

Sermon: A Dream and a Prayer

Firstly let me thank you for electing me to the office of Moderator of the Synod of Otago and Southland – I count it a great honor and a great privilege.

Tonight I have a dream for you and I have a prayer for you but **firstly let me tell you two experiences I had recently.**

I was in a waiting room and could not fail to hear a conversation between two grey haired and respectable looking gentlemen.

"I haven't seen you for a while - are you still busy in your church?" asks one of them. "Busier than ever I am afraid" replied the other "this period before Christmas just about takes up all my time. Helping the minister, preparing rosters, church cleaning and we have had three funerals as well. I am not going to get away this year with all this going on."

"Same with me," says the other. "Tell me are things better now you have the new minister?"

"Not much - in fact we used to get about 100 people at our morning service, now we are down to about 50! My wife says no one wants to come now that everybody is so busy on Sundays with sport and clubs and the like. But we keep on plugging on."

My second experience came about when I spent a week in hospital a few months ago - no not this time as a surgeon but as a patient! Each morning a man came to get blood from my battered veins - it became increasingly difficult and time consuming but during these times we came to know each other and by the time I was ready to go home he was telling me a lot about his sad life. He told me that two years before his partner died and ever since that time he had struggled with loneliness; devastating loneliness. I asked him he had any sort of faith to which he replied that each night he prayed to his partner and sometimes to his dead parents too. I gently pointed out to him that there is an answer to

loneliness - if he reached out and asked Jesus into his life he would find a wonderful friend with whom he could share his deepest needs and trust implicitly. He thought for a moment and a faint smile crossed his face; "I think I will try this tonight," he looked at his watch, "oh I must get onto my next patient" and as he was going through the door he looked back, somewhat alarmed, "I wouldn't have to go to church would I?"

I tell you these two stories because they illustrate two ends of a wide spectrum. At one end is the plodding faithfulness of good church people stoically facing increasing discouragement while at the other end are people out there who have never been confronted with the claims of Christ. Some may feel alienated and mistrusting of everything to do with church and what goes on inside church buildings.

We church people sometimes just shrug our shoulders at the enormity of the problems facing our church and cite the fact that these difficulties are due to a complex array of historical, sociological and cultural factors that we can't control.

But are we really content to see the church more on the margins than at the centre of society?

Of course not and it is for these reason that I have taken the opportunity of centering this Synod meeting on developing a clear vision of where we are going as a church and in particular learning more about the sort of church God is calling us to be in Christ.

This leads me to my dream: I dream that by the end of this meeting we will have:

A clear picture of the sort of church is God calling us to be.

and

A clear vision of what that church will look like in the 2020's.

Tonight Barry Kelk will speak of his own experience of setting up a worshipping community centered on Jesus and other creative ways of being church.

Tomorrow Richard Dawson and a panel of experts will answer questions about what the church will look like in the 2020's and beyond and to bring it all together Graham Redding will give us an overview of what the 2020's church might look like if are listening to what God is calling us to be.

Well that is my dream, what about my prayer?

Let me start with another story:

When I was a medical student at Otago University we had the temerity to invite the great Biblical scholar, Professor FF Bruce, to conduct a mission at the University. We were blown away when he accepted but we even more blown away when 15 of us met him for the first time the night before the mission started. He exuded gravitas and enormous scholarship but he soon put us at ease by arranging for us to sit down in a circle. Then he asked us tell in turn how we became Christians.

After half an hour we were through and Professor Bruce asked us, "Did you notice a common thread here? Every one of you became a Christian through the faithful work of another Christian. There was something in that person's life that attracted you to Jesus and their loving mentoring helped you to come into the kingdom!"

I am sure the same applies to us – most of us came to Christ through another person. Paul knew this too; he knew that the faith quality of his converts often attracted others to Jesus and faithful servant love and care and whatever it takes are what God uses to bring seeking believers into a commitment to Jesus and ultimately full fellowship with other believers.

And that is why Paul often prayed for the development of the inner lives of the people in the new churches he founded. And that is why my prayer for you is based on one of his prayers.

My prayer for each of you is the same as Paul's prayer for the people of the newly established church in Ephesus: Ephesians 3: 16b-19:

It is for this cause that I bow my knees in prayer before the Father ----that according to the wealth of his glory:

(1) He may grant you to be strengthened with might in the inner man so that Christ through faith may take up his permanent residence in your hearts,

(2) I pray that you may have your root and your foundation in love,

(3) So that with all God's consecrated people you may have the strength to fully to grasp the meaning of the breadth and length and depth and height of Christ's love, and to know the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, that you maybe filled until you reach the fullness of God himself.

It is interesting that in this prayer there are no requests for healing, for relationships, guidance or protection. In asking that the Ephesian Christians might be blessed, Paul's focus is on spiritual blessings. He wants them to have an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit, so that they may know Christ in their whole inner being. It is as if Paul is suddenly concerned that the church at Ephesus has only a superficial grasp of Christ's love, and he longs for them to experience more.

Notes:

- i. The first gift he asks for is his people to be strengthened with might in the inner man.

The inner man he speaks of here is the deep seat of the personality where the Holy Spirit seeks to have His dwelling and so transform the whole life of a man -- it is a plea for Christ to dwell in them -- not just from time to time but as a permanent resident.

To sum it up: The secret of strength is the presence of Christ within our lives.

- ii. The result of Christ dwelling in our deepest self is **love**. As Paul puts it, the roots of Christian character are to go down deeply and its foundation is to be firmly laid and love is the means of both.

- iii. Where is that love to be experienced? In fellowship with all God's consecrated people. It is as if Paul invites us in our church fellowships to look at the universe -- to the limitless sky above, to the limitless horizons on every side, to the depth of the earth and the seas beneath us and says, 'The love of Christ is as vast as that.' No man is outside the love of Christ; no place is outside its reach.

The church may have its faults; church members may be very far from what they ought to be; but in the fellowship of the church we find the love of God.

It is God's design that all men and all women, those at the centre of the church and those who never darken a church door, should be all one in Christ. To this end Christ needs the church to go out and tell men of his love and of his mercy. The church cannot do that, until its members, joined together in fellowship, experience the limitless love of Christ.

Yes my prayer I have been praying for us all is practically the same as Paul's prayer for the Ephesians:

I have been praying that that according to the wealth of his glory:

1. He may grant each of us to be strengthened with might in the deep seat of our personalities so that Christ through faith may take up his permanent residence in our hearts,
2. That each of us may have our roots and our foundations in love,
3. So that with all the people in our church fellowships we may have the strength to fully to grasp the meaning of the breadth and length and depth and height of Christ's love ---- love that is beyond knowledge and love that is at the very core of our being.

Key points:

Let me say it again – I have a dream that during our time here at this meeting we will gain a clear understanding of what sort of church Christ is calling us to be.

But perhaps even more important is my prayer that we will grow in the knowledge of Jesus' reality in our lives – that His love will be at the very core of our being. As a result we will be encouraged to focus on seeking, shepherding and sharing with people in our communities who have never encountered Jesus.

God is at work out there, causing people to question their lives, circumstances and purpose. He needs his ambassadors to listen, befriend in love and pray with them in love, to graciously meet practical needs and most of all share the message of life – in love.

This attitude of heart and mind will invigorate the church in the Synod area more than anything I know.