

St Paul's Church, Napier. 29th September 2024.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY:

God of all wisdom and of generous love,
 you brought the church into being
 that it may be a sign of your love for humanity,
**grant that we and the whole church may have courage
 to learn afresh how to serve your love
 and to walk in the way pioneered by Jesus.**
 In the spirit of Jesus we pray, Amen.

THE READINGS:

Mark 4: 26-34.

The gospel of Mark was written as a guide for those seeking to follow the Way pioneered by Jesus. In later years people were concerned about the progress and growth of the church. Mark, however, does not speak of the church but of the Kingdom of God, an energy of love that bubbles away within life, bringing life and peace, justice and mercy to birth within the human family. It is like an easily overlooked mustard seed that grows, not to dominate but to give shelter and hope to those for whom life is tough.

2 Corinthians 4:5- 11; 16-18.

The letters of Paul were treasured in the early church because they were reminders of how the Way of Jesus made its way in the Roman Empire and how an early church leader expressed the faith and encouraged those gripped by the Way pioneered by Jesus. In our reading Paul encourages what was a small group in Corinth not to give up but to live in the light that flows from Jesus even though they live in dark times and the future is uncertain. He encourages them not to lose heart but to live within the enduring love of God.

The Temple is gone and new possibilities beckon.



The Christchurch Cathedral was among the casualties of the 2011 earthquake. Sitting at the centre of the city it served it had been a focus of communal values and aspirations since 1865. Numbers attending worship may have declined in recent decades but for many it still represented values and aspirations they admired. The latest news is that an attempt to rebuild the cathedral in its original form has been mothballed for lack of money and interest. It's become a sort of concrete metaphor of where the church is in our day – struggling, marginalised, uncertain, somewhat demoralised, wondering if we should attempt to rebuild the old or discover the new.

I recently attended an Auckland church where I had taken my first steps in Christian understanding more than 75 years ago. It was a thriving community in those years – filled with interesting and caring people and with a vibrant social life – pretty much like St Paul's Napier would have been at that time: solid, confident, interesting, all ages from babies for baptism to funeral farewells, worshippers who contributed strongly to the health of the wider community. I think you know what I'm to say next: Today my "home church", is a struggling and aging group. There are scores of similar churches throughout NZ. They've been hit by an 'earthquake' more deeply centred than a geological event – they're victims of a trend that has grown in

strength over recent centuries: an increasing number of people and communities have come to the conclusion they do not need the church and its doctrinal certainties to build a meaningful life. I read somewhere that the church goes through a major crisis and must be reconstructed every 500 years. Well, its about 500 years since the European church needed reconstruction at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps we're in a period of reconstruction. Some ask if the church is still needed in the era we are entering.

Census returns throughout the western world make it clear that fewer people are willing to identify with a church community. We seem to be living among the ruins of a collapsing church. Perhaps the Christchurch cathedral is a metaphor for the western church in our day. Some church groups claim to be doing well but my experience and observation is that most self-promoting groups and those with all the bells and whistles have chosen to replace the challenge of the gospel pioneered by Jesus for old fashioned bigotry, fundamentalist attitudes and harassment of marginalised groups like the homosexual community. The most obvious example is the Trump supporting, so called, 'evangelical' churches of Southern USA but the same attitudes are alive and well among similar groups in NZ.

Whether we like it or not we are a generation learning to live Christianly in a time when the church, the Christian structure, the organisation that once supported us in Christian living, is collapsing. It's a challenge to be named and faced and we need to support each other as we face what feel like cold winds.

The Bible reminds us of at least two occasions when People of Faith had to rediscover how to live within God-love in a period when the structures that had once offered support and encouragement had been destroyed. The first was during the period in Old Testament times when the loved Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by an invading army and the leadership of ancient Israel was sent away into exile in Babylon. During their time of exile they gathered and edited the stories and wisdom of their people so that when they returned home they could rebuild and reshape life as a people of God on a journey towards a just, peaceable and compassionate future. The second occurred 500 years later in the first century of the Christian era. In the year 70 CE, just 40 years after the death of Jesus, the rebuilt Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by Roman troops. Both the Christian Church and Rabbinic Judaism (main stream Judaism as we know it) grew out of the ruins of this fallen Temple. It felt like the end of the world for first century Palestinian Jews – and remember, the first Christians were Palestinian Jews who loved the Temple and valued the security and confidence it represented. The early church was literally born out of the ruins of a collapsed temple. Through the crumbling walls of an institution that had once shaped their living they glimpsed new ways of being the People of God-love. We might learn from them and how they rethought their faith and vocation without the security of the Temple they had known and loved. A recent book by a Czech Catholic theologian is entitled "The afternoon of Christianity." The question prompted by the title is worth asking. Are we in the afternoon hours of Church life as we have known it? Is the sun setting for the church as we have known it? Or is there a pathway that might lead to a reshaped expression of Christian community following the fall of our former temples?

The experience of the earliest church may provide some clues for us as we open ourselves to new possibilities. I'll name just a few clues leaving you to add to my wee list.

The first is that the early church made a distinction between Jesus and the Temple. They thought of him as being a lived expression of who we might become, as the pathway into a decent future for the people of the world, as an enduring embodiment of God-love in a wounded world. They gathered and studied all they could get hold of that helped them live within the Way that Jesus pioneered. They prayed for love-strength and courage to walk the Way of Jesus. The first followers emulated the example of their exiled ancestors as they wondered what the future held for them and their children after the destruction of the Temple. They gathered and edited 4 versions of the deeds and words of Jesus (the gospels) and they collected letters written by Paul and other Christian thinkers so they would have reminders of what it means to follow in the steps of Jesus. So, the church of the early centuries was born among a people lamenting the loss of their

temple but finding a new pathway into the future based on the radical way pioneered by Jesus. Perhaps its only after we have lost the false security afforded by church structures that we will rediscover the risky, love shaped, God with us way, pioneered by Jesus.

