

## 11 May 2014, Easter 4A, Induction Revd Dr Ockert Meyer, Canberra Central Parish

Ockert, I was so delighted to receive an invitation to be with you today. I am grateful to you, the Parish, and the Presbytery for including me in this special occasion. To be here with you, and to be with the people of the Canberra Central Parish, people I have loved, and from whom I have received so much love, is very moving for me. Thank you.

My responsibility today is to preach the Word. I hope to be able to do that. But I feel an occasion like this also calls us to spend a few moments locating our life as the Church within society at large. It is important to take a realistic look at our place within the world, among its' needs, its' questions, and its' life. For that, after all, is the reason we are here. That is the purpose of the Church.

To disconnect ourselves from the needs of the world, and focus only on ourselves today, and our celebration of a new beginning in ministry, would in fact mean that we cease to be the Church. As Bishop William Temple put it: the Church is the only society in the world that exists for the sake of its' non-members. He may have been exaggerating to make a point. Rumour has it preachers are prone to doing that. But it is a point nonetheless worth making. As Jesus of Nazareth is reported to have said to his first followers: I have come, not for the righteous, but to seek those who feel lost.

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As the Church, we face a great challenge. Perhaps you know what various surveys are telling us: that only about 5% of the Australian population attend Church, and about 90% of the population has no Church association at all.

That decline is partly explained by wider trends - the shift from 'culture Christianity', when people attended Church because it was the cultural norm (in 1905, 85% of people attended Church). But that cannot explain it all. I work in an office with 25 people. Only 2 or 3 have occasional contact with the Church. Yet I am intrigued by how many are interested to talk about the Church – to ask questions about it. *They do want to engage in a meaningful conversation about God.* And yet they have been to a Church, or to a Church-based school, which has not reached them at all. In fact, in many cases, it has had the opposite effect. They are Christians *once-removed*. Like a family member at a distance.

Here is a statistic that is worrying at first sight and yet, on closer inspection, I find it quite hopeful. The National Church Life Survey is conducted every 6 years in Australia. Among other things, it tells us how many people are in Church – about 5% of the population, as I mentioned. That survey has also picked up an interesting phenomenon. Each year, almost exactly the same number of people try to join a Church, but give up. I know it is an oversimplification, but that phenomenon says to me there is a whole other *total* Church population out there who are looking; who want to join a community, if only we can find a way to provide what they are seeking. That 5% who look but give up tell me that people still seek a spiritual dimension to their life - a way of understanding who they are, and how they can live with hope. And they still look to the Church to offer them that opportunity. We exist for their sake, not for our own. But we are not meeting their needs.

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This is where I would like to turn to the Gospel reading. The image that stands out for me like a bell ringing in the night is this image of the gate. Of the gate, and of Jesus as the gate, and the sheep in pasture.

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in, and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I came that you may have life and have it in abundance." (John 10: 9,10)

Biblical scholars tell us chapters 8 through to 12 of John's Gospel are an extended attempt to answer the question: Who is Jesus? As you read through, you can see that flow. I don't mind saying that my life feels like extended attempt to answer the question: Who is Jesus? A challenging, occasionally poetic and rewarding, yet also many times hard work and confusing set of chapters in life. Who is Jesus? The answers that John offers are, I found, quite moving. Jesus is Light, he is Bread, he is the Shepherd, he is the Gate, Jesus is abundant life.

I feel so able to relate to each of those images because they are real. They are down to earth. They are images I can understand, and ways of describing Jesus that I can relate to:

- the one who takes away darkness, Jesus is the light
- the one who nourishes, Jesus is the bread
- the one who guides and protects – Jesus is the shepherd
- the one who opens our path to God – Jesus is the gate
- the one who brings hope and authenticity to our days on this earth – Jesus is abundant life.

I can't explain it. But I know it. And I have experienced it. I hope you have too.

It seems to me the great challenge faced by the Church if we are to reach those who are seeking is that we must find a way of speaking about our 1<sup>st</sup> century faith to 21<sup>st</sup> century people. Our *faith* is one and the same as that of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. But those sisters and brothers who went before us expressed their faith through a *set of beliefs* that many if not the vast majority of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australians no longer believe: seas that part and close again, stars that move across the sky and come to a halt, angelic choirs, people ascending to God through the clouds. That language is so foreign to people today and our understandings have moved so far.

Yet that sort of observation from the pulpit moves us into controversy. And the usual way in which a debate such as this plays out in Church is that two camps are formed: those who say we have moved too far from traditional beliefs, and those who say we have not moved far enough. My little contribution to that debate, if I may, is to suggest that the problem is not that we've moved too far, nor that we haven't moved far enough. I think what might have happened is we have forgotten the *sheer breadth* of how rich and diverse the symbols and the language of our faith are, right before us, in the Bible.

If we are guilty of anything, it is of falling into the trap of taking a being so beyond our comprehension – God – who, because of God's sheer "indescribability" is capable of being described in broad and generous ways, and making that which is so beyond us *so very narrow*. That is most often done, I think, in order to suit our need for conquest through understanding; our need for a formula for belief, to settle on a single answer.

Allow me to come back to John again. How much more welcoming might it be to someone who is trying to approach an understanding of God through us (someone new to the Church, or a Christian once-removed) if he or she were to hear us speak of Jesus as light, as our guide, as our nourishment, of Jesus as the gate who opens our path to God, rather than:

Begotten not made, only son of the Father, sitting at the right hand of the Father, coming again to judge the living and the dead (and so on).

Now, I realise it is cheeky of me to take a few minutes here today to make these observations. But there is a reason. It is not an exaggeration, and nor is it arrogance, to say that this is the *national* parish of the Uniting Church in Australia. It is one of the strongest parishes in the nation. You have a wonderful opportunity to lead the church. With Ockert and David, you have two of the finest and most respected ministers in the nation. We turn our eyes to you to show us the way to the Church's future.

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One final image of gates and pasture. Farmers need a way to ensure their stock are held together, so they stay on good land and don't become lost. In Australia, and I imagine in all other countries too, they do this in one of two ways: either by building fences, or by providing and maintaining water holes.

As you travel toward the country you first see grazing land surrounded by fences; farms with fenced paddocks. Fences are used to keep the herd in. The deeper inland you get, where the land holdings are larger, you no longer see fences because the herds are held, not by the presence of fencing but by the presence of water. The fences are not needed. The presence of the water they know they need to keep alive, in the middle of the dry land, means the flock do not want to stray at all.

Build a well, and do not worry about fences. All sorts of people will want to come.

May God bless you as you do that together with Ockert and David.