

What are congregations for?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 November 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Dean Eland

Pentecost 26B

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Mark 13:1-8

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Thank you for the opportunity of being with you today on this very special occasion. It's great to be here but I've been warned this reflection is on You Tube. I was going to tell you today about the Two Ronnies - because it's Ron's special birthday and I'm looking across at the other Ron over here because many of you know that we worked together - and others who are here today, other names who I could mention.

But it's great to be here and to find so many memories that stimulate thoughts and insights about the experience that we had as the church here in the late sixty's. As we were coming to Sydney I suddenly realized that I had actually preached here 51 years ago, in 1967 - and Judy and I had just been married for a few weeks. I was very distracted and trying to concentrate on what I should say; and lo and behold the next morning in The Sydney Morning Herald, the sermon was summarized and was there for all to read and to reflect on. And I was never invited back again after that.

But the story goes on and I haven't got long to talk about this, so how about over morning tea, if anyone wants to know what actually happened after that, I'd be happy to explain. Judy and I were based in Redfern for 12 years and lo and behold we came back to Pitt St about 5 or 6 years later after that sermon to find ourselves working here with a great team of people - very few people - to put the stones back together again so to speak, to recreate a congregation which was grounded in the life of the city.

But today I'd also like to bring to you the greetings of Pilgrim Uniting Church in Adelaide. Pilgrim Church is made up of 3 worshipping congregations on a Sunday morning and I think, over the years, we've learned a lot by our sharing our experience together - particularly in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. Many of us have met on many occasions to reflect in conferences, workshops and other programs that we've shared over nearly 50 years, about what it means to be the church, to engage in our community.

Lately I've been calling this *learning to love our neighbourhood*. It's one thing to learn to love and neighbour. It's another thing for churches and congregations to love their neighbourhood. So a whole lot of things have happened at Pilgrim Church over the last 15 years or so, in terms of engaging with the city and we've called this local public theology. So there's another whole time of reflection that would be very helpful, I think, in terms of how we're learning from our experience and our insights that we gain from ministry in the city.

It's pretty interesting; two years ago, Pilgrim Church was joined by a fourth worshipping community, an independent Chinese church. We had to rescue them. They left Maughan Church down the road in Franklin Street. They had to find another building to worship in in about 3 weeks; and Pilgrim community welcomed them and we're now developing what's called a partnership in ministry - even though our theologies and our insights and our experience are very different.

So one of their Elders, in a conversation one day, was very interested in linguistics and in words, said: *Pilgrim? Pilgrim?* And he looked up (and he'd done a bit of research)... he said: *Pilgrim – ahh, you're people on a journey!* And I said sure, sure. We are.

Most congregations are on a journey! Pilgrimage, pilgrimage yeah. And of course, those of us who come from the Mayflower tradition, we had one version of pilgrimage: Dissenters who came to South Australia who established a very respectable community in the city of churches.

A historian once wrote a book about the history of South Australia called *Paradise of Dissent*. That gives you some idea of the kind of influence of dissenters had on the formation of that colony in South Australia. But the Chinese Elder said to me: *I now understand how you've chosen that word pilgrim because it's indeed for all of us – a journey of people on the way.*

Well, I must get on to the interpretation of Mark today. (Thankfully I'm not preaching on 1 Samuel, but I could. It's actually got me thinking. I won't go there!) Mark's apocalyptic tradition, just one chapter in Mark if you like, about the first Christian community who were struggling with the kind of changes that were happening in the world around them.

The first Christian community in formation, if you like, in a prophetic tradition. I think I would argue that there is the apocalyptic vision of all of what actually is happening and going on around us. In the first Christian Community, learning to have eyes to see and ears to hear - to think about the implications of the actual historical reality that they were facing - real events, not speculation, threats and upheavals when the social order is fragile, disturbed or unsettled - regimes that are taking advantage of their power position, with the poor excluded and dispossessed, when rhetoric of nationalism ensures division anxiety and fear.

Now does this sound familiar to you? And I'm talking about the first century, the first Christian community - but these words, for me, ring true to what's happening today. It's a moment in time for the Jewish tradition, a critical turning point, because it has implications for the next 2000 years.

The Mark community, they have to make a decision about what to do about the Temple in Jerusalem, what to do about Jerusalem, what to do about all the traditions that have been born and created out of the journey that they've been on. A critical moment because the Roman army is coming; and as we know, Jerusalem indeed, and the temple, not one stone remained on the other.

So the Christian community had to make a decision. Should we stay and collaborate? Should we stay and work with the regime that we have, regardless of what the circumstances are - or should we join the underground - the armed resistance movement which was started by the zealot community as a Jewish community at that time? Very difficult decisions to make for the Markan community because of the dilemma, the historical moment that they were facing.

And so that the turning point comes, and I think it be fair to say that, indeed the Markan community did go underground and avoided the conflict and moved on and lived in a very fragile contextual setting for the next generation or so. So the challenge for me, in the gospel today, is about the invitation to reflect on the relationship that we take with the context around us.

We can confront, we can ignore, we can go underground. We can become subversive as the Christian community in creative and positive ways. But remember, the people of God have been on a journey. They have been on the road in many places in different situations over 2000 years and we can learn from that.

By drawing on their experience they discover the qualities and wisdom that will last and endure - despite that changing context around them. They know about the commitment that endures out of all our efforts and all our striving and out of all our work. Each congregation then, in a changing setting in a changing context, always a moment to discern the steps to take on the journey. What do we do? What do we do next?

