

Unless the Lord Builds The House

Mission Advisor Synod AGM Address 2012

As I travel around the Synod region I count it an immense privilege to work among you. It is also a great privilege to share with you, to hear your stories, listen to your challenges and to be invited to share your lives, especially when you so willingly open your homes and hearts to Beverley and I. I am very grateful, thank you.

In the travelling I hear.

- some of our women feel discriminated against, they're not the only ones
- some of our professionals feel undervalued,
- some of our non professionals feel they are overlooked and not seen to really have any valued ministry. They often feel patronised and condescended to.
- In some cases children are ignored and youth misunderstood. Cheryl and Stephanie work hard at addressing this.
- I read that in the wider New Zealand context academics and scholars feel undervalued and sense there is an anti intellectual attitude abroad.
- In fact I think that every group in the church can at times feel discriminated against.

Is this could be because:

- we see the church as being **ours**
- in spite of our rhetoric we see 'church' in terms of institution and power, not as a people called of God to be the Body of Christ, a royal priesthood
- we confuse 'the church' with the Kingdom of God and make the growth of the **church** the focus - when church growth is the outcome of Kingdom work. We think that getting people over the threshold of the building is the most important. This is church growth which is quite different from Kingdom growth. Much of our desire to see the church grow is so that we can meet the budgets that will enable us to continue to do what we have always done, and in many cases in the way we have always done it. I know, because you've told me that's the case!
- At other times you have told me that you would find it was easier to invite your un-churched friends and neighbours to a cup of coffee than to your normal services of worship. That's telling us something.
- More importantly, I think we are more focused on ourselves and **our** desires and not on Jesus Who is the Head of His church. We don't exist for ourselves. Paul says in Ephesians **we are** the glory of God because of our hope in Jesus.

Jesus is so gracious that He will stand on the sideline while we rush about doing what we **think** He's wanting without us actually taking the time to really seek His mind. In our desire to serve Him we, in effect, say to Him 'just watch what we will do to get others on board here.' We think it all depends on us.

On this subject I am being stirred by two verses in particular.

First from Psalm 127, 'Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.'

Who's the builder and who's the watchman?

And again from the words of Jesus:

'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.' Note that 'nothing,' it's critical. Remember Mary and Martha?

One of our great problems is our desire for control. Things need to conform to what **we** think is decent and orderly. I know we say all the right things in prayer. But so often **we** plan everything out then ask the Lord to bless **our** plans as we go forward in faith!

The other thing we often do in prayer is tell God what it is that He should be doing; much like 'Dear PA in heaven, here's the list of jobs I have for you today and I will get back to you sometime and check up on how you're doing.'

I know, I've prayed these prayers myself before rushing off to do what **I** think should be done. I have also discovered that as we wait on Him He does lead and often in ways I could never have anticipated. Ask me about it.

I don't know if you have discovered this, we cannot control God. As one of CS Lewis's characters' says 'He's not a tame lion!'

Jesus only did and said what His Father told Him. We are His people called to follow His example. You see, Jesus will not be controlled by us. We can choose to work with Him or on our own. He will not override our choice but seek to influence us to follow His call, or leave us alone if we won't listen. He responds to our business by graciously allowing us to have the control we desire. In the end, when we are at our wits end, and really turn to Him bereft of ideas, He graciously steps alongside and leads us.

As I have surveyed elders in the Elders training workshops I run both here and in other parts of the country, I have found that most Sessions/Parish Councils spend very little time in prayer and seeking the mind of God. That's actually one of our core functions as leaders. Most say that it's the day to day matters that take up so much of their time. Why is that? That's another subject altogether.

Have you noticed, the only time an addict can really be helped is when the addict has come completely to the end of their own resources and reaches out to a 'higher power.'

We are addicted to control - and the institutions of church. Perhaps we are a church on the road to Emmaus – walking with Jesus but not recognising Him?

Here's the good news. God is simply waiting for us to realise:

- that anything we can bring to the task of His mission comes from Him anyway, our gifts, talents, studies, academic degrees or experiences in life -
- that we are really bereft without Him -
- that we acknowledge that He really is the head of His church – His Body on earth, and bow the knee to His Lordship -
- that we make Jesus central to our lives individually and corporately –
- that we really take the time to seek Him – Be still and know that I am God. Paradoxically sometimes the way forward is to stop! -

then we can be in the place where He can most effectively work with, in and through us. Then I am sure that we will find a vast change takes place in relation to the things that hold us in our bondages. As we come to the realisation that without Jesus we really have nothing, I think this will go a long way to deal with those issues I started with. Everything we do, everything we have, and every skill we possess, have come from Him anyway.

There is no one person or group better or more important than anyone else in this family of God – even Moderator Designates! We are all important and necessary.

Let's focus on Jesus and really appreciate what each is able to bring.

This is a question I have been wrestling with for the past while 'Am I in love with Jesus or the Idea of Jesus. Am I in relationship with Him or the idea of relationship with Him?'

Let's make the institutional changes that are working against this being able to happen.

We are the branches that need to abide in the vine to bear the fruit. What do the branches do? Abide, stay connected. Being attached to the vine, the fruit, the character of Jesus, is inevitable – everything comes from the vine. Apart from the vine the branches have no life.

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It really is an honour and joy to serve with you. I really mean it.