

SERMON 18 JUNE 2017 40TH Anniversary

When you are young, 40 years seems a very long time. The older one gets, that time seems to shrink. Probably the Uniting Church still thinks of itself as young, but there are now ministers who have never known anything other, and have no identity with the labels “Methodist”, “Presbyterian” or “Congregational”.

Where were you, and what were you doing in your life 40 years ago, if you were alive then? However you might answer that question, your life would have been very different from now. I was living as part of a very ecumenical situation on the Resident Group at Iona Abbey. I could never have imagined that 40 years later I would be a minister in the Uniting Church in Sydney!

40 years ago the expectations for this newly birthed church were high. It had taken years of preparation, prayer and negotiation to get to this point that, it was hoped, would be the beginning of further coming together in the name of Christ. Some of the phrases that stand out from the great document that is the Basis of Union affirm that we are “a people on the way”, and “pilgrim people”. We were a church that valued scholarship and learning, an inclusive church. Almost from the beginning we talked about being multi-cultural, though that phrase has required much unpacking over the years and a number of different statements have been made about it. It is certainly something we like to pride ourselves on being. 40 years ago there was a wonderful energy. As different anniversaries have been celebrated, it has become clear that the journey has unfolded rather differently from what many hoped for and envisaged at the inaugural service. The numbers at the special gatherings became fewer rather than more.

As we celebrate this 40th anniversary, the Uniting Church has been going through challenging times of restructuring and rethinking. There has been, and continues to be pain associated with this. We are being encouraged to be more missional, to focus on the young, to think about how we use our resources. It is a good time to think about our focus and what informs that.

40 years ago the threat of nuclear weapons was at the foreground. There was apartheid in South Africa, a wall between East and West Berlin, an Iron Curtain. We were very aware of Communists. The USSR still existed; the Eastern European countries like Bosnia, Serbia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia were yet to fight for independence. The word “terrorism” was not part of the daily vocabulary, Islam was not regarded as a major threat, there had been no 9/11, no talk of climate change even though we were aware of shortages of basic resources. There was no calamitous refugee crisis. 40 years ago more people identified as being religious, Christian, than today.

40 years ago, Rev. Davis McCaughey preached at the inaugural service. His text was the verses from Matthew’s gospel that we heard last week, the “Great Commission”, as Jesus told his disciples that “All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This may not seem to sit comfortably for us in our times, but, as McCaughey said, “The statement may be one of triumph but it is not triumphalist: he is the meek King, who disclaims power and glory and moves towards the hour of his final judgement in lowliness by way of a cross. The living crucified one still reigns.” He goes on to say “Mission is not an act of spiritual

aggression, human imperialism. It is a making of disciples, a passing on of the word “follow me”. Then, thinking about Jesus’ words “I am with you always” he says “We are not alone because there is one who was once alone, who heard men jeer and gloat and knew the desertion of disciples, the antagonism of authorities, the indifference of the crowd. Because he was alone once, we need never be quite alone again”.

These powerful words are no less relevant 40 years on. We know there is a hunger out there beyond the churches’ walls. We know there is a sense of being alone, lost as the things that signified security and peace no longer seem able to protect us or to create a world of hopefulness and joy for our children and grandchildren. We know that people can feel overwhelmed by what they see around them, by the violent conflicts and by the levels of anger that apparently lie just below the surface of many people’s lives. We know there are enormous problems facing the lives of millions on this planet and the wellbeing of the planet itself. We know that many people long to find meaning and no longer trust the institutional church. So, can we still take hold of Davis McCaughey’s words and make them our own for these times?

All those things I have just listed are one side of the story. The temptation of the times is to be drawn into the negativity, to make it the theme, as much of the media does. Negativity is quite infectious. Do you know anyone who is always pessimistic, someone for whom nothing is ever quite right, someone who is always complaining? They drain the lifeblood away! But then there are those who always have a smile, even when we know it is an effort. There are those for whom the glass is always half-full. There are those who always see the good in others.

40 years ago I could never have imagined being at an event I was at a week ago. I was at a formal but very friendly iftar meal, when Muslims break the fast at sunset in Ramadan. We had some wonderful speeches, including one by a beautiful young woman, a lawyer and educator called Tamana, whose heavily mascared eyelashes blinked beneath her hijab. The topic of the evening was inclusiveness. She approached it from the aspect of "Blessing". Ramadan is a time of reflection for Muslims when they ponder the blessings of God and how we are called to share them. She was asking everyone to think about what blessings we have, and asked if we try to protect them and whether we can share them. This is an equally good way for us Christians to think especially as we turn to the readings we heard this morning: the wonderful passage from Hebrews: "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ...Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" The reading from John's gospel was of the well-loved prayer of Jesus for his followers, that they might be one as Jesus and the Father are one; that there might be unity so that the world would know the love of Father and Son. Surely love is the greatest blessing!

The words we read are a call to follow. The unity they speak of is not just for the Uniting Church to hear today. These are words that are a cry for the world we share. It is not just a hope about uniting, but about being able to recognise the love of God in one another, even beyond our walls. The other side of the story of all the negativity in the world is a story about the love that is everywhere; the love that is often seeking

expression; the love which knows what is good and true, ethical and life-giving.

40 years on, we have the opportunity to take stock, to see how the dynamics are changing: how cultural diversity within and outside the church is bringing colour and life, music and song and new ways of seeing. 40 years on, we have the opportunity to look back with gratitude for so much to celebrate in the past. Just as much, we look forward. Though things may be very different, though the world may seem to be changing so fast we don't know what lies ahead, we know we are still called to be God's people for our particular time and place, however it is that God calls us to be.

Davis McCaughey reminded us of the way that God's power was manifest in Jesus, not in triumphalistic ways but in lowliness, in the crucified but risen One. Maybe it is when the church is not being powerful and triumphant but humble and loving that it is most clearly being obedient to the One who invite us to be people of the way, pilgrim people seeking to follow. We can't imagine what the Uniting Church, what LUC may look like in 10 years, let alone another 40 years. We don't need to. We just need to imagine how the God of love is at work everywhere right now and keep on imagining that love at work in us. Then we find we are indeed God's people.