

South Island Rural Conference 2013

Rev Peter Dunn

Slide - Title

Thank you for your welcome. I have only spoken four times before at things like this. I always find it a bit daunting because someone has made the assumption that I know what I am talking about. Sometimes I do but when I don't I make it up - thought I would tell you at the start.

Slide - Waipu

In 2011 I was asked to be the keynote speaker at the AGM of the Synod of Otago and Southland held at First Church Invercargill. That was a sneaky one because I was actually coming down to preach for a call at Windsor Community Church, resulting in the ending of 22 years rural ministry in the Waipu Parish in Northland.

I loved being in Waipu. Some of my best but also most challenging years of ministry. Top left the church building, 143 years old this year, although the porch coming out of the entranceway with the little cross, I built that. The picture below is of me taking a Matariki service at the cemetery where all those who had loved ones buried there in the previous year would come by invitation, and it grew as Clan families came to remember their Scottish ancestors. After the 15 minute service for everyone I would then go with the clans to their family plots and have another time of prayers and remembering. I took services for about 130 people buried in that cemetery. Bottom left, some folk practicing for our community carol service that grew from a couple of dozen coming to over 300 attending. Showing the place where I led worship on over 1,200 different occasions, including Sunday services, wedding, funerals and community services like ANZAC Day. Top right, a place for remembering the unborn who died naturally or through human intervention right beside the church. I wrote the wording on the plaque and hundreds of people visit it each year, and it has one or two amazing reviews on liturgy websites. In the back ground is a stone garden with hundreds of names painted or felt penned onto the stones. Just a snap shot of rural ministry as I experienced it.

In going to Windsor Church I can honestly tell you that the transition in culture, and I mean community culture, spiritual culture, weather culture, language culture, dress culture (we wear singlets down south), church culture has been enormous. So I come from the perspective of having been a sole charge rural minister in a decile 4 church for all that time with 16 months experience in a large suburban multi staff decile 10 church. Rural ministry formed my ministry and made me what I am.

I was the keynote speaker at a rural conference organised by the Nelson Diocese at some isolated spot in the Motere Valley back in about the year 2000. That seemed to go well. In 2001 I was invited to be a key note speaker at a place called Goondiwindi which is a days bus trip inland from Brisbane and the town is beside a river that is the boundary with New South Wales. It was a conference on Rural Education and Community Development sponsored by the Queensland Government and at that time I was involved in some community initiatives that took the view that large state assets like schools could be catalysts for community development in rural areas, and somehow the Aussies thought we had something to contribute so off I went. I don't remember much of the conference except for two things. Going for walks along the river and crossing the bridge into NSW freaking out incase I came across a snake, and the minister of education for the Queensland

government. He introduced me and we had never even talked together. But he quickly made up for it with his earthy sense of humour. He took great pleasure in examining the word Waipu, with the emphasis on the “pu”, and by the time he had finished I felt I was in the pooh with the audience. So scrambling for an adequate response I started off with. “The honourable gentleman wants to now the answer to the question “Why pooh? All I can say is that if you don’t you die.” Applause and laughter erupted and I enjoyed the moment and had the attention of the conference, but I noticed not the minister of education.

Slide - Restorative Conference

Then in 2007 I was invited to be a keynote speaker sharing the podium with the Principal of Bream Bay College as the chairperson of the Board of Trustees at the inaugural Restorative Practices International Conference held at a flash resort on the Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane. I have never been in such a flash place. This came about because Bream Bay College was one of the first schools in the country to move to a fully restorative rather than punitive discipline system, meaning that we treated drugs and violence and all those things as educational issues rather than rule breaking issues and what was and still is being achieved educationally and socially is remarkable and some thought our story was worth telling on an international stage.

From memory there were about 600 at the conference from all over the world with most from Australia and a number from NZ. The Honourable Pita Sharples was there representing the NZ government. I sat about four seats from him on the plane on the way back, and I mentioned that just to name drop.

I experienced a spiritual “wow” moment at that conference. On the first day they gathered everyone in a huge hall something like a school gymnasium and they let a psychologist loose on us to help us get out of comfort zones and meet new people and form groups of common interest. We started by getting into groups according to what number sibling we were in the family. I am a number 5 so I went to the number 5 sibling group and said hi to all the number 5 siblings in the place. Very uplifting!

