

By Faith

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 7 August 2022, by David Gill.

Readings were Isaiah 1:1,10-20, Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 and St Luke 12:32-40

A couple of months ago, we learned the findings of last year's census. Religion was the big surprise.

Faith communities were taken aback to discover that nearly 40% of Australians now say they have no religion. Christians especially were given food for thought, with the news that, at 44%, we have now become a minority in this land.

For the churches, of course, it wasn't altogether a surprise. We've watched our numbers shrinking, our Sunday schools evaporating, our church buildings closing and our young people discovering more interesting ways to spend their Sundays.

What the sobering statistics mean is a matter of some debate. Yes, people have been disengaging from religious institutions – but they've also been opting out of political parties, trade unions and many other community organisations. We're just not joiners, the way we used to be.

And inherited identities count for less. The days when having Scottish ancestors, playing the bagpipes and enjoying Scotch whisky meant you had to be a Presbyterian are gone forever.

The underlying issue goes deeper, of course. The massive secularizing shift that's taken place in the Western world during the past several centuries has rendered the place of religion – *any* religion – problematic.

The German philosopher Friedrich Neitzche summarized it memorably with his line: "God is dead and we have killed him". At least, so it seems.

That cultural shift is something you and I can't do much about. Nor can the churches. We can only try to be faithful through difficult days, waiting for the West to find its way forward to a more adequate worldview that has space for the transcendent, the mysterious, the wonder-full.

Meanwhile, how should we react to these shrinking numbers? There are several possibilities.

One is to *offer people what they seem to want*. It's a good commercial principle: if people aren't buying what you have to sell, change your product. Invent a better mousetrap, as the saying goes, and the world will beat a path to your door.

So if people aren't attracted to your message, substitute something that will be more appealing. If they've lost interest in worship, focus instead on community welfare and social services. You won't only be more popular, you'll pick up some government funding as well!

Forget the Bible and twenty centuries of Christian history. Let the market determine what we believe and what we're on about.

That response might save denominational budgets. But it won't save our integrity. Nor, I think, would it be meeting humanity's deepest need.

Secondly, there's the *back to the future* response. When times are tough, go back to what seemed to work in what we fondly imagine were the good old days.

We've seen this recently among our Roman Catholic friends. They've just had a rather fraught Plenary Council meeting on the future of Catholicism in this country: should there be more change and if so where and to what extent, or should things revert to pre-Vatican II days when father knew best, everyone knew the rules, women knew their place and nobody argued.

The Protestant equivalent is probably the drift we see from mainline denominations towards more conservative, often Pentecostal congregations – where, similarly, the pastor knows best, everyone knows the rules and nobody argues. But I'm not convinced that trying to head *back to the future*, in any form, is a responsible way forward.

A third, less obvious response is simply *to opt out*. Just as depressed people are not much fun to be around, so a depressed organization isn't much fun to be part of. So, with no big drama, some quietly withdraw from demoralized churches. And they're gone.

There is, however, another possible response. Remember today's second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews? We don't know who wrote that letter, but we do know why.

It was addressed to some Jewish Christians ... hence the title "to the Hebrews". And they had a problem. People were walking out the door. Well, in those days they didn't have church doors because they didn't have churches to hang doors on, but you know what I mean. People were dropping out.

Why? Perhaps they feared persecution, which then loomed large. Perhaps they'd had second thoughts about following the man of the cross. Perhaps it had all become too much, and they were tired. For whatever reason, or combination of reasons, some were opting out.

So what does this letter advise? Hang in there, urges the writer. Persevere. Remain faithful. You were courageous in the early days, after your conversion. Don't let go of it all now.

But how? Easy to say. Not so easy to do. How to persevere when things are going downhill? How to remain faithful when the future looks bleak?

First, by remembering and trusting, urges this letter-writer.

He evokes history, reminding people of those who have gone before. Their Hebrew ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, many others, who have walked the difficult road of obedience through far more trying times than we're ever likely to see.

Remember! Good advice for Christians then. Good advice for Christians now. Of course, the church has a special day for such remembering. All Saints Day, at the beginning of November. It's one of our most important festivals.

But there is one problem with All Saints Day. It has us thinking mainly about the biggies, the VIPs whose names grace church buildings, who rate a mention in history books, who get quoted in sermons. All well and good. But it tends to distract us from everyday saints.

I don't know about you, but at different times when I've found it difficult to hang in there as a Christian I've been strengthened immensely by memories of ordinary people who in one way or another have impacted my life, people in whom I have glimpsed something of God, people from whom I have learned more about the Christian way than I can ever acknowledge.

Perhaps, this November, each of us should come to our All Saints service armed with a personal list of saints. People, in this congregation or another, to whom we owe a special debt of gratitude. In whom we have discerned something of God.

But the writer of Hebrews tells us not just to remember those who have gone before. He goes further. He wants us to remember what it was that drove them. Why? Because that's what ought to be driving us too.

Right through this 11th chapter of Hebrews it's like the rhythm of a heartbeat: by faith ... by faith ... by faith ... by faith. Da-dum ... da-dum ... da-dum ... da-dum.

There's the same pulse beat in the tempo of the original Greek. The two English words "by faith" are just one word in Greek: pist-ei ... pist-ei ... pist-ei ... pist-ei. As a beating heart pumps life and confidence into the body, so faith (in the sense of trust) pumps life and confidence into the church.

Remember. And trust. Good advice for us individually, especially when the going is tough. Good advice for the community of faith, whatever census statistics might be saying.

We cannot know what the future may hold. But we do know who holds the future. And that is enough.

More than enough.

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