaped and expressed by nineteenth-century English culture, along with the general establishment of colonial government, had a huge impact on the Solomon Islands, and upon Vanuatu – and inevitably so. No doubt in many ways that is a lasting influence, but the strongest impression on me in 1999, when I made my first visit, was of how naturally ‘Melanesian’ everything now feels.

I recall preaching at a service at St Barnabas’ Cathedral in Honiara, with 1000+ people in the congregation, and only two white faces among them. While aspects of the hymns and the liturgy derived from the English Anglican tradition, it all felt very local, and Melanesian.

This, of course, was fundamental to the vision of Bishops Selwyn and Patteson themselves: to establish the Gospel in these islands, and as soon as possible to appoint clergy and church leaders from the local population. The story of how they and others went about this is deeply moving, and Fr Leonard today bears his own particular testimony to it. I would like to think that the assistance we gave to Fr Leonard 12 years ago to study in Chester has a certain continuity with the vision with which Bishops Selwyn and Patteson first established the church here.

It is a particular feature of Christianity that, among the world religions, it has been able easily to adapt to different cultural settings. This reflects the fact that the New Testament itself gives relatively few specific commands about how the local church should organise itself. The commands which we read are essentially for that particular local Church, there and then, in that particular time and place. Clearly there needs to be the basic continuity which the Gospel gives and requires, but the details are largely for local discernment. This is summed up in the verse from St Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you’.

Rather than give us precise instructions about all aspects of Church life, God gives us a much more precious gift - himself – and empowers us to ‘work out our own salvation with fear and trembling’.

In this way God gives us the freedom, and the responsibility, to adapt the life of the Church, and our lives within it, to his basic call to us to be disciples and witnesses. This has led over the centuries to the Christian Faith taking a rather different shape, and having a rather different feel, in different parts of the world.

This is why partnership between different dioceses and Provinces is important. We have so much to learn from each other, and so much to give to each other, precisely out of our different experiences. I believe this has been richly illustrated in the relationship between the Province of Melanesia and the Diocese of Chester these past 30 years. It has been our different perspectives and experiences which have precisely generated the richness which we have experienced.

Our perspectives and experiences have to be of the same Gospel, and the same God, of course. That's why, amid our differences of cultural expression, we need a common commitment to the same Scriptures, the same Creeds, the same sacramental worship, and the same structure of mutually recognised ministry under a universal episcopate. These represent the so-called Lambeth Quadrilateral, which bind all Anglicans together.

Sometimes, the local adaptation to which I refer becomes controversial. Is this or that really an expression of the same Gospel? These questions are testing the Anglican Communion in new ways, but I am pleased to note that in our relationship over the years it has always been the unity of the Church which has been uppermost in our

minds, and the controversies which are proving so difficult in other parts of the Anglican Communion have largely passed us by.

But there's a deeper reason why we need each other. The strength of the Gospel's ability to take root in a particular culture, and adapt itself accordingly, can also become a weakness, when the local interpretation of the Gospel is assumed over time to be the only, or the most obvious, interpretation.

This can lead to a confusion, or an assimilation, between the Gospel and a particular culture. At worst it can become a captivity of the Gospel in a culture, a bit like the people of ancient Israel ending up in captivity in Babylon because they had failed to keep their Jewish identity and distinctiveness.

In recent years, this has been the sharpest criticism of the Church of England – that over the years, indeed over the centuries, it had become too 'English', too absorbed by, and identified with, English society.

So, we need our partnership relationships so that we can hold up a mirror to each other, to help each other to guard against becoming too identified with our particular context and culture.

One way or another we all need constantly to be on our guard against allowing the Gospel to become too familiar, too comfortable, and – if you like – too 'normal'.

In the New Testament, the best example here comes from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, from which our reading was taken. The Corinthian Christians had indeed allowed their Christian belief to become too 'normal', too accommodated to Corinthian culture. As a result, the social divisions which were normal in Corinthian society, had become all-too-normal within the life of the Church. The rich were no longer prepared to share their wealth with the poor, or to eat with them.

Against this, as Paul sets the eternal Gospel of Jesus Christ:

'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.'

This is the Gospel to which we need constantly to recommit ourselves – to know only the crucified Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Every Christian will need to wrestle with temptation, and Bishops face additional temptations due to the power they exercise, and the prestige they are given. Fr Leonard, we pray that in your episcopate you will hold fast to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and to that faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

You will do this, not by denying or underplaying the gifts which God has given to you, and which have led to your election as Bishop – but by using them boldly and wisely.

Our understanding of the episcopal office, and the work of a Bishop, is based upon Our Lord's own commission to the original Apostles. That's why we call the ministry of the Church the 'apostolic ministry'. Our Gospel reading contained the foundational commissioning of St Peter:

'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'

This points to the serious consequences of our actions. By them we will either bind or loose – in St John's version, either enable the forgiveness of sins, or prevent the forgiveness of sins.

Fr Leonard, this points to the seriousness, the weight, of the responsibilities with which you are now to be entrusted as Bishop. You will bear them together with the priests of the Diocese, and with all its people. But there's a personal element which cannot be evaded: 'I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.'

The Diocese of Temotu has always had a special place in my heart, although I have never before been able to visit it, because it is here, on the island of Nukapu, that Bishop John Patteson met his death as the first martyr of the Church of Melanesia. There is always a cost to Christian discipleship, and none of us know what that cost may be.

When I was a student at the University of Oxford, I was a member of Merton College, where John Patteson was a Fellow. He remained a Fellow of the College throughout his time in Melanesia. In the Chapel of Merton College, where I regularly worshipped as a

student, there is a lovely memorial to Bishop John Patteson, with an engraving of him being borne out to sea for burial.

Fr Leonard, today you will be consecrated to continue the work which Bishop Patteson began in these islands, as his direct successor in Temotu.

May God bless you, and go with you, in all that you do in His name.

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