

Diocese of Nelson
Synod 2008
Synod Sermon.....

This Synod comes at a unique point in our history as a Diocese. 150 years this Saturday (the 27th September), Queen Victoria created an independent See in the South Island of New Zealand to be known as the Diocese of Nelson. It wasn't the beginning of Anglican Ministry in this part of the world – that was already well established. But 1858 was more than just the start of another chapter. It really was a whole new story. And over these next six or seven months of sesquicentennial celebrations we'll retell parts of that story. And this is a thoroughly biblical thing to do. The people of the Old Testament were constantly looking back and reliving their story to remind themselves of what God had done in their past in order to ensure their faithfulness and righteousness in the present. A powerful example of this can be found in the book of Nehemiah....

Background to the story first.

For many years following the death of King Solomon the nations of Israel and Judah were governed by a succession of Kings who (with only one or two exceptions) led the people on pathway away from God. In 722BC Israel was destroyed by Assyria and the people taken into captivity. And then about 100 years later Judah also fell and the people exiled to Babylon. However with the rise of a new Persian Empire in around 530 BC, the people of Judah were allowed to return and Zerubbabel led the journey home and the rebuilding of the temple. Just under 100 years later Nehemiah returns to Judah and finds the walls of Jerusalem in an absolute mess. So he mobilizes the people to rebuild the walls. However they seem to be up against constant attack both from within and without and Nehemiah realises that these people needed to return to faith in God as dramatically as they had returned to Jerusalem. So Ezra begins to read the book of the law to the people and their response is overwhelming.

But let me read from verse 5 of chapter 9...

'Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous. You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea....'

What do they do? They go back and retell their story and realize in the retelling how powerfully God has blessed them and led them. And their commitment? Verse 38... *'In view of all this we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing..... We will obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord, or God.... And we will not neglect the House of our God.'*

So, **firstly**, it so important to look back and retell our story - to ensure that our foundations are firmly established on the God who has poured out so many blessings here in this place. And then we've got to do what the people of Judah did; make a commitment to do something about it. These 150th celebrations will mean nothing at all if they don't lead us into some sort of commitment as a Diocese, as a Synod.

The philosopher George Santayana once said that 'those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it....'

Secondly, we look back in order to keep ourselves in perspective!

There are some wonderful stories in the history of our Diocese – stories of the characters who planned and planted and nurtured the church through these 150 years. People like Bishop Suter, the second Bishop of Nelson who really provided the vision and the Although he had a very powerful impact upon the city and the Diocese he was a deeply humble man. He wrote the following in his diary in 1865:

This evening, about 8.30 pm I had a letter from the Bishop of London offering to nominate me for the Bishopric of Nelson, New Zealand. How unworthy I am of this honour, and how unfit in so many ways, how far below the mark! O Lord fit me for this post, let me humble myself for it; the future is with Thee, and yet it will be no dreaming or deluding myself to prepare for it.'

He arrived in New Zealand in 1867 and within a month made his first trip to the West Coast, visiting Westport. He got there by travelling across to Reefton, then to Inangahua and then down the Buller by boat! He celebrated his first service there in Tremble's pub. And we think Fresh Expressions is something new! He returned to Westport again in 1872, this time walking overland. He loved the Coast and was instrumental in starting the parish in Westport and finding their first Vicar. His successor, Bishop Mules retraced his footsteps, but then continued up to Karamea following the coastline – at times jumping from boulder to boulder.

There are many references to their ministries within the Diocesan archives. But what about the hundreds of men and women; lay and ordained who committed their lives to building God's church here in Nelson, on the Coast, in Waimea, Golden Bay, in Marlborough and whose names are known only to God.

A walk through our history reminds us again just how frail we really are. It doesn't matter how many possessions or how much knowledge we have accumulated; how important we are – or what titles we carry. Most of us end us the same way – dead. The mortality rate still stands around 100%

To walk through our history is sobering and humbling as we become aware of where we fit into God's plan of things. We are only here for a fleeting time.
So what are we going to do with that time?

Thirdly, (and this is linked to the last one) **we look back to be inspired and encouraged** by the lives of all the saints who have been part of the life of this Diocese over 150 years.

The whole of the 11th chapter of Hebrews does exactly this as the writer takes us on a guided tour through some of the great characters of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, etc – an absolute roll call of sainthood. Yet they were not perfect. They were ordinary human men and women who were called by God to do some extraordinary. And they responded by faith.

