

Sermon/Reflection:

A Christian presence in Napier.

St. Paul's Church, Napier, May 15 2022.

I know very little about St. Paul's. I attended worship with you a couple of weeks ago, just to spy out the land, see who you are and chat with the organists about hymns and music, nuts and bolts sort of things. I've also attended a Taize service here and some musical events. I've learned there's been a church here for 160 years.

My first encounter with St Paul's was memorable and challenging. In May 2016 Kathleen and I travelled from Auckland to attend a weekend conference on Progressive Christianity hosted by St Paul's in the Asher Hall. The guest speaker was The Rev Dr Robin Meyers from Tulsa, Oklahoma, then Minister for more than 30 years of the Mayflower Church in that city. During that time he assisted the Mayflower congregation to live more consciously and thoughtfully within the pathway pioneered by Jesus and in that spirit to serve the people of their city and neighbourhood in a way that reflects the all-embracing love of God for all humanity and for all creation.

Robin Meyers described the setting of his church: a Bible Belt state and a city where most claiming to be Christian were distrustful of strangers; were harshly critical of gay people who they claimed were sinners deserving divine punishment; held a deeply seated mistrust of scientific discovery especially if it challenged ancient Biblical assumptions; tended to deny human induced climate change; embraced a largely unspoken assumption of white supremacy along with a harshly expressed distrust of those of other faiths, other cultures and particularly migrants. Many of them adopted what has been described as the "Prosperity Gospel", a strange belief that if you say the right things about Jesus God will reward you with monetary wealth. He described how Mayflower Church had challenged and continues to challenge these and other attitudes and behaviours that represent a clear denial of the Way pioneered by Jesus - no matter how piously and strongly they are held.

In such an unlikely setting Mayflower Church became a community where the Way of Jesus is explored, human need is met as far as the energy and resources of the congregation allow, and the faith is presented in ways that embrace rather than reject knowledge unavailable to those who first wrote the bible and formulated creeds and dogmas that still guide many churches. My notes of the conference remind me that Robin said of mayflower Church that it is "first, unapologetically Christian (in the sense that it takes the Way pioneered by Jesus seriously and in particular this Way as described in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the way Jesus welcomed the marginalised and needy to share his table; and secondly, unapologetically liberal (by which he meant that it takes seriously the findings of emerging scientific and social knowledge and that Christians welcome positive change in a similar spirit to the way we welcome positive change in other areas of

life.) Robin described how Mayflower became a church following the tradition of radical hospitality pioneered by Jesus. – gay persons and members of other marginalised groups, were welcomed and given a seat at the table. That doesn't seem particularly radical or exceptional but it was in Tulsa. The folk at Mayflower continue to seek for peace in every area of life, and in this spirit challenge those who view God as a somewhat violent, vindictive and ever judging heavenly figure. They are working out the implications of the Biblical affirmation that God is love and that all people without exception, are embraced by God-love. Christianity, Robin affirmed, was not a belief system, a collection of creeds and church structures, but a way of life based on expansive love and radical hospitality. (He remarked that the Sermon on the Mount is about how we should live and says not a word about what we must believe. The Nicean Creed formulated at the behest of a Roman Emperor is about belief but says nothing about what to be or what to do in the world – he described this as “the great reversal” and a betrayal of the Way pioneered by Jesus.) He suggested we take ourselves and our opinions and prejudices less seriously and instead allow ourselves to be guided into the hospitable and justice seeking path pioneered by Jesus. Our beliefs will emerge from our doing. He encouraged us to sense how counter cultural the Way of Jesus was and is. Speaking to clergy present he claimed that too little of what is said from the pulpit has anything to do with what is happening in the world. He encouraged preachers to understand the times in which we live along with the Way of Jesus and to bring these two aspects of our life into fruitful and transforming conversation.

Robin Meyers was like a breath of fresh air at a time when many congregations are without clear direction and have slipped away from the Way embodied by Jesus. Those who attended the conference were grateful to St Paul's for hosting the conference that brought him to New Zealand. That was my first visit to St Paul's.

Today St Paul's enters a period described within the Presbyterian tradition as a “vacancy”. For some congregations a vacancy is a period when the group marks time, awaiting the coming of a new Minister who, like a Messiah from afar, will lead them into a new future, whose immense wisdom, experience and faith will work wonders. You could describe this as “a passive vacancy” - a sort of sleepy, marking time.