We went through about four other criteria for gathering and greeting. No hugs from me though. Then the psychologist told us to walk around for a few minutes and then start coalescing into groups of people - so when we saw them you felt an affinity with them. Tree huggers I thought to myself! You know how hard that is for a wall flower like me. But off I went and after a few minutes was standing with about six or seven others who psychologically I felt an affinity with, and in another ten minutes there were about 15 of us standing there. Then we were told to find out what the basis of our affinity was. Short story really short, all of us were clergy, ministers, pastors, priests. Uniting Church of Australia, heaps of Lutherans, Anglicans, AOG pastors, a Catholic Priest or two, and a Presbyterian from NZ. We were so amazed at what had happened that a sense of awe came over us all and we went and had lunch together saying “wow that was amazing!”

It strikes me every time I tell that story how often we do not see, or we grossly underestimate, or simply have no clue about the Kingdom of God in our midst. It wasn’t psychological affinity that brought 15 or so pastors together that day in a crowd of 600 at a secular event. The Holy Spirit did something unexpected and unasked for in the context of the world’s affairs that wowed us and wooed us. I tell you, some of those ministers were there out of desperation to find answers to seemingly insurmountable problems surrounding issues of justice in the communities they ministered in. One guy was a minister with the Uniting Church based near Port Augusta working in Aboriginal

Communities. He was originally from Kaikohe and is Maori. He was so lonely and down in the dumps that first day but the fellowship with other ministers revived his spirit. I am sure he went back home with other answers, but over those three or four days the Lord gave him an answer he did not expect or ask for. "Brother, you are not alone in this stuff".

Another guy, an AOG pastor and native of the Torres Straight islands I got to know a bit, was the same. Lonely and isolated and about to give up ministering in his home patch where his people were the victims of many injustices from government policies and the economic raping of the resources that once sustained thousands of people on tiny islands and atolls. As we said our farewells what he took home was a renewed sense of vision and hope mostly gained from the fellowship with other Christians who had committed their life to Christ to make a difference in their communities. Brilliant and Holy Spirit orchestrated.

In this session I want to explore the context of rural ministry in 2013. Tonight I want to talk about ministry and Christian Community in rural areas looking forward from the context I am going to present now. And I hope that what I share will be insightful and encouraging and will give you something to take home that will be useful long term.

None of what I am going to share is original. I have to acknowledge some general reading of Walter Bruggemann's writings over the years in the OT prophets. A month or so ago Graham Redding, Principal of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, spoke at our EquipSouth meeting in Invercargill on leadership and stuff, and I had to go up to him afterwards and tell him I was going to nick some of his stuff basically because I had already thought of it. I am also putting in my own thinking and observations from 22 years in a typically hard rural parish, and now I am able to see things from another perspective looking over the city boundary - if I am brave enough to drive that far - but never at night.

Slide - rural landscape

Where are we finding ourselves in rural ministry? What is the landscape, the reality of things that are molding us in rural parishes right now? Can I take you on a biblical journey to show you where we are? We are going to journey across fifteen hundred years or so of Israel's history in about 15 minutes in two big leaps.

We begin with the first five books of OT, the Pentateuch, Genesis through to Deuteronomy. The texts deal with creation and fall, covenant and law, freedom and captivity, slavery and escape, identity and promise. Deuteronomy takes the story right up to Moses standing on Mt Pisgah looking across the Jordan Valley towards Jericho the gateway to the Promised Land. That's the geography. He was also standing on the covenant promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob under one foot and the covenant promises made to him personally by the Lord on Mt Sinai both in the burning bush encounter and the giving of the law encounters under the other foot. That is the Spiritual geography.

Slide - Moses

After this great coming together of history and the present, of covenant and law with struggle and freedom under the Sovereignty of Yahweh, Moses has the news confirmed to him that he already knew and probably didn't want to hear again. Deuteronomy 34:4 *Then the Lord said to Moses, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' - I have now allowed you to see it with your own eyes, but you will not enter the land."*

The first lesson we need to learn about ministry, about the visions and dreams we have for where we are in terms of the Christian faith and the church is this. Those of us who are involved in ministry leadership, are not necessarily promised to be there when the visions and dreams come to be. Achieving the vision, seeing the hope eventuate - is not determined by the life span of someone in ministry or the term of appointment that we might have. I have watched people in rural ministry leadership, both ordained clergy and people in team ministries be successful while others have burnt out and crumpled. I will be addressing some of the reasons why for this in tonight's session, but I want to lay out the basis for what I will be saying tonight now.

