

**Mission Advisor's Address to the 2009 Synod Annual General Meeting**  
**Saturday April 18<sup>th</sup> 2009**

**Death of a Congregation.**

In pure biological terms I exist that there may be a generation after me. I am now in my 60s, have been blessed with children who are now adults and we have grandchildren. In one sense Beverley and I have fulfilled our biological purpose for living. But of course there is much more to life than this especially as followers of Jesus. Our children now make their own decisions, their own mistakes. The real test of our parenting is seeing how they respond/react to the things that life throws their way and in the quality of their relationships. We no longer have the right to tell them what to do, even if asked. As parents we may respond to requests for advice but now have no right to insist on that advice being taken. I have also learnt that even though our children are now independent of us and making their own way in the world they are still our children. Nothing can change that special relationship even though our relationship has changed.

Having said all that, I am not yet ready to finish this life, there is still too much living to do. However I have to let the next generation take up their responsibilities to lead as others did for me. Personally I find I am happy for that to happen. That is very freeing really. Those taking up the leadership will do it different to me, will make mistakes, miscall situations, get it wrong at times, just as we have, but life will continue. I am still here to offer encouragement and advice when asked. But that doesn't stop me from supporting, encouraging, praying.

This past year I have found myself thinking a lot about death in terms of expressions of church. We seem to have this fixation on growth and that numerical growth should always automatically be the norm. I don't think so.

I have been concerned that I have seen little in the way of theology related to death of a congregation. I see many congregations working very hard to keep life going on a life support system. I am sure we do this because in the present climate, the thought that the congregation may die is deemed a failure. Should it be seen that way? Our faith proclaims that death is not final, that death opens up the way for the possibility of new life. Perhaps the most compassionate thing to do is turn off the life support. Randal Prior spoke of this at the last General Assembly when he told of advice given him when starting in his first parish. He was told to help the congregation to die gracefully while at the same time look for the signs of new growth. Let the past ways go while looking for the new that God is bringing about. Be prepared to die so that the new life can come forth.

We just celebrated Easter which is all about this. It wasn't easy for Jesus.

Let's look at this. One story in the OT that really gets to me is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham waited for 100 years before the child of his prayers was born. Sarah was 90! I hope I still have the stamina if I live to be 100!

Sometime later Abraham hears God asking him to sacrifice this child of promise, this child of his old age. Abraham doesn't seem to question this request. I am more than sure I would have! The very next morning Abraham sets out to do God's bidding. We have no insight as to what was going on in his mind. He trusted God even with this most precious child of promise.

In effect Abraham had already made the sacrifice. How else could he have done what he did. God called him to trust. I think trust is one of the highest expressions of love. Particularly trust in circumstances that seem to make no sense at all. Isaac died in the mind of Abraham, was it a failure of the promise? No, in this case Isaac was restored but and it's an important but things had fundamentally changed. If you have ever been faced with the possibility of death, either your own or someone close to you, you will know that the world is different, - for a start, priorities change. I am certain that the relationship between Isaac and Abraham was different after this test.

In Scripture the church is called the Body of Christ. The organic terminology is used often. Organisms have a life cycle. They exist so that another generation may come into being. We are not called to clone

the church but to invest new life, allow a new generation to come forth and be moulded and mould its own life or expression of the body of Christ. There are certain core values of a life following Jesus but the packaging around those values will and must certainly change.

- Why are we so frightened to let go?
- Why are we so afraid to change?
- Why are we so frightened of death?
- Why are we so frightened to pull the plug on the life support system?
- Is it a reflection of a personal fear of death?
- Is it a reflection of the strong gift given to us to live that enables us to continue on often in spite of our challenges?
- Is it because our faith is not really in our God but in our expression of church?

We will all come to that time when we will have to let go . perhaps that will be our greatest test of faith in God.

We are surrounded by metaphors of death leading to new life . if you are a gardener you know that. Here are some words of Jesus on the subject:

*“Now the time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory. <sup>24</sup> I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity. <sup>26</sup> Anyone who wants to be my disciple must follow me, because my servants must be where I am. And the Father will honour anyone who serves me. <sup>27</sup> “Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But this is the very reason I came! <sup>28</sup> Father, bring glory to your name.” (John 12:23-28 NLT)*

I don't want to preach a sermon but in a sense I am! Let's look at this passage in relation to our subject. Jesus says that it is time to enter into His glory and the way for entering is to die. In fact unless He dies that glory can not come and as a result of that death much fruit will result. None the less He is still deeply disturbed by the prospect. It seems it wasn't only in the Garden that He agonized to bring His will in line with His Father's. But in true biological terms he says that He came to die to pass on new life for those who come after.

- Is our desire to hold on to our expression of church a failure to seek to bend our will to God's will? I am always interested that so often we seem to presume that God always seems to agree with what I want!