There's a more creative way of viewing a vacancy – receiving it as a gift, a period when new futures are imagined, when new thoughts flourish and faith is both challenged and renewed. In due course you will share in the development of a parish profile, a statement of who you are, what you seek to become and the nature and shape of your calling as a Christian congregation in the city of Napier. The preparation of that document can be a time for adventurous yet realistic imagining, a time for thoughtful and prayerful discussion.

We live in significant days for the Christian community in New Zealand. We're being challenged with a new urgency to re-explore what it means to be servants of the Way pioneered by Jesus in a changing and challenged world. Think of climate change and the need to drastically modify our way of relating to the natural world. The gap

between rich and poor, world wide and locally, continues to grow, justified by an inherently unjust economic system and fed by the greed of the already well off. International conflict and the re-emergence of new forms of authoritarian leadership is a shadow that affects the whole world. Add the individual and communal insecurity we've experienced in covid times. Subtle racism, social exclusion of those who are different and old-fashioned bigotry are alive and thriving – even in some churches. A congregation wanting to walk in the Way pioneered by Jesus cannot ignore these and other challenges. We live in tough and uncertain times.

In such a time, it seems to me, the world needs the wisdom, vision and energy represented by the Way of life pioneered by Jesus. But main-stream churches like the PCANZ and like St Paul's are in trouble. Numbers are declining. Disagreement over matters of ethics and core beliefs has created divisions that are not easily healed. While some sense an urgency to re-think Faith in a changing, evolving, world, others want to hold fast even more strongly to ancient expressions of assumed truth. It's a time, I suggest, to re-explore the Way of Jesus, to rethink how we express and embody the good news, to rediscover what it means to live within the forgiving, hospitable, inclusive, compassionate and justice seeking Way of Jesus. A vacancy is a good time to explore and imagine, rediscovering the heart of who we are and who we can become.

I encourage you, as part of your preparation of a parish profile to revisit Napier, as though for the first time, walk it's streets, hear it's people, their pain and their joys, their hopes and their fears. Visit suburbs you normally only pass through. Ask yourselves what it might mean to embody the Way pioneered by Jesus, the path of radical hospitality and generous, risk taking love, in this city, in this century. Re-explore the Way pioneered by Jesus, stripped of all the dogmas that we've gathered over the centuries, and wonder together what it might mean if we were to weave that Way into our lives and into the fabric and the structures of our community. You may wonder together what, if anything, would be lacking in Napier if St Paul's were no longer here – or stated positively, what can St Paul's, as a community shaped by the Jesus Way, contribute to Napier in a time of uncertainty.

Though no longer strong with the energy of younger days a congregation like St Paul's represents much needed and hard won wisdom that the wider community needs if it's going to make it through coming decades. Napier, like communities around the world, will need to rediscover how to build and sustain good community, how to care for neighbours, how to share with those in need, how to live with purpose and with grace in a world claiming to be a 'no god world'.

So, I am suggesting a positive rather than a passive vacancy, an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be servants of the Way pioneered by Jesus, in Napier and beyond, an opportunity to hear new voices, to ask new questions, to dream new dreams, to explore new possibilities, to enter afresh into the Way pioneered by Jesus, to reaffirm our underlying desire to be an expression of God-Kingdom in this time and place. And then, according to Presbyterian custom, to call a new Minister, someone able to walk

with you, support you, explore and discover with you, think and act with you, walk with you into your unique expression of God-love in Napier.

One of the readings for today is from The Revelation of John ch.21. Throughout this strange book the author has talked of the struggle experienced by his stream of the early church to remain faithful to the Jesus Way. He ends with an invitation to imagine a new future: In imaginative prayer, he shares his deepest hopes for the infant church. His words (concluding in the following chapter) might be paraphrased: "I looked into the future and I glimpsed newness; the oppressive power of the Roman system by which we have been enslaved for so long had lost its power to oppress; the times of destructive human division were no more; people no longer lived in fear of a god in heaven but rejoiced that God is in us and around us, inviting us to share in the creation of newness; our destiny is to be part of a stream of life-giving water in a thirsty land."

Keith Rowe

May 2022