Vision and purpose are two things that are essential in sustaining ministry. The real question is who's vision and who's purpose drives you in ministry leadership. I have observed there are two cups that people can drink from on the ministry journey, and I can tell you that I have switched which one I drink from. You receive a call to a place like Waipu. You have weighed up the pros and cons, done the mental SWOT analysis, prayed and sought wise council and you come in with a vision of great revival happening - the promised land. You will do better than the ones before. Or your church has reached the stage where full time ministry is no longer viable and you are tapped on the shoulder to be part of something new and exciting and you are asked to be part of a ministry team and although the promised land may look a little different there is none-the-less a promised land that draws you to look forward with vision and hope. And off you go on this adventure called ministry leadership.

Along the way, whether you are in full time ordained ministry or in rural team ministry where you minister part time with a specific portfolio or ministry area you in which you have been recognised and set aside for, there will always be a cup you return to and you will drink deeply from it.

They look deceptively the same. The first cup is full to the top but will be drained dry over time, probably in 3-5 years. The second cup is full to the top too but you will never see the water level decline and you live with the mystery of being able to carry on despite heaps of reasons not to.

The first cup is a mix of motive, ambition, world view, theology, doctrine, church growth strategies, social justice agendas, tradition, hymn books, drums in the sanctuary, history, good old days, programmes, business, desperation, tyranny of the urgent - all agitated by financial issues especially when your stipend is on the line. And you keep coming back to it because stalking you all the time is something that if it catches you is too hard to face. Your church has failed because you have failed. That is the cup of worldly success.

Slide - 2nd cup

The second cup. It's a mixture of motive, ambition, world view, present reality, forward looking, theology, doctrine, justice, relationship, call to ministry, fellowship, grace, faith, hope and love, aerated by the creativity of the Holy Spirit. When you begin to drink from it it seems to morph in your hazy moments into another form and you realize that the hands that lift it to your lips are scarred from their own experience of hardship in ministry. I hope I am not being too cryptic but you can have all the passion and vision in the world, but it will be knocked out of you - I can guarantee. And then where do you go? I would go truck driving.

When the first cup runs dry you learn, or you go and get your heavy traffic license - you learn that your call means the Lord cares intimately for you and your ministry. The Lord is at work in you in your community, and has ploughed and sown and brought people and situations to a point that when you have the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the hands to do, you will understand that the Kingdom of Heaven moves across time and circumstance and life times and terms of appointment - and your time is precious to the Lord and is not wasted nor is your ministry - and it is the Lord's vision and work for Church and community that we are called to walk with. Knowing the Lord, finding his rest, finding his interest and places of contact are the keys to ministry that lasts.

Slide - Moses on Pisgah

So there's Moses on Mt Pisgah looking across the Jordan Valley to Jericho and the Promised Land, and after all he has been through, all he has seen and done, the Lord says you aren't going there, someone else is. I can remember the time when I felt the Lord telling me the same thing about Waipu, about year 5 of 22. Thankfully, like Moses, I had already changed cups and I didn't take it personally.

Slide - Moses & water

You remember of course that Moses had trouble with water. That time in Numbers 20 when the second generation of wilderness trekkers came of age and just like their parents complained against Moses and Aaron because they arrived at Meribah, the place of arguing, and there was no water. Even though the Lord had led them out of Egypt with miracles they now complained to Moses that he had personally led them to this place to die and they moaned because the desert was not like Egypt. Again, Moses sought the Lord's counsel, and the Lord said go speak to that rock over there and water will flow, so Moses goes over to that rock over there and instead of speaking to it he hit it twice with the staff he used to part the Red Sea, the same staff he had used to strike the rock at Massah a generation before on the Lord's instruction to bring forth water for the people.

This is a good place to leap to another OT theme, but not without first noting that when Moses lost his temper with the people he had a consequence to face. He made a mistake. When you loose your temper with the people you go into a default mode, and Moses' default mode was to do what he had done before, that was to strike the rock instead of hearing the Lord's new instruction - speak to it.

Slide Number 20:12

This is the danger of always doing what we have always done and not listening for and following the new instruction. For Moses, this was the consequence. Numbers 20:12 *Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!* In Christ I have deep a love and respect for the Lord. I am a person that has been captured by and always seeks to live by the doctrine of grace. A verse like that never allows me to be too familiar with or off hand with the Lord, because sometimes grace can draw me into a place where I think I am the boss and I call the shots and I have every right to get angry at the people. This verse reminds me I am not the boss and there are consequences to my actions and living in God's grace does not mean I will escape the consequences of poor ministry decisions. Whereas a form a grace might draw me into thinking I am partnering with the Lord on an equal footing, this verse reminds me that the Lord is still holy and there is a scary side to that holiness I should never forget.