More than that Jesus says that if we love life (and here the Greek *phileo* is not *agape*) then we will lose ultimately. I am not a Greek reader or scholar but the word translated as *really* has the sense of *destroy* according to some sources. So if that is the case Jesus is saying that those who wish to treat their life affectionately in the sense to preserve it will, in the end, end up destroying it.

- Is our desire to hold fast to our expression of church because we love and understand it (or so we think), is in the end the very thing that is destroying that expression?

Jesus then goes on to say that the one *who care nothing* or *hates* or even *detests* their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

What a statement.

Goes against so much of popular thought!

- So are we prepared to count all things as loss save knowing Jesus?

This passage makes me think of Paul, who says in Philippians 3:8, that he counts anything save knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord as, and forgive the word but it is what he means, as *shit*

- How do I compare with that statement?
- How do we as a church see things in the light of that statement?
- How do our attitudes as congregations compare with this?

It concerns me that so much of what I hear in parishes reflects an attitude that this is my church, my congregation, my way, my style, there's no way I will let this die, any change will over my dead body.

Well - it just might be!

But then in Jesus' terms I will end up destroying the very thing that I consider the most important.

The church is not mine, even if we are leaders, it is God's, it is the Body of Christ in this place.

As followers of Jesus, we have actually given control of our lives to Him.

We have been bought by a fearful price. We are not our own anymore.

Well at least that's what the Bible that we profess to believe tells us! Yet so much of our life is spent telling God what He should do . just listen to our prayers. Dear PA in heaven, here's your list of tasks for today, tomorrow I will want to see how well you have done! .!

But Jesus is saying that if we have an eternal focus in the now . if we hold the things of this world lightly then we are better placed for eternity. I'm not for moment suggesting that we become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use! If we have genuine faith in Jesus then that faith will be solidly grounded in reality and will show in how we live in this life, in our relationships with others. In truth, to show a life that is constantly being transformed into the likeness of Jesus, which is the real work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the follower. We will be so concerned that others should know and share the grace of God as seen in Jesus that we will want to remove anything that would stop that from happening.

How different that is from much of our church life.

Back to the dying bit!

Many, I am sure, are keeping the life support turned on because they see death as failure. However it is my contention that if we can see that death is part of a natural life cycle then we can go a long way to lifting a certain sense of guilt and allow a healthy grieving as well as opening up new opportunities to bring life.

Look at the story of Lazarus. He's dying, Jesus gets to hear about it but seems unconcerned. He certainly doesn't rush to Lazarus' bedside. (Bad pastoral call!) He waits for a few more days because He knows from His Father that something greater is going to happen. He arrives and there is real grief as Lazarus has died. Even Jesus weeps, but I don't think it's grief at Lazarus' death, He already knows what He is going to do. He grieves for the grief of those around Him. I also think He grieves because He knows that He will be bringing Lazarus back from a far better place to this life to again face all that that means and that death will have to be faced again by Lazarus. You see, Lazarus was not resurrected, but resuscitated. However God's plans were the most important. That's the way Jesus worked. He said that His ministry was based on hearing and doing only what His Father told Him to say or do.

How different from so much of our forms of ministry.

The death of Lazarus bought forth a greater good for the Kingdom of God. Lazarus' death opened the way for a spectacular demonstration of God's power and much more.

Perhaps if we had the confidence in God that we think we have, we could trust Him with the death of our favourite or traditional expression of church believing that that could well be the door to a new form of life that we haven't even thought about. Job is helpful here when he said in <sup>15</sup> "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him;" (Job 13:15)

Church history shows that many expressions of the church have died but the church has not. Jesus said that the church would not fail. He didn't say that any one expression of it wouldn't fail. Death has often led to newness. While we hold on to something we are unable to take hold of anything else.

- Is it time for us to be prepared to offer up our Isaacs so that we may receive the new life as Abraham received and to see the faithfulness of God?
- To hold on and not let go is in many ways a denial of the very faith we say we profess. *'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.'*  
Hebrews 12:1. Note the passage says to not only throw off sin but anything that hinders

The Synod has as part of its mission statement;

- To hold to our values dearly and to our structures lightly thus to focus on Christ's life and teaching rather than evolved Church structures and practices.

My hope for this year is that all of us whether we are in a successful parish or a struggling parish or one in between, we will not be afraid to let things die, especially those things that we cling to other than Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

In this I would like to help. I am not concerned with institutionalism. I am interested in encouraging myself and fellow pilgrims to constantly deepen our relationship with Jesus, to die like that grain of wheat so that new life may come forth to the glory of God; to be able to say like Paul that anything other than the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord is simply not worth it and is in fact a hindrance.

I'm not yet in that place and I suspect, neither are you. Can we help each other on this road to the glory of God and the furthering of His Kingdom where we are?

Thank you for the privilege of serving among you. God bless you.