

Waikato Taranaki Synod Sermon (Readings: Acts 2:42-47 & John 21:1-12)

It's a great pleasure and privilege to be asked to preach at the opening service of your synod. For me it represents our close historical links as well as our enduring friendship as neighbours. Aucklanders are not as afraid of life beyond the Bombay Hills as people sometimes think.

I offer this kauwhau then in a spirit of friendship and love, and also in a spirit of empathy, as the kind of issues you are grappling with are the issues we are grappling with too, and I know are similar across most if not all of the other New Zealand dioceses.

The whole Church is facing big issues about our purpose and structure to be able to offer good pastoral ministry to those who are part of our gathered life, and to equip ourselves to participate well in the Mission of God as bearers of God's love and the gospel message.

We have known the pain and challenge of decline for a long time. At the moment that decline is being exacerbated by sudden rising costs, exemplified by insurance premium increases, and by an overall decrease of income.

Decline in numbers also means a decline in people actively involved in our churches, which in turn means many tasks that were once managed by volunteers fall to clergy to pick up because there is no one else. That leaves less time for pastoral ministry and for leading the people of God in the work of mission.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

A big ticket item for Auckland at the moment is property which is an amazing blessing and a huge challenge all at the same time. We have two centuries of accumulated wealth and property from which we benefit. We have churches that have absorbed the prayers of generations of believers, that have hosted times of great joy and deep sadness of the lives of families. They hold great meaning. They are our sacred spaces. That is significant not just for the current generation of worshippers, but for the life of the wider community who value the presence of those churches and what they symbolise and offer.

We also know that our buildings are places that exist to serve God's mission. They are to be places where we gather to worship and be equipped for that work. They are places from which we go to undertake that work, and in turn to which we can bring others. They stand as a sign in the community of God's presence.

So we live with this tension – the respect we have for our buildings and what they represent, and whether they are a benefit to God’s mission or become an end in themselves and thus an impediment to God’s mission.

I don’t know for sure but I suspect property is likely to be one of your conundrums. We need to face the questions that arise from these tensions very carefully.

Challenge always offers opportunity, and the task now as you gather synodically is to build on the regional conversations you have been having and to discern what are the new opportunities, and to set a path accordingly to make good use of your resources in ways that both respect the sacred heritage we are entrusted with, but also ensure the mission of God continues effectively.

As an aside I would add that organisationally we do not face these issues alone. They are real right across the charitable and not for profit sector in our country. Compliance, cash flow, volunteers, asset maintenance, a perfect storm of issues that is preventing lots of organisations from fulfilling their core purposes.

I’ve thought a lot in recent months on the nature of the Jerusalem church that is described in Acts 2. It’s easy to read that passage in an idealised way as we are told that people had all things in common, sold possessions to help others in need, and that God was adding daily to the number of believers. So often I’ve heard people say things like “if only we could be like the early church.”

But actually when we read the early chapters of Acts as a whole we also discover there were arguments between cultures about who was getting a fair share, some were hiding their wealth so as not to have to share it, and theological disputes between Jewish and Gentile believers were starting to ramp up.

Modern sounding problems, aren’t they?

So reading it with that awareness, I have been wanting to think about what was the essence of the Jerusalem church’s life. I see these things there:

- the gathering of people in personal encounter, *kanohi ki te kanohi*;
- reading the Scriptures together, interpreting them and understanding their meaning for their life;
- celebrating the sacraments; praying together;
- caring for one another;
- making known the love of God and the good news of Jesus to others.

These are things we must ensure that we retain in our church life wherever our structures and the use of resources might take us. This I believe is what the essence of Church life is about.

Just this week I have spent a few days away with the Anglican Catholic dialogue group. We have explored the places of our respective faith beginnings in the North of Aotearoa. Most of us here will know our Anglican story well: the friendship between Ruatara and Marsden, the invitation to come to Rangihoua, the Christmas Day sermon, the establishment of the first mission station.

I didn't really know the places of Catholic beginnings which are in the Hokianga. I knew that in a remote place there is a little church that now contains the casket with the remains of their first Bishop, Jean Baptiste Pompallier, which were repatriated from France 20 years ago. So I was really excited to get to go to Motuti and to have that experience.

What I didn't know is that on the way out there is a little place called Totara Point and that it is where in 1838 Pompallier and others first landed in Aotearoa and that on coming ashore they celebrated mass there.

With your synod in mind, and our own ongoing Auckland conversations, I couldn't help but reflect on the fact that the respective beginnings of Anglicans and Catholics in Aotearoa were ones where we simply connected with whenua, celebrated the presence of God, and in doing so made a response through worship of this vocation to be a part of God's mission.

And as I thought more about that, I thought about how our churches began pretty well with nothing. And I remembered something that Sarah Moss, our Auckland Ministry Educator, had said when she preached at our synod opening last month. Sarah spoke about how in the midst of the kind of issues we are facing we tend to develop a mindset of scarcity which can lead us, even unconsciously, to questions and strategies that are to do with how we survive.

Sarah wondered about how our thinking can change when we develop a mindset of abundance, a realisation of just how much we do have, and which can then lead us, hopefully quite consciously, to questions and strategies that are to do with how we serve. Such a mindset re-engages us with the mission of God.

Let's not fool ourselves – the scarcity is real and can't be ignored. But it doesn't have to determine our mindset. And our mindset of abundance is not just about the tangible resources which we have, but they are about the treasure we hold within the clay jars of our lives and of our church, the very life of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and the message of the gospel entrusted to us to live and proclaim.

It's also a scarcity in relation to ways of being church that largely belong to a societal context of a different era, and so we are faced with imagining how it can become an abundance for the context of the society within which we minister today.

We have had a metaphor of that in the miraculous catch of fish we heard from the gospel. Working with Jesus, following his call, being prepared to do familiar things in a different way or in a different place, can yield an abundance because it is about joining with Jesus in the ongoing Mission of God that he began among us.

Friends, deliberate well. Know that the prayers of others are with you as you do so. Listen for the voice of the Spirit as you seek to identify the new opportunities that are being set before you. In all the reality of the challenge of scarcity, remember the abundance of what you have and the abundance of the life of Christ that is within and among us as we respond to the call to be bearers of the gospel.

Bishop Ross Bay
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