Slide - Jerusalem

So let's leap from this uncomfortable place to one that is much more comfortable. The period in Israel's history when the King's ruled with righteousness, the High Priest directed the worship in Solomon's Temple, the nation of Israel lived under the Lord's protection and was prosperous. This is all good folks because this is what you would expect after slavery and oppression, after a long wilderness experience, a messy conquest of the promised land, an equally messy political and spiritual period of transition from the Judges to the King's, and finally all the hopes and dreams of generations come together under the reigns of David and Solomon. In fact, this period of stability can be argued to be the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If I was living then I would have thought so.

Slide - why did people leave

Can I introduce to you a parallel history? My ancestors came from Europe, specifically Scotland and with a family name like mine pre-Roman and Caledonian, one of the wild looking lot painted blue, and most probably from one of the tribes of the Pict nation. Another branch from Ireland, one branch from the Orkney Islands which means a strong Scandinavian link through the Vikings. Some generations ago in each line became Christian, Celtic, Roman Catholic probably - through to Protestant Presbyterian. Tumultuous times across the centuries I would presume, a miracle my family line made it this far. In the 1800's another period of great turmoil afflicted my ancestors. All were poor, some went through the clearances in Scotland, some were directly involved in the huge spiritual upheaval of the Presbyterian Disruption of 1843 - they ended up in NZ, with the notion of exodus and promised land firmly in their life theology as they came to their promised land. They carried in their hearts covenanting theology where the promises of God concerning the establishment of a godly society kept them focused on the future. My lot were mostly rural and small town people in South Canterbury and Eastern Southland. In fact taking the whole whanau together, we own most of those places - still.

Four generations into this promised land of New Zealand when my father was in rural ministry from the early 1950's through to the early 70's he was in growing churches. I grew up in the rural parish of Knapdale-Waikaka in Eastern Southland. Four preaching places, services every Sunday, Dad doing two and a lay preacher the others. Churches sitting 80-120 people with good attendances. When churches were growing and basically full, when the Bible Class and Sunday School movements attracted hundreds of kids, new churches were being built in both town and country, there was a very real sense of optimism and stability. In Northland it was no different. While many of the churches are old and historical, even the Presbyterian ones, there were many churches built in the 1960's, and the Dargaville parish had two parts to it, the town part and St David's in the Fields, a rural parish linked to the town parish that circled the town with a myriad of preaching places and its own minister.

Slide - Jerusalem

Looping back into Israel's history once stability and to a greater extent the covenant promises were fulfilled with Solomon's Temple you notice something else. During the escape from Egypt and the wilderness wanderings and into the conquest the spiritual leadership was prophetic and innovative and people centred. There was nothing permanent or even safe about their circumstances. When we come to the stability of the

Temple age there is a shift to priestly leadership increasingly concentrated on tradition and form and preservation of the institution, until by the time of King Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 24 the institutional form of religion had become unbending, unresponsive, irrelevant to almost everyone except the priests, having lost its prophetic voice to challenge the Kings.

Many things had changed to create the climate for this to happen. Not only were there spiritual leadership issues as Kings and priests came and went, some good, some bad, but there was also a political geography as well as an economic one, cultural shifts in neighbouring kingdoms,

slide - destruction of Jerusalem

that all led up to the invasion of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the people were carried away to a foreign land and found themselves in exile from the holy land, and when they heard the Temple was destroyed it broke their hearts.

Psalms 137 is one of the songs from that exile period. Verse 1 *Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept as we thought of Jerusalem.* Verse 4 *How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land.*

Slide First Church

Back in NZ. I am suggesting to you that since about 1976 the NZ church has been moved from stability to exile. I choose the date 1976 because when you line up church stats with NZ stats the beginning of the rapid decline in church attendance began about 1976 along with the first big rural down turn after the wool boom of the 1950's. See that graph. Usually when I go to conferences like this someone always seems to put up a graph of church decline, I think to encourage me or something. That is not a church attendance decline graph. That is a rural population graph of NZ between 1976 and 2009. (www.tradingeconomics.com).