I have particularly focused a lot of attention on a guy called Edmund Hobhouse - a priest in the Diocese of Oxford who, in 1858, was invited by Queen Victoria to become the first Bishop of Nelson. Bishop Hobhouse and his wife Mary arrived here early in 1859 and he was installed as Bishop on April 28th of that same year. They were a devoted couple and had two sons within a short time after their arrival here. But Hobhouse found the ministry pretty tough. 1863 was a particularly tough year. Many of his motives were questioned in the local newspapers – and in synod. There were misunderstandings over the sum of 1000 pounds which had been promised by Bishop Selwyn to get things up and running. An allegation of wrong-doing against one of his clergy ended up in the courts and his passion for the biblical truth regarding the sanctity of marriage provoked real opposition. Two men insisted on talking all the way through his prayers in the Cathedral and they then walked out when he began to preach. The headaches that plagued him when he was a student returned with a vengeance and their son Walter became very ill.

It was all too much. So in 1864, Hobhouse advised his tiny Synod that he was retiring as Bishop and he moved out to Brightwater to live and minister as a simple parish priest. He had only been there for two months when Mary gave birth to a still-born child and died herself, two days later. Newspaper coverage of her death describes the Bishop standing at her grave holding the hand of his four-year old son. Hobhouse was shattered. Mary was the most beautiful woman full of joy and of love. He described her as his ‘prayer partner.’

But he stayed on for another two years ministering out of this vicarage before finally returning to England in 1866. Can I read one paragraph from our Diocesan history?

‘During the time that intervened before the Bishop left for England in 1866, many of those whose actions had aggravated his difficulties came to regret what they had done, and his departure took place amongst universal sorrow. People came to realize the loftiness of his aims, the self-denying simplicity of his life, and his deep religious earnestness. The people of Nelson have reason to rise up and call him blessed for the generosity of his many gifts and the tradition of self-denying service he gave to the Diocese. In Edmund Hobhouse the foundations of the Diocese were well and truly laid.’

There is so much more of his story that could be told but, as the 10th Bishop of Nelson I feel totally inadequate to walk in these footsteps. But these are the saints who have been part of this Diocese. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

‘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)

So....

What we are going to be doing over the next few months is very good. It is not just a little nostalgia trip. We look back to ensure our foundations are strong and secure in the God who has blessed this Diocese in so many ways. We look back to keep ourselves in perspective – in the light of God's eternity. And we look back in order to be inspired and encouraged by the saints who have gone before us.

But I can't finish there, because the Bible doesn't. While we are commended in scripture to remember, almost the whole focus of the New Testament is looking forward to what God has still to do. In fact Jesus seems, at one point, to be almost critical of those who are stuck in the past.

Luke, chapter 9: 'He said to another man, "Follow me."

But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

We are told to look ahead to a new heaven and a new earth. We wait for the return of Christ. We work so that the good news is spread to the whole earth. The pages of Paul's letters talk about us becoming, growing, advancing, going. Are those words that could be used to describe this Diocese? Or are we kind of treading where we've always trod?

There are some huge challenges facing Christianity in the West and this is not the time to be treading water. If we are committed to being a missional church, we must begin to seriously look for new ways to reach out with God's grace and God's truth into our local communities. We must begin to explore new ways of being 'church' in order to be more effective in the mission to which we have been called.

A church that is dead is one that is stuck in the past remembering the good times and yearns for things to be the way they were. A church that is alive and vital is one that embraces the past but looks ahead with enthusiasm knowing that, in Christ, the best is yet to be....

But this is all part of my charge tomorrow. Let me just finish by reading a paragraph from the September copy of the Witness – from 1939. It was written by a minister of the congregational church who had been an observer at our Diocesan Synod.

'Frankly, it is not often that one attends a Synod or an assembly of any description in anticipation of something like revival, yet there was more evidence of true revival and an outpouring of God's Spirit in Synod than a dozen evangelistic campaigns I have been in. There is not the slightest doubt that as men spoke of the forthcoming mission in the Diocese and the

need for it and the way to prepare for it, the hearts of all of us were touched by the Holy Spirit and there were times when the hush of God's presence was so great I do not think I am exaggerating when I say, you could have heard a pin drop. It is my conviction that revival in the Anglican Church of the Diocese of Nelson has begun, it began in our hearts at Synod and I should not be surprised if one of the greatest spiritual movements New Zealand has ever known sweeps through the Diocese and beyond, and if it does, well, it will be because those who caught the vision at Synod of a revived church have been faithful to that vision....'

(Rev Raymond Simpson – Minister of the Congregational Church)

Can I dare to hope that the same might be written of this Synod?