

Become What You Are

A sermon preached at the induction of Ockert Meyer as minister of St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, on Sunday 11 March 2012, by David Gill. The readings were Ephesians 3:14-21 and St John 17:1-5,20-26.

One day, during my time with the staff of the National Council of Churches in Australia, I had to unpack some of the mysteries of ecclesiastical protocol for a new colleague. She was trying to make sense of how clergy correspondence should be addressed. So I explained.

Anglican bishops, I told her, are labelled The Right Reverend, but if they're archbishops they're The Most Reverend. Catholic bishops all get The Most Reverend, but if it's the cardinal you're after he's His Eminence. Orthodox bishops are a mixed bag so wing it. Deans of cathedrals and defunct Presbyterian moderators general are Very Reverend, not to be confused with archdeacons who rate as Venerable. Your ordinary garden variety minister may be The Reverend Joe or Jill Bloggs, but never The Reverend Bloggs. Then there are canons galore, monsignori in droves and the serried ranks of the Salvation Army.

Pausing for breath, it occurred to me that the beneficiary of all this information was looking less than totally impressed. "You must be joking," she said. "What's all that got to do with Jesus Christ?"

Which is a good question. A very good question. A question we should probably ask a lot more often about the ways we spend our time and energy in the life of the church.

Like what's happening here this afternoon. What has this service of induction to do with Jesus Christ?

Yes, we're here as people who care about St Stephen's, people who care about Ockert, many of us who care about both, to help them mark a significant new beginning and to wish them well. And yes, we're here for a formal action by the Presbytery of Sydney as it exercises one aspect of its episcopal role and places a minister in a position of pastoral responsibility for a particular congregation.

But beyond the friendship, beyond the formalities, what has this induction to do with Jesus Christ?

The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia points us towards an answer. “The Congregation,” it says, “is the embodiment in one place of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ”. A powerful statement. And it’s a statement about you, St Stephen’s. You, in company a few minutes hence with Ockert as your pastor! An embodiment – here – of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.

Yes, I know about your aging hips and creaking joints. I know about the dicey stone masonry at one end of this sanctuary and the rainwater seeping in at the other. I know about your treasurer’s sleepless nights. I know you sometimes feel daunted by the task that is yours.

But it’s not just some other congregation the Basis is describing, it is you. *You* -- believe it or not -- are a living cell in the body of Christ. *You* are a community in which the Word of life is heard, the sacraments of life are celebrated, and again and again the Lord of life is met. *You* are a fellowship in which the mystery of grace is glimpsed, in which again and again the miracle of faith happens. *You!*

St Stephen’s, Ockert: we charge you, together, on this your special day, to become what you are. Do not waste your energy trying to recreate a past that is long gone. Do not be seduced into cooking up an eccentric St Stephen’s version of religion that modern Sydney might be persuaded to swallow. Mark well, on this day of new beginnings, whose you are and what you embody.

One ... Holy ... Catholic ... Apostolic. These are the four marks of the church affirmed in the Nicene Creed, the most universally accepted of all statements of the Christian faith, and highlighted in our Basis of Union. They define your God-given identity. They are to shape the message you proclaim, the worship you offer and the witness you give. Let’s unpack that.

The **faith** in which you stand will not be defined by the latest fashion in theology, by this week’s insights of your minister or by the brainwaves of stand-in preachers like myself. It will not be determined by what you as a congregation necessarily

wish to hear or by what contemporary Sydney-siders want to be offered. It will be the faith of the *church*, the whole church, across the ages and across the nations, as best we can discern it.

That requires of you and indeed of all our congregations a discerning conservatism -- and both those words are important! A discerning conservatism must include a willingness to cherish what is best from the past, a capacity to sort out enduring treasure from transient trash, a zeal to learn from our ecumenical partners in other churches, and a greater humility towards the things we have received and at this moment may not fully understand.

The **worship** you offer will be not be the product of a passing whim, a craving for contemporary “relevance” or, worst of all, a cavalier carelessness towards the most solemn act in which any mortal can engage.

Your worship will be shaped by the logic of the gospel, the heritage in which we stand and the insights drawn from our ecumenical learning. It will be marked by awe at the greatness of the ultimate mystery, wonder at the vast expanse of divine love, and joy in the recognition of all that God in Christ has done for us. Oh yes, and it will be enriched with the best that human artistry can devise – including, notably, the wonderful musical resource you are nurturing in this place.

The **witness** you give will be not to any ideology, party or program for social improvement.

Your witness will be to One whose holy love judges the pretensions of all nations, the illusions of all ideologies, the inadequacies of all parties and the follies of all cultures, our own included. One whose boundless compassion laughs at the cheap moralizing that all too often masquerades as Christianity, in this city more than most. One whose amazing grace reaches out to all people, especially those the world – and sometimes, shamefully, the church – might prefer to exclude, despise, forget.

That witness to the gospel will not always win you friends, especially among those in high places, including some of your neighbours on the other side of Macquarie Street. But, in these days of Lent, we need no reminder of the cost of discipleship.

The faith in which you stand, the worship you offer, the witness you give. It sounds like a big ask. And indeed it is. Too big, perhaps?

A few minutes ago we heard from an important document that circulated in the early Church, subsequently to be known as the letter to the Ephesians. The author was writing for people like you -- like us -- as they contemplated what must surely have been a daunting future. He wanted to confirm those first century Christians in their faith, to stretch their horizons, to draw closer the bonds that united them, to help them grasp the significance of the body to which they all belonged, to spur them forward to become what they already were. Hear him again. This time, hear him writing, on your day of new beginnings, to St Stephen's with its incoming pastor.

I pray that the Father, according to the riches of his glory, may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.... I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Hear him, further, on where you should place your confidence.

To him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

May the blessing of that astonishing God be with you.

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