Not only did church attendance begin to decline rapidly in rural areas but so did rural populations in general, averaging about 10% between 1976-86 slowing down to about 3% between censuses ever since, except in Northland that has grown consistently and has been the most densely populated rural province for a couple of decades now. But what I know about Northland is that the church is not as strong there as it is around this part of the country. Another interesting thing about New Zealand is that Church attendance has never been high. Declared affiliation has, but attendance has never been higher than 20% overall, compared to somewhere like the United States that was around 80% in the 1950's and is still at 44% - according to the experts on these things.

I find it impossible to analyse why the church has declined although I have read as much as I can about the New Zealand context. As far as specific reasons are concerned I can't list them with any sense of accuracy. It seems to me that something much bigger than economics, politics, population drift and Lloyd Geering has happened. All I know is that the church has shifted a whole dimension in New Zealand from stability and prominence to exile and shadow and I think the shift is still happening, and a lot of us still haven't caught up with the fact.

What does being in exile look and feel like? If we take Psalm 137 as a window text into the spiritual psyche of exile, we might come up with this.

Slide - by the rivers of babylon

Verse 1a. *Beside the rivers of Babylon.* The uncomfortable realisation that we are now in a different reality in terms of being the church. Everything that made us stable and confident and excited has changed to an unrecognisable landscape. Up north I worked closely with seven parishes over a number of years, sometimes three or four of them at a time, in our system with the title of Interim Moderator. There was nothing interim about most of it - it was long term support and direction given in difficult places. The first big obstacle I found to overcome especially in the small parishes, was to get them to recognise the landscape around them. Each one was now in Babylon, not the promised land. The classic comment "All we need is a good man to bring back the people" still rings in my ears as an example of grieving for the stability of the old times. The classic comment "If we paint the church and have the doors open on Wednesday morning and a new sign that says "Everyone Welcome" they will come on Sunday."

In Babylon the community expects the church to be painted anyway, they expect it to be there as some sort of symbol, but they won't come on Sunday's. The trend is increasing that they won't even think of you for funerals or weddings either. But they might think they own you, like our Anglican friends are finding out with Christchurch Cathedral, but it won't be for spiritual reasons, it will be for historic reasons. They might see your building as an icon, and the people of God as a nuisance in achieving the preservation of their icon.

We are in Babylon, not the promised land.

Verse 1b *we sat down and wept as we thought of Jerusalem.* One of the biggest things to deal with in coming to understand that we are in Babylon is the issue grief. The People of Israel expressed their grief by thinking back to Jerusalem. They were looking back to the stability and comfort of the great city, the fulfillment of the covenant promises and all that stuff. Physically they were in Babylon, emotionally and spiritually they are in Jerusalem and they are grieving. There was no longer the joy because they could not reconcile what was now in ruins - the symbol of blessing and God's presence as represented by the City itself, the Temple and the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, the stability of the priestly order and the form of corporate worship that had all disappeared. So as it says in verse 2 they hung up their harps. It is just like us looking back to growing parishes and full churches and looking to get back there. And all the while the tormentors and critics of the Church encourage us to sing the old songs and keep the tradition going. This I know. As long as we look back to what has been, as long as our purpose is to keep the old ways going, as long as we keep doing what we have always been doing, we will be just like the exiles in Babylon not accepting Babylon as their new place - we will have the same lament. Verse 4 *But how can we sing the songs of the Lord in a new land?* Indeed how can we? If you read through the rest of the Psalm it gets pretty dark as the lament continues and the way I read it, their grief descends into a very unhealthy place.

Thankfully Psalm 137 isn't the end of the story. You find that unfolding in the Book of Esther. Because the discovery that is made by those in exile is that the Lord is as present and commanding and guiding in Babylon as in old Jerusalem, but most things have changed. Instead of a great city with walls giving identity, it was now the fellowship of God's people in a new land that were a remnant of what used to be. Instead of the Temple and priests, it was now synagogues and Rabbi's, a lay leadership movement that understood the reality of the present Babylon and listened and changed and adapted. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah the journey of the exiles back to Jerusalem is about

vision and purpose being found. And when the walls and Temple were rebuilt, it still wasn't the same as before.

I would like to wrap this up re-emphasizing the need to comprehend what has happened to us. It doesn't worry me too much why we are where we are - can't go back and fix. I have no desire to earn a PhD writing about it. What I am about is recognising that what I see around me isn't the promised land. I am in exile. And being in exile is hard work. Being in ministry is hard work.

What I want to explore with you tonight is some people dynamics, ministry dynamics, of leading in exile. So how is the remnant going.

Any comments, reflections or questions?