

Advent 1B: Sermon for the Parish AGM
Reflections on Parish Life

Rev Robyn Boyd

I can't offer you a usual vicar's annual report, but I can bring you both my first impressions of being priest here, and some of my broader reflections about being church in a time of transition.

So: first impressions. At this point in our relationship, I'm seeing a parish where people care for each other, and where that care is both spontaneous and carefully organized; I'm seeing a parish where there is deep and loving respect for the Sacraments, and great care taken in worship. There's a great energy here – a good vibe! I'm also seeing some pretty smooth functioning of the administrative bricks and mortar of parish life. And I'm experiencing welcoming people who care about their faith and who want to nurture and explore and develop it. But I'm aware that a parish, like any organization, and indeed like our own selves, has multiple layers. Of course, as I get to know you better, I will also come to know the places of tension, the frustrations and regrets— after all, God has placed his precious church – the body of Christ – in the hands of vulnerable and imperfect humanity: me and you. And I'll also get to know your own personal stories of life and faith, and how these stories have met with the story of this parish. And you will come to know me better. I look forward to this.

But to go on, a couple of comments on the work of the parish in the past year: Over this past year, the parish has clearly been engaged in some very hard work: not only the maintenance and development of its regular weekly life, but in discerning its future and its vision – a process that is necessarily ongoing. It began the new venture of Kid's Hope, and built on the social justice initiatives of the previous year. And of course, for half of this year, all this has been done in a climate of change, without a vicar. It is testimony to the commitment of the lay leadership and parishioners that a robust continuity of the parish's liturgical life, pastoral care, school ministries, play group and social justice work has been sustained. Thanks you to all of you; I won't single out names. Even your faithful attendance each week speaks of your commitment to the body of Christ in this place.

And so, a few words, too, about being church in today's world and into the future. The parish has been doing a lot of thinking and talking about this, and will continue to; so here's a scattering of my thoughts about what is important to me as I join you in this process.

It's not easy being church these days. We can look around at most churches and see declining numbers and ageing congregations and dwindling parish resources. There's the great Australian apathy about the institutional church, increasingly evident in the last few decades. Church just doesn't count. And the world out there offers endless choices in what people can believe, a world where "church" and "religion" and "faith" no longer hold the same meanings or respect that they did in decades past. The question I always ask baptismal families and couples being married is "why?" If church hasn't been part of their lives why bring baby for baptism, why choose a Christian marriage service? It seems there's still something that draws some people, without them being able to name it.

For us here at East Burwood, we have an additional challenge. We are a parish which is in its own transition. The transition here is that from moving from a “family sized” church – a church where everyone knows everyone else, where one’s story of belonging here means something; to a middle sized church, where newcomers are seeking to establish themselves and where it’s not as easy to get to know everyone in the same way. Previous systems of leadership and care, and methods of communication need to be adapted to larger congregations, and to changing demands of family life and work. Building relationship remains vital.

It is said that in times of transition, two major temptations face the church: to want to go back to the good old days, or to grab for the future; to grab anything that seems new and fresh and is working somewhere else. We’ve heard a lot about Fresh Expressions – in this region of the Diocese all parishes are being asked, as part of the regional strategic plan, to consider how we might develop a fresh expression of church. (A lot of priests groan about this). This is often misunderstood as being a misguided grab for the future; or as being asked to ditch the old and start something new. But that’s not what it is about. It’s asking parishes to add something new, that might be quite a different way of worshipping or exploring faith for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

Rowan Williams talks about fresh expressions in this way: “we’re rediscovering something about what the Church is.....rediscovering that the Church is something that happens before we’re institutionally organized. It happens when the Good News summons, assembles, people around Jesus Christ. Remember that that is what we’re thinking of, not a series of scattered experiments, not a series of enterprises in religious entertainment, not, God forbid, a kind of dumbing down of the historic faith and its requirements.The point of fresh expressions is the point of the Church itself, that is to provide a place where Christ is set free in our midst.”

Now, I’m not going on about fresh expressions because I’m suddenly or even slowly going to launch this parish into something. Not at all. This parish has begun its own work of identifying what being church means for it now and for the next couple of decades into the future. But what I do want to tease out of all the talk around fresh expressions is that very focus that Rowan Williams talked about: whatever we do as Church, we do with the good news of Jesus Christ as the centre and the purpose of what we do.

And here’s a handshake with today’s Gospel: everything –all our programs, initiatives, plans - should be regarded as transitional and provisional except God him/herself and the gospel we receive from Christ. “Heaven and earth will pass away” says the Lord, “but my words will not pass away”. Jesus Christ remains at the centre.

In this age of transition, when we’re afraid that our church, our parish, will die out, it’s all too easy to look at big, booming churches and think that God is at work somewhere else. We can fail to recognize that God is with us and that the Spirit is working through us, with us, in us, in this process. God is at work here in the stories of the people here in this place, and in the story of this parish itself. Where God’s people stay faithful to the task of connecting our human story with the divine story told in Holy Scripture, especially in times of upheaval and

change, God's future will emerge. We're called first and foremost – not to be big and successful as the world defines it – but to be faithful disciples, making Christ visible in our lives by word and action, making him visible in our worship and our relationships with each other and the communities in which we are placed.

So as we continue on, with our planning and our doing and our dreaming, it's my prayer that we remain conscious of Jesus being at the centre of all we are, all we do, encountering him in word, sacrament and in relationship, being open to hear and respond to God's voice and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sharing his life in our works of justice, in pastoral care, in the local school and in our places of work and leisure. No matter what other forms of being Church we might want to explore, we should allow nothing to distract us from the centrality of Christ and these traditional places of encounter with God in word and sacrament. And always remembering that we –individually and corporately as this place - are God's work-in-progress – we're not left on our own to do God's work.

And as we plan for the future health of this place, we do so knowing that our Christ-life, at its very heart, is about being and becoming people open to God and to each other whoever we are, encountering each other in love just as Christ continually encounters us; becoming what Christ made us to be.