

FAITH, FELLOWSHIP AND FUTURE

An anniversary service is traditionally one of celebration and remembering.

It is typically a time when memories are shared - memories of people and events in the past that have helped to shape the present of the congregation - events and changes that have occurred, and that will continue to inform the future direction of ministry and fellowship and service.

There is no doubt that you and I are here this morning because others have been here before us.

These walls and floor, ceiling and windows of this building have been witness to countless Sunday worship services, Christmas Eve pageants, C.G.I.T vesper services, evening prayer meetings, Bible studies, community dinners, fellowship events, choir practises, weddings and funerals.

Elders have been ordained, infants, children and adults have been baptized, teachers have been commissioned, much bread and grape juice have been consumed in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

For 152 years, scripture has been read from this pulpit and many sermons have been preached - some of them up-lifting, some of them confusing, some of them boring, some of them off-putting, some of them inspiring - but all of them prepared, prayed over and preached by men and women who have done their best to interpret the scriptures in such a way that God

is honoured, and God's people are helped to grow in their faith.

Anniversaries are those times when we stand in one place and look in all directions. We look into the past and remember; we notice the present and pause to reflect; and we peer into the future and wonder.

I chose the words Faith, Fellowship, and Future as themes to consider this morning, and the ways in which they apply to the life and ministry of this congregation.

David's gratitude for God's faithfulness is proclaimed in the words of Psalm 145.

"Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; God's greatness no one can fathom."

David could not have made this declaration had he not been aware of how, in the past, God had done great things.

"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

These words can only be spoken by one who has experienced God's grace, compassion and love.

These are words of **faith**, spoken in the present as one reflects on the past, and they are words which give one hope for the future.

We remember the ways in which God's faithfulness has inspired faithfulness in God's people in years gone by.

In this particular context, we would speak of the faithfulness and dedication shown in the decision to establish a church here in that territory known as The Queen's Bush, all those years ago.

We would tell of the services that were held in the Temperance Hall before the church was built.

Some would recall stories they heard about the union of the two Presbyterian churches in Lucknow, and the great debate regarding whether services should be lead in Gaelic or English. From the book written to celebrate the church's centennial in 1973, I found this account:

"At the union of Knox and St. Andrew's churches, there was complete agreement on every point except on the continuation of Gaelic preaching. The old people who had the Gaelic were most desirous of its continuation. Many of them had English and could do business in it, but taking in the sermon in English was altogether different.

They heard in English, but thought in Gaelic. They translated English speech into Gaelic thought as the minister went on with the sermon. This especially applied to those whose knowledge of English was imperfect, but we realize how much of the truth was lost to such a hearer. We have often been told how much better a thing sounded when said in Gaelic. There were many Gaelic words which had a meaning which no word in English could fully express."

As time went on, there would be other debates and decisions regarding the use of the organ, the singing of hymns, the use of the "new" book of praise - and each time change was called for, the congregation needed to lean into their faith as they considered the best way forward.

In looking back through the eyes of faith, one considers the number of ministers and missionaries who have gone forth from this congregation - and the countless occasions when the faithfulness of God was evident and the grace of God was experienced.

We would talk about words of welcome that were extended to newcomers to the community, words of forgiveness which were offered, words of comfort which were spoken - and in all of these stories from the past, we would be declaring the faithfulness of God as it has been active in the lives of God's people.

David's affirmation that 'one generation will commend your works to another' is an affirmation that looks into the future with the assurance - or at least the hope that the stories and experiences of faith will not die with this present generation. They will be told and taught to the next generation - and the next and the next.

For 152 years, teachers, leaders and preachers have all done their best to continue to live out David's words.

Teaching techniques have certainly changed over the years.

Leadership styles vary depending on the unique personality and skillset of the minister or leader, but the heart of the message has remained constant, the love, the grace and the faithfulness of God. This is the foundation upon which this congregation has been built - and upon which it continues to stand.

Jesus' parable in Matthew's gospel reminds us of the importance of building on the sound and solid foundation of his teachings.

Every church, indeed every Christian does well to continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding of Jesus' words - and not only keep them in their head, but plant them in their heart - and live out of them.

It goes without saying that the time and culture when this church was built was far different from our own time and culture.

Then was the time of Christendom - when church was central to the life of the community.

