

“The challenge that faces us”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Combined Parish Service - 27th February 2011

Isaiah 49: 8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34

Last Sunday I had the privilege of worshipping in the grand old 12th century Lausanne cathedral in Switzerland. About 100 of us were present, but that included some 60 of us from across the world, visitors participating in the World Council of Churches meetings in Geneva that week. So the usual Sunday morning attendance in the Lausanne Cathedral, a congregation of the Reformed Church in Switzerland, appears to be about 40 - and the cathedral can accommodate around 3000!

Across the western world the church has been in decline for almost 50 years. The way our culture has developed, with increasing materialism, individualism and secularism, means the younger generations are far less likely to believe in God - and even if they do believe, they're far less likely to want to belong to any church institution. 1963 was the peak year for Protestants in Australia. Catholics held on for a few years more, but they are in similar decline to the rest of us now. And the Pentecostal revival seems to have flattened out, meaning that overall Christian numbers in the western world are steadily declining. Of course we can take heart that in places like Africa, China and India the church is growing strongly.

So congregations like that in the Lausanne Cathedral, struggling numbers occupying large buildings, are now found in many parts of the world, including in Australia. These days we qualify here in Canberra Central as one of the strongest and numerically largest Uniting Church parishes in the country.

St Aidan's of course, is not the strong suburban congregation it once was. The days of smallish neighbourhood congregations appear to be numbered. Wesley, because of location, profile in the community, vast property facilities and our many programs, has the blessing of drawing people from across Canberra and has been able, more or less, to retain its strength over the years. But for every congregation throughout the western world, maintaining a stable congregation, let alone a growing one, is a challenge.

In today's portion of the sermon on the mount, Jesus tells us we should not be worriers. If God looks after the beautiful flowers and the tiniest birds, why should we worry about ourselves. What's more, he says, tomorrow will bring enough worries of its own, so what's the point in being a worrier. Well.... we need to be clear that Jesus is not saying we shouldn't plan for tomorrow, that we shouldn't accept responsibility for our own life, that we shouldn't care about the future - but he is saying that what comes first is our seeking of God's kingdom, our obedience to Christ's way, our awareness that God loves us, forgives us and is with us every day. So we have no need to worry.

Elsewhere Jesus speaks positively about planning, in his brief parable about a king planning to wage war. In that same section in Luke 14, Jesus also teaches about a builder planning to meet the costs of his project. God plans too, as we heard in today's reading from Isaiah, preparing to bring back to Jerusalem those who have been suffering in exile. So planning is okay, worrying is not.

In the yellow summary of our planning day earlier this month, there are 8 specific recommendations for our church life this year, with work to be done in children's and youth ministry, in our connection with the local community, in our fellowship and social life, among others. And alongside this is the further development in the effectiveness of the pastoral and spiritual ministry of our Elders, more study and discussion groups, and our church camp.

Within this planning there's a sharp awareness of the challenges we face, and the opportunities. Hundreds and hundreds more people will soon be living on Wesley's doorstep, in the apartments across the road. Our community facilities such as the Music Centre, Lancaster Hall (known to some of us as the gymnasium) and the tennis courts bring hundreds of non-church people onto our site every week.

When I was church president, one of the common themes I spoke about persistently was what constitutes a healthy effective congregation. I referred to five characteristics:

- worship which enables people to connect with God;
- a welcoming ethos;
- a genuine connection with the local community;
- being part of the bigger wider church; and
- competent ministerial leadership.

Ensuring we rate highly on each of those five is part of the challenge we face.

This parish has been much blessed over many years. When many congregations have been in sharp decline, we've managed in recent years to hold our numbers - and more importantly, our worship, witness and service. But there's always a challenge in ensuring we retain our effectiveness in our worship, witness and service in the present and into the future.

Plan, and follow through, and work hard together - yes. But worry? - no. For God is with us. Amen.