

“Back to Canberra”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - 5 July 2009

Mark 6:1-13, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

In 10 days time I conclude my three years as national President of the church. At the Assembly opening service in Sydney on Wednesday week I shall install our new President, Rev Alistair Macrae from Melbourne, by removing this presidential cross and placing it around his neck and by hanging a new presidential scarf on his shoulders. While I will undoubtedly miss many aspects of being President, it will be a relief to pass on the heavy responsibilities and challenges of serving as President. I look forward to again being one of the ministers back in our Canberra Central Parish, fulltime.

I did a bit of counting this past week. In my three years as President, I've been away from home 575 nights, just over half the time. I've travelled on 390 planes. I shudder to think of my carbon footprint - which mind you, has at least in theory been offset by paying for many trees to be planted. I have visited just over 100 of our 1800 congregations, I've preached, as President, 83 sermons; I've delivered something like 180 other speeches, and I've participated in more than 150 community and ecumenical gatherings with leaders of other churches, with government and non-government organizations, with politicians, and with leaders of other faiths. You can see why it will be a relief and a liberation to return to local ministry in Canberra.

Our gospel reading today speaks of Jesus returning to Nazareth after travelling and ministering elsewhere - and of his hometown people refusing to believe in him, rejecting him. I'm very much hoping that will not be my fate in returning to ministry in Canberra!

Today, perhaps a little self-indulgently, I want to share with you just two learnings from my past three years, and then reflect briefly on the poem you've received in the order of service.

The first learning is that my confidence in the present and future life of the Uniting Church has soared as I have been exposed to the church in every corner of the land. After his rejection in Nazareth Jesus went out among other villages and he sent his disciples out on his behalf, to spread the good news in word and in deed. It's a privilege to be able to say that the Uniting Church is keeping up that mission, in villages, towns, cities, in the outback, overseas, with tremendous faithfulness - in word and deed.

Our best estimates at the moment are that of our 1800 congregations, around 600 are growing, 750 are declining and 450 are just holding their own. Those numbers are not brilliant, but they are encouraging as it means there are significantly more of our congregations growing now than 5 or 10 years ago. Growth is happening across the theological spectrum of the Uniting Church - again encouraging - with most growth coming from families with young children and in our migrant congregations.

More importantly than the figures though, are two other factors. One is that we are far more accepting of the various diversities among us - in theological emphasis, worship style, different views on social and political issues - than we were 5 or 10

years ago. And the second is that the next generation of church leaders are emerging - ministers and lay leaders a lot younger than me with tremendous giftedness and commitment to the faith and to the church.

The second learning is that the church is still very much an influence for good in our community and national life. The work of UnitingCare's community services programs is extraordinary, serving over a million Australians every year. The credibility of the church with community leaders such as business groups, trade unions, non-government organizations, and with government is high. There's never a week when the church is not directly involved in serving the poor and in advocating for justice in our world. National leaders of the churches have excellent access to our national political leaders.

In our reading from second Corinthians today, Paul speaks of how God's grace has enabled him to keep going in his ministry despite persecutions and difficulties and a particular unspecified thorn in his flesh. God told him, he says "my grace is sufficient for you". Well, I have not been persecuted, I don't carry anything I could regard as a thorn in my flesh, but I can witness to the fact that through the demands and stresses of the past three years, God's grace has always been there for me, and has been more than sufficient for me - even when Alison my wife was dying, and even when I've copped some abuse from people angry with our church. To know God loves you, even when you're feeling weary or weak or inadequate, is a marvellous thing.

It's in that context that the message on the boat I was given in April in Fiji struck a chord with me - "the will of God will never take you where the grace of God cannot keep you". Bob Davenport, one of our 9.00 members, found the poem from which these lines are taken (*see below*). It's a beautiful poem, and I like it - but it is a bit simplistic and superficial, it needs three qualifications:

- first, that we recognise that many things happen to us in life that are not the will of God - accidents, diseases, our own poor choices in life, our sinfulness; these things, strictly speaking, are not covered by our poem, all of which centres on that which is God's will, and God's will is never that we suffer;
- second, I want to remind you that the grace of God is there for us even when things have happened which are not of God's will; when we face conflict or suffering or struggle, we can draw on God's peace and guidance;
- and third, we need also to recognise that sometimes in the midst of our struggles and suffering we may feel that God is nowhere to be found; when that's the case it does not mean our faith is insufficient or that God does not care for us, it means rather that our suffering is so strong, so deep, that in our humanness the gap between us and God is too real, too big; and we have no choice but to accept the depth of our struggle and to keep seeking the God whose compassion and grace is there, albeit very hard to find.

Friends, I thank you, the Canberra Central Parish, for allowing me the extraordinary privilege of serving these past three years as President, and I pledge myself to work with you in local ministry in these next years. And I thank God, whose grace has been more than sufficient for me. I look forward to working with you, back in Canberra, as together we seek God's grace and follow God's way of compassion, love, justice and peace. To the glory of God, Amen.

The Will of God

Remember ...

The will of God will never take you,
where the grace of God cannot keep you,
where the arms of God cannot support you,
where the riches of God cannot supply your needs,
where the power of God cannot endow you.

The will of God will never take you,
where the spirit of God cannot work through you,
where the wisdom of God cannot teach you,
where the army of God cannot protect you,
where the hands of God cannot mould you.

The will of God will never take you,
where the love of God cannot enfold you,
where the mercy of God cannot sustain you,
where the peace of God cannot calm your fears,
where the authority of God cannot overrule for you.

The will of God will never take you,
where the comfort of God cannot dry your tears,
where the Word of God cannot feed you,
where the miracles of God cannot be done for you,
where the omnipresence of God cannot find you.

Author Unknown

*Gregor Henderson will be referring to this poem in today's sermon, and has an important qualifier or two to say about it.
5 July 2009*