Last Sunday you sang a hymn by D.T Niles (CH4,358), that described Jesus as ‘the Pearl of Great Price’. I like the description of Jesus as a ‘pearl of great price’. It allows us to distinguish between the pearl and the shell that protects the pearl. The enduring beauty of the pearl continues long after the shell has disintegrated and no longer serves the purpose for which it was originally shaped. The church as we know it seems like a disintegrating shell. Perhaps it has outlasted humanity’s need for it. At times it has acted as though it was in competition with the Pearl it was meant to protect. Instead of caring for the pearl within it has behaved as if it was itself, the ‘shell of great price’ and overlooked the radical love shaped pearl within. It has at times been taken over by a desire to be strong, powerful, wealthy. It’s been captured by attitudes and values that bring death rather than life to human communities. The servant way of Jesus has been denied in so many ways. In some eras people have been so mesmerized by growing the church as an institution that the church as witness to the compassionate, inclusive, welcoming Jesus of the Gospels has been obscured. Could it be good (though painful) news that the shell, the structures and doctrines of the church, are crumbling and need to be redesigned? Perhaps, the influence of Jesus will escape from the church and be let loose in the world! I am certain that the loving and compassionate Way pioneered by Jesus, embodied in the lives of good people in every generation, will live on beyond the death of the church as we have known it. Almost certainly we’ll grow a new shell that will eventually crack, crumble, creak and need to be let go lest it destroy the pearl it’s supposed to be caring for. Let’s focus on the Pearl and its possibilities in our wounded world not the shell, on the Way of Jesus rather than on church structures, buildings, budgets and debates that lead nowhere.

One of the problems with strong temple or church walls is that they stop us seeing those on the other side of the wall. If the walls crumble we might see those we thought were enemies or competitors in a new light. Without protective walls we may feel our human vulnerability and lose any need to prove we are better than other people and that God chooses us and rejects others. We can let go of the long-standing church dogma that we are the God appointed judges of other people and that God wants everyone to be like us. Surely this is part of the adolescent and discarded shell we can do without. It’s a cluster of attitudes and behaviours that are inappropriate for a people seeking to embrace the Way that Jesus pioneered. Jesus was an includer – he welcomed strangers and the marginalised to share his table, he learned from them and he respected them. He had let go of any inherited sense of superiority over others. He was a servant of human unity rather than defender of cultural, national or religious superiority. Paul, viewing life from within the shell of a broken temple, expressed the same insight in his letter to the Galatians: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ - words seeking embodiment wherever division, violence, prejudice damages human community. He told members of his house churches they were called to be ‘ministers of reconciliation’ in a divided world. Engagement in active friendship, learning and shared action with Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and adherents of other historic faiths, all of us facing the same broken world, could become the norm once we have crawled out from under the broken shell of inherited church structures. We in the Christian tradition have important wisdom to share with others – we can also learn from the wisdom that sustains them. Deep truth is not confined to Christian circles. Others too, have their pearls of great price. Perhaps in this time of church weakness and vulnerability we will be more open to learning from others. It goes without saying that a fresh expression of church would be building strong links with Maori spirituality, relearning how to care for the earth and to build compassionate community. Just imagine a place like this building becoming a ‘meaning centre’ where Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Maori and Pakeha, humanists and searchers learn from each other while also sharing their pearls of great price, their faith, in ways that reflect our deepest convictions about the mystery and wonder of human life in an evolving universe.

We are living amid what at times feels like the ruins, the rubble of our Temples, structures, denominations, churches, and creeds. In the meantime we get on with living in the Way pioneered by Jesus according to our

strength, opportunity and courage. As a hymn by Shirley Murray ('Our Life has its seasons') reminds us, "there's never a time to stop believing, there's never a time to stop hoping, loving -these three things go on" – with or without a strong church structure. Census figures and their dire predictions have very little to do with what is true and worthwhile. We may, and should, express our faith differently now than we did when we were younger but the heart of it all remains: Life is a gift, life has purpose, love for family and neighbour are keys to human fulfillment, to seek after peace and justice is the heart of what it means to live within God-love. We may have stumbled often in the doing of these things but the truth they represent remains – whether its popular or not, whether the church is strong or not. Jesus remains the pearl of great price whether the rest of the world agrees or not. It's the church, the structures created to protect the pearl that are in deep trouble. Perhaps our churches and their denominations grew too inflexible, more doctrine centred than people centred, more concerned about the growth of the church than the healing of humanity, overly concerned about buildings, finances and social acceptability.

Can the church survive its present numerical decline? Probably not, at least not in its inherited form. The shell is too broken. But the Way pioneered by Jesus has a future – love remains the energy at the heart of all that is: it's the direction of human becoming, it's the doorway into a future where every person knows themselves to be loved, valued and cared for. Has the church got the strength, the love, to share in the building of such a world? Paul asked the same question and responded that Jesus was known not for his power but for his love, emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. Then how will we live amid the ruins of a crumbling church – we'll simply follow the path shaped by the footsteps of Jesus and share as we are able in bringing a more humane, caring, hospitable society into existence. We'll trust in the loving purposes of God lived out in the life of Jesus rather than in human management and financial manipulation. Forget about rebuilding metaphorical old cathedrals, – it might be more Christlike to build people and a society where everyone is respected and is being loved into wholeness.

What do you think? So much more to ponder, so much to share as we help each other remain Christian as the Church, or at least its doctrinal and power structures, crumble around us.

Keith Rowe

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