

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Commemoration of Bishop William Grant Broughton

First Bishop of Australia

(1788 - 1853)

Evensong

26th February, 2016

'A Church for Australia'

Readings: Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34: 11-16; 1 Peter 5: 1-4.

This evening we have come to remember and give thanks for the life and ministry of William Grant Broughton, the first (and only) Bishop of Australia and later Bishop of Sydney. His presence is clearly apparent to us gathered here with his bust near the lectern, his coat of arms in the stained-glass window near the entrance to the tower, and all about us this church building that served as his cathedral throughout the term of his episcopate. Bishop Broughton is therefore important to us at St James', as was this place important to him in his ministry.

A Pilgrimage to Canterbury

Around thirteen years ago, (when we lived in Bathurst), Rosemary, Kate and I travelled to the UK and, during this time, visited several cathedras and met with their deans. One of these visits included Canterbury Cathedral where we were shown around by the Reverend Ken Child, (a former Rector of the Parish of Rockley near Bathurst), after which we met with the Dean, Robert Willis.

Fr Ken used to take people on what he called the 'Australian tour' of the cathedral; which included the monument to Governor Sir George Gipps, the Blaxland graffiti in the cloisters, and of course the sarcophagus of Bishop William Grant Broughton – the last bishop to be interred in the Cathedral.

Broughton had a close association with Canterbury from his days there as a student at the King's School. For Broughton, this time was a formative time that went on to be a creative force throughout his years in ministry – especially as Archdeacon and later Bishop of Australia.

As Christians, it is important for us to know our roots in the ministry and teaching of Jesus and the experiences of the early church, as related to us in the Scriptures; yet, we know that the story doesn't end there. Many millions of people down through the centuries have an influence on making us who we are today.

For me, the visit to Canterbury was part of appreciating my spiritual journey as an Anglican living in Australia. To see there, in the centre of world Anglicanism, the burial place of the first Bishop of Australia only served to reinforce this sense of place and belonging. Little did I realise then, that I would become rector of the church that served as Broughton's cathedral during the time of his episcopate.

William Grant Broughton

Although a devout person, William Grant Broughton was an unlikely bishop - especially for Australia. He was born in London in 1788 of a middle-class family and originally worked in business. An inheritance from his uncle allowed him to attend Pembroke College at Cambridge University where he read theology. He was an intelligent person, yet his ambition was modest – indeed, it was enough for him to have a good parish in the English countryside.

It was in such a parish that he met the Duke and Duchess of Wellington who, in 1829, convinced him to take up the position of Archdeacon to New South Wales. The position proved to be a much tougher assignment than was described to him. The challenges of distance, climate, the lack of money and other resources, and the godlessness of the population made it a very difficult task indeed.

Broughton however, made a friend in Governor Darling and became one of his close advisors, serving on both the Legislative and Executive Councils. This changed under Governor Bourke, who was not enamoured of Broughton's conservative nature or his claim to the priority of the Church of England in the colony. Bourke, a liberal Anglo-Irishman, had other plans especially in education – which also happened to be Broughton's interest.

Broughton returned to England in 1834 to raise his concerns with the Colonial Secretary. To his surprise, and later to that of Bourke, Broughton was appointed the first Bishop of Australia. On returning to Australia, Bourke tried to exclude Broughton from the administration of the colony. He was also, and understandably so, lampooned in the press for some of his quaint conservative ideas such as a religious foundation for the University of Sydney and support for an hereditary Legislative Council – later to be satirised as the 'bunyip aristocracy'!

However, a change in governor from Bourke to Sir George Gipps, (who like Broughton was a King's School old boy), changed the Bishop's fortunes, allowing him to get on with the development of what was to become the Anglican Church of Australia. He remained Bishop of Sydney until 1852 when he died whilst on a visit to England.

Establishing a Church in Australia

Broughton's legacy for the Anglican Church in Australia is the creation of its five foundational dioceses – Sydney, Tasmania, Adelaide, Newcastle and Melbourne. He was also the founder of the King's School at Parramatta, named after his alma mater at Canterbury. Broughton also travelled widely across Australia and encouraged the establishment of many parishes and schools.

Of course, it was not an easy task for Broughton. There was much resistance to his work, from both the authorities and the general public. He tended to look back to England and its established church for models to apply in the Australian context, often without success. Australia was not to have an established church, indeed the mood of the age was to make Australia a secular society based on humanist values.

Moreover, the Christian denominations seemed to spend more of their time fighting each other for political position rather than bringing any good news to the ears of a greatly disinterested and sometimes hostile people. This sectarianism was to continue as a modus operandi for the churches in Australia for well over one hundred years.

A problem for Broughton was that the needs of the colony were greatly different from the conservative world of his homeland. Nevertheless, given the challenges of distance and communication, he laid down a structure for the Anglican church that gave it the required flexibility for its growth and development for the next hundred years. This included diocesan independence and strong synodical government.

Sadly, this same structure has proven to be a blight upon our church for the past seventy years, making itself manifest through the experiences of self-interest, self-reference, factionalism and tribalism; all centred upon diocesan institutional structures and their need for control.