Discovering the turning points that are going on around us, finding the wisdom that come from the struggles and then to celebrate the road that we take. For the people of Jesus' day, the temple building in Jerusalem symbolized all the experiences of God's people. The ups and the downs, the trials and the challenges of the journey; the escape from Egypt and through the Red Sea, forty years wandering in the desert. Moses and the burning bush of Revelation, the enduring image of the House of David, the harsh and confronting words of the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, words of doom and words of promise.

So the followers are right to claim: *look what we've achieved as you see all around us. This building! This building represents what we stand for! This is what will survive and endure* they say.

Here is a mixture of both religion and nationalism, one feeding off the other it's a bit like the visitor standing on the embankment of the River Thames, looking out across at Westminster and saying: *will liberal democracy endure?* A contemporary confronting issue. And for the electors of Wentworth, when the prime minister said: *yes, I'm giving a little bit of thought about recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.* Political advantage at a particular time in history because the emotional association with Jerusalem in the temple is about a deep sense of nationalism and community identity.

So the disciples' struggle is about the claim of Jesus - and Temple loyalty. What it stands for and will it survive. However the reality is that the man of Nazareth has already left the synagogue. He has taken to the streets. In public places, Jesus imagines and demonstrates a new creation, a new place for a community life. A temple not made with hands. A household made up of living stones.

Here at the end of his public ministry we see this as we see the struggle that the Christian community has with the powers and the forces of the day. Read the signs of the times, Jesus suggests - and discover in my words and actions a new creation, a different way of life. Here is a movement of faithful people from many places; one that welcomes the stranger, reaches out across the divide of national and cultural loyalties.

Here the disciples bear witness to being shaped and formed as a servant community. A building made up of living stones, founded, restored, renewed and empowered by the love of the Creator known through the love given for the sake of all.

And now, 2000 years later, this becomes our charter. Indeed a people on the way - people on the journey, congregations helping to live in anticipation of the world that embraces justice and peace. The dawn of a new reality, a movement of forgiveness, hospitality and reconciliation. Life given by helping others to turn away from death dealing ways.

Congregations are people seeking to work with these values and these priorities - sometimes expressed in the spectacular and other times in the ordinary. Daily expressions of ministry and service in everyday encounters and the ministry that we do together.

Sunday by Sunday we pray: *give us all our daily bread may your new world come*. And so we hope and work for the day when all will live in a peaceable world, that guns will fall silent, the hungry fed, the stranger welcomed and friends made. Congregations do not work well when they become fatalistic, pessimistic, resigned to the unknown - and it's a seemingly dark future.

The way of the new day is bound up with healing, forgiveness, wholeness and restoration. Not an escapist road here. Not being taken over by loss and despair. A dystopian perspective imagining a future worse than the past.

May we encounter, in the experience that we have when we see the gridlocks and malfunctions of an urban world, a dominant culture of consumption, fuelled by a full lifestyle that leads to destruction and the exploitation of the earth's resources. In the midst of affluence and economic plenty, yet spiritually empty and values betrayed.

Not only for public figures that we admire, but we have to learn to use the eyes to see and the ears to hear by becoming aware of the thousand and one tiny empowerments that are at work in those who have not given up, or lost hope, or become disillusioned, or become despaired about the human condition.

We discover, in other people we work in partnership with, generosity and compassion through actions pointing to the reality of God's design. So we are people, when we work in partnership with people in different circumstances and settings, when we meet in playgroups and clean-up campaigns; in the Landcare movement, in those who visit detention centres and prisons; in community choirs and book groups that nurture the spirit; in men's sheds, community gardens and in many many centres and programs where the commandment to love the neighbourhood is being lived out day by day.

Congregations become the places where small actions and surprising gestures lead to healing and reconciliation. Here in these moments in partnership with others we celebrate that we are working together to create new structures and systems of care in our pastoral work that inspires others to build places of hospitality and welcome.

And so here in these places we hear and experience the promise of a new day dawning. A new day present when we find the courage not to give up or to give in; when we build for a sustainable future, not just for ourselves or for our children, but for our children's children.

The word of a prophet, Leunig, I think helps to bring these thoughts together in a prayer that he wrote: *Here in This Place*. And we could use this as our prayer for every day:

Fill this place O Lord with a sense of your presence
that it indeed may be a sanctuary,
a wayside place for all people,
a shelter, a place of refuge
to bind up the broken hearted,
a place of welcome and hospitality.

Here we meet people for a sacred purpose,
to celebrate their relationship to a covenanting God,
to restore brokenness,
to give thanks,
to enter into binding relationships with one another.

To rally for a cause, to confront injustice,
to wait upon the spirit.

Here also we are encouraged to seek a purpose in life,
to be challenged and invited
to discern new directions and priorities for our life,
a refuge for the troubled,
a place where good news is celebrated,
a place where prayer is fulfilled according to your will.

May the worship and service which is given here
reflect your purpose for all humankind.

May we be a community receiving the gifts of the Spirit
rejoicing in the hearts that are opened through forgiveness.

A community celebrating differences
which are welcomed into fellowship.

A community witnessing the beginnings of courageous healing journeys.

As we travel inwards,
may we find refreshment for our vision of the good news
and may we find ourselves embracing God's wondrous purpose
in reaching out to others in love and grace

And as we travel outwards from this place may we go out today knowing that we are
indeed restoring what we can of the broken troubled world.