

Build and Plant, Here and Now

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, on Sunday 10th October 2010, by David Gill. The readings for the day were Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; St Luke 17:11-19.

In April 1941, most elements of the 6th Australian Division found themselves in the mountains of northern Greece, charged with stopping, or at least slowing, a strong German advance. Brigadier George Vasey's 19th Brigade had been ordered to hold the key Klidi Pass. His troops were tired and cold. They occupied a poor defensive position. They were outnumbered and outgunned. Every one of them must have been wishing fervently that he was somewhere else. They would not have been human if they hadn't been pondering their chances of getting away in the chaotic retreat that loomed inevitably ahead.

In that singularly unpromising situation, Brigadier Vasey issued an order to his brigade that has entered the annals of Australian military history. It was, and I quote verbatim: "Here you bloody well are, and here you bloody well stay!"

Jeremiah's advice to the exiles in Babylon, of which we heard in today's first reading, was along much the same lines. Those exiles must have been yearning for home, their hearts aching for how things used to be before they were dragged off into captivity, to a strange land among strange people. Surely, they thought, their God, the God of the exodus from Egypt, would save them? Surely their prophet, Jeremiah, would send a word of hope?

Jeremiah does send a word, but it's not the one they wanted to hear. What he says is not: liberation now, you'll be home again soon, I'll take you back to the good old days you once knew. But rather: there you are in Babylon and there for the time being you are going to stay -- so build, start families, plant crops (even fruit trees -- which suggested they were going to be there for quite a while to reap the benefits). And pray for that alien city as if it were your own. In other words, be faithful where you are. That's where you will find God's future.

It must have been a difficult call for them to accept. Anyone in such a situation would have found it difficult. After all, when times are tough, it's only human to fix your eyes on what once was, to hanker for the good old days.

Just a few blocks from this church, at the corner of Hunter and Bligh Streets, there is a small marker. It commemorates the first act of Christian worship on these shores, on 3rd February 1788. Try to imagine that scene. The congregation would have comprised some 700 convicts, all no doubt wishing fervently that they were somewhere else. There would have been a similar number of marines, ship's crews and officials, probably wishing they were somewhere else too. And perhaps, on the sidelines, there were some curious Aboriginal people looking on, heartily wishing that this entire fleet load of uninvited guests were somewhere else! The fascinating thing is the text on which the colonial chaplain, the Revd Richard

Johnson, preached Australia's first sermon. It was Psalm 116:12 – "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" The focus was on God's goodness – here, not somewhere else, and now, not in days long gone.

It's natural to yearn for the good old days. When I was working in church leadership jobs, I could not help wishing, occasionally, that I'd held those posts back when things were easier – when congregations burgeoned, when Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams, when youth groups thrived, when people paid attention to church leaders, when the Church had no scandals (well, none we knew about!), when Christians were sure of themselves (well, we acted as if we were!), when this was a Christian country (well, we told ourselves it was!). Ah the good old days.

It's natural to think that way about our congregations too. Don't you sometimes find yourself yearning for St Stephen's as it used to be? – when the sanctuary was packed to the rafters, when assorted royals and governors turned up, when we were all a generation or two younger, when the treasurer slept soundly knowing that his budget balanced, when there were no bits falling off the roof, when we had good preachers instead of (well, let's not go there!). Ah the good old days.

Haven't you sometimes found yourself thinking like that? Don't worry, it's OK to own up! It's natural that we should hanker after the good times past. But it can be dangerous too. For three reasons.

First, the past is a mirage. At least, our recollection of it often is. Our memories operate with a sort of built-in filter system, taking out or at least muting the worst things from the past and accentuating the best. Those allegedly good old days, in reality, were not nearly as delightful as they appear through the filter of hindsight.

Second, the past is beyond reach. Back in 1940, a novel by Thomas Wolfe appeared with the catchy title "You Can't Go Home Again". That title has found an enduring place in US speech, meaning that attempts to relive youthful memories will always fail. You have changed. The world has changed. Everything has changed, moved on. We cannot go back and it's foolish to try.

Third, the past can too easily be a distraction from the present. Our great memories of the past can actually hinder us, demoralize us, for facing the great challenges of the present. Yes it is good to be grateful for the past. But not to be paralysed by it.

So next time you catch yourself yearning for St Stephen's as it once was – pause, and think again, and ponder very carefully the warnings we've heard today.

It is just possible that you might hear Thomas Wolfe saying "St Stephen's, you can't go home again!"

Or you might hear Brigadier Vasey saying – in a slightly expurgated version! – "St Stephen's, here you are, and here you stay!"

Or you might even hear the prophet Jeremiah saying "St Stephen's, here and now you are to build. Here and now you are to plant. Here and now you are to be faithful."

"And here and now you will discover again the never-failing faithfulness of your God!"