Almost everyone went to church at least once every Sunday, and prayer and Bible readings were the norm in homes, schools as well as many civic meetings.

In those times, it may have been easier to keep one's life built on the foundation of faith - because that faith permeated most areas of life and society.

Today, we live in a very different social context - a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faith context - and in many ways I believe we are the richer for it.

Living, as we do, amid and among people of other faiths and no faith, calls us to a place of humility as we recognize the myriad ways in which the Divine, the Holy One, is understood and experienced in the lives of people who are searching for deep meaning and connection to the spiritual realm.

Christians have found that deep meaning and connection through the life of Jesus, and it is our desire and our calling to share what we have learned and experienced with others - but we do so in a spirit of humility, compassion and grace - and perhaps even with a willingness to hear from others how they experience the Divine in their lives - and to be interested - and to learn from them what gives their spiritual lives such depth of meaning.

Families and congregations that wish to maintain the foundation of faith and continue in Christian fellowship need to adapt to meet the challenge of the new surrounding landscape in which we live.

It is a challenge which is met with varying degrees of success depending on the willingness and determination of those involved to grow forward in faith, following a God who sometimes charts a course into the future through unfamiliar territory.

One of the things that is of concern in many churches is the declining attendance at worship and in Sunday School - and it is noted here too - but credit must be given to the creative vision of those who introduced Messy Church to the community.

You are legendary for what was at one time a new means of outreach, and are to be commended for the ways in which the invitation has been accepted by families and individuals who don't darken the doors on Sunday morning - but ask them if they have a church family, and they will say it is you.

The same will be said for those who participate in Family Faith and Youth Group - and the many children and families who benefit from and are impacted by your engagement with and support of Camp Kintail.

You have caught the vision that ministry and worship extends well beyond what happens on Sunday morning between 11:00 and noon - and you are creating a fellowship of faith that is spilling over in ways you may never fully understand or appreciate.

Change is not always easy - but it is often necessary. God has called many people to leave a particular past behind in order to move into a new future.

Abraham and Sarah were asked to leave home and family; Noah was told to build an ark when the sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky; Mary was given disturbing news

of an unexpected pregnancy before she was married; Peter, James and John were told to lay down their fishing nets and follow Jesus.

The presence of a woman in your pulpit and women on the session is clear evidence of change - and though I am not aware of the struggles that may have been part of that process of change, it is clear that you have come to embrace its reality.

The inclusion of the organ in years past and the presence of the Lucknow Classics Band today, the use of power-point and the welcoming of children to the Lord's table more recently, and the changes that have been made to the building over the years - all of these changes required taking risks and being prepared to work your way through differences of opinion and objections that might be raised at the time - but each of these changes have taken root and I celebrate your flexibility and willingness to follow a new path of God's leading.

It gives me great hope and excitement as I consider the future that is yet to unfold for this congregation.

I am convinced that God is issuing a call to the global fellowship of believers, whoever they are, wherever and however they gather for worship - and it is a call to continue the faith of their parents and grand-parents, but continue it in a way that makes sense in these days, in this context which bears so little resemblance to the past.

Living out that new call will require ongoing imagination, creativity, risk-taking, and working together prayerfully, but the firm foundation upon which this church has been built will support you as you go forward.

In the world of business, growth is attributed to the hard work of the people and leaders involved in the past and present.

In the church, growth is attributed to the faithfulness of God *working through* the people and leaders of the past and present.

In business, many future projections are based on statistics and trends, financial assets and liabilities, leadership strengths and employee commitment.

In the church, the future, to some extent at least, is also based on statistics, trends, finances, leadership and congregational commitment - but more importantly, in the church, underlying and upholding all of that, is the presence and faithfulness of God.

We do what we can do, but if we depend solely on our own strength and insight, strength and financial stability, we are not being the church.

We are being just one more human institution relying on the limited power of humans.

Deep in the hearts of the family of faith in this congregation, as I have come to know you, there lies a common vision of a

hope-filled future; a common purpose to grow in faith; a common love for God and God's people; a common heart of compassion and grace.

As you move into the tomorrows that await you, my prayer is that you will remember the foundation upon which your faith has been built, that you will celebrate the fellowship that binds you together, and that you will look to your future with a sense of joy great anticipation.

Amen - and to God be the glory.