

## **Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013 “45 years of ministry”**

**Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT**

**Gregor Henderson**

**Psalm 100 Acts 7:54-60 Matthew 14:13-21**

In the name of God – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

I think it's four people here today who were at my ordination in Shepparton in 1971 – my father, now about to turn 99; my oldest daughter Cathy, then just turned 1; and Val and Ken Whan, members in my first parish of Shepparton North.

The 42 years since – 45 if I allow for ministry time before I was ordained – have been a fascinating and fulfilling vocation, with plenty of hard work, lots of delight, laughter, anguish, tears, plenty of achievements and frustrations, far too many meetings, hundreds of sermons and thousands of prayers, a deal of travel, and overall an immense privilege and joy. 27 of those years have been in local parish ministry in Victoria, Tasmania and the past 10 years here in Canberra Central, although for three of those years I was hardly here, when serving as national President of the Uniting Church. 15 years were in wider church positions, in the national office for 12 years then an international position for 3. I will look back on every one of those roles with a sense of joyfulness and a measure of pride.

For me there are four main factors which make the role of an ordained minister a privilege and joy:

- First there's the honour of being supported by the church, fulltime, to be an agent of the good news of Jesus Christ. Speaking constantly of God's love for each and every one of us, and trying to live out that love every day, can be demanding and even stressful at times, but it's a marvellous beautiful message about God's gifts of love, forgiveness, self-worth, purposefulness in life, abundant and eternal life. What a privilege.
- Second, there's the honour of representing the church in many different settings, both in the wider church and in the community. Last Monday I spoke at the protest rally at Parliament House on asylum seekers and refugees, representing the church ecumenical. Last Tuesday I was a guest at the installation of Archbishop Christopher Prowse, the new Roman Catholic archbishop of Canberra, representing the Uniting Church. Community and church - a fairly typical week.
- Third, there's the awareness of being part of the worldwide Christian movement. We are not just a local community group, we are part of God's family across the whole of the earth. I've certainly had more privilege here than most, as general secretary and then president of the church visiting with many of our partner churches in Asia and the Pacific, and as one of the Uniting Church people much involved with the World Council of Churches over more than 25 years.
- And fourth, there's the amazing but beautiful fact that being a minister means nearly everyone immediately respects and trusts you – from the Governor-General of the country to the most humble among us. What a privilege to have people share with you their deepest sorrows, their greatest needs and their topmost joys. And to work with them in the service of others.

I've chosen today three of my favourite Bible readings:

- Psalm 100 resounds with praise and joy in response to God's gifts of life and love and faithfulness. Over two and a half thousand years, Psalm 100 has called people to worship God, and with joyful enthusiasm I'm more than happy to be one who's tried to answer that call.
- The feeding of the 5000 always has much to teach us. There's the compassion of Christ for people who are hungering spiritually and physically. No matter that Jesus is looking for some time to himself, having just heard the terrible news of the execution of his second or third cousin John the Baptist, and wanting time to grieve. Then there's this marvellous picture of God's abundance, transforming a young boy's gift of five loaves and two fish into more than enough for thousands of people. And that's a reminder that no matter how small we think we are, no matter how limited we feel our gifts and abilities, God can transform them into something fruitful and beautiful that shows we are indeed fulfilling love of God and love of neighbour.
- Then there's the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr after Jesus. I've hugely appreciated this passage ever since I met Dr Han Wan-Sang in 1985, a Korean pro-democracy campaigner who went on to become deputy prime minister of South Korea. In the 1970s he was imprisoned in solitary confinement for two years, with his sole companion being just some parts of the Bible. He got to know those Bible passages very well. He points out that Stephen's vision of Jesus in heaven is extraordinary. Stephen sees Jesus standing at God's right hand. Note this is the only place in the Scriptures where it's said Jesus is "standing at the right hand of God" and it's emphasised by being said twice. In Ephesians, Colossians and the Creeds the reference is to the ascended Jesus "seated" at God's right hand. Dr Han is convinced Stephen saw Jesus not only standing alongside God, but stamping his feet in anguish and frustration at Stephen's execution. He makes the point that Jesus is not just a spectator, not just a bystander, when it comes to people who are following his way – but that Jesus is a participant, acting with us, alongside us, whenever we faithfully seek to act in love for God and love for neighbour.

Those sorts of inspiring messages from the Scriptures will continue to enthuse me for the rest of my life. Yes, I'm retiring from fulltime active ministry. But no, I'm not retiring from life, I'm not retiring from the faith, I'm not retiring from being a Christian who seeks to live out God's compassion, God's justice and God's peace.

Friends, thank you for the past 10 years of partnership in this parish. Thank you for the past 45 years of ministering together in Christ's service. I want to leave you with three fabulous truths about faith and life – one, that God loves you, always, every day; two, that you have gifts from God, at least one, that enable you to play your part in the ministry of Christ; and three, that Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, walks with us and works with us every day, as we seek to live his way of compassion and justice and peace.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege and joy of being a minister in the church of Jesus Christ.

To the glory of God. Amen.