

Aidan, Bunyan, Phillip: Three Journeys

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 31 August 2014, by the Revd Dr John Bunyan. The readings were Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21 and St Matthew 16:21-28.

My thanks to David and S.Stephen's, for the kind invitation to preach this morning. I am getting a bit past preaching, as you may agree by the time that I finish in about 20 minutes - but at least you can say Amen to my prayer.

May the words of my lips, and the music of our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

The other Sunday I noticed a small carving in our Minister's chair of the burning bush, one of the reminders that the heritage of S.Stephen's is Scottish Presbyterian. My own Scottish Presbyterian grandfather was married when this church was in Pitt Street – that Scottish Presbyterian heritage taken up as one part of the Uniting Church – “uniting” sometimes perhaps appropriately begun with a lower case u – but anyhow S.Stephen's older heritage one part of what is meant to be, I hope, a Church that is more like an assorted salad than a simple soup.

The burning bush, of course, is not just a Scottish Presbyterian badge. It is a reminder of today's story of Moses coming upon this strange sight, a bush burning yet not consumed – and if there were time one could explore that sign, but anyhow Moses is told, “take off thy shoes, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground”.

The custom of taking off one's shoes before entering a holy place is one of the many customs that Muslims copied from earlier Christians, and Jews. I once knew an old priest of the now sadly gravely persecuted Church of Iraq, of Assyria, the great Church of the East, and this old priest would say his morning prayers in our church, always first taking of his shoes, before entering what an old Church of England homily calls the house of God & the temple of the Lord. At least here at S.Stephen's, in every pew there is a little notice to remind us that this is a house of God.

Such outward reverence seems less common now – a pity since it can help strengthen our sense of the very reality of God, and reverence in church can perhaps also help us, in turn, to go out to have greater reverence for God's world as a whole, perhaps finding, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning did, that earth is “crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God.

Well, today marks anniversaries of three men. First of all, this is S.Aidan's Day, Aidan the northern Irishman who walked the beautiful but sometimes grim wilderness of Northumbria to proclaim the good news of Jesus. If given a horse to ride, he tended to give it away to someone who needed it more – S.Aidan of Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, who shared not only Celtic austerity but Celtic reverence for creation, who did as it were, if not take off his shoes, did walk, on holy ground.

This 7th century monk and bishop gradually brought Christianity back to pagan Northumbria – an amazing achievement that I should think is still remembered, for example, at St Aidan's Uniting Church at Narrabundah in your former Minister's new parish.

S.Aidan of Lindisfarne journeying and, like Moses finding the burning bush – of God's presence, And bringing back the Christian faith to a kingdom from which it had been expelled. I dare to say, I dare to say, that is our task today- not to just accept that ours as a secular, post-Christian, post-modern society, but to endeavour to restore, as far as we can, the Christian faith and to witness intelligently to it.

Even in a society where the Christian Church is confronted without, by the atheism of some of the intelligentsia and within, in some places by scandal, and weakened by modern fundamentalism, because Christian fundamentalism is a comparatively modern phenomenon, we still, as we sang the other Sunday, we still "have a Gospel to proclaim", and saving health to experience and to share, and we do that not least by maintaining open doors in every sense and extending genuine welcome and heart-felt care, and even if a few of us are weary in body and mind, I hope we do not grow weary in this well-doing but remain deep within, enthusiastic.

The second passage today is from that great 12th chapter of S.Paul's Letter to the Romans. It fits so well the character of the second person commemorated this morning, John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who died on August 31st in 1688.

During the war years I only had one special birthday party, my 7th, and the presents included a children's version, in the John Mystery series, of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I was fortunate that it was a children's version. It left out most of the difficult and sometimes dry theological material that I never read until many years later and that even an adult might still only skip or skim.

My version simply told the story of Christian's progress. I always objected whenever I was told I was too young to understand it. I did realise it was about the story of our

lives – and what we might encounter, although only years later of course did I know some of those things by experience. The story tells, for example, of the Hill Difficulty that most of us have to climb quite often, and of the Slough of Despond into which some of us at times might fall, of Giant Despair in Doubting Castle whom I hope we do not meet, and the Valley of Humiliation, Vanity Fair so very prominent on our paths today, the Valley of the Shadow of Death through which all of us must pass, and not least – and earlier on - the Cross and Sepulchre where the burden on Christian’s back fell off and tumbled away to be seen no more. The story tells also of his finding friends such as Faithful, Hopeful and Mr Standfast, friends we also need, and tells also of his lodging at the House Beautiful, and his walking on the Delectable Mountains – what a lovely phrase – the Delectable Mountains - from where we can sometimes glimpse the Celestial City gleaming in the sun.

Bunyan’s own life illustrates so many of the things about which S.Paul speaks in the second reading –cleaving to that which is good, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation – tribulation which in Bunyan’s case meant years spent in gaol, twelve years, and then after that another six months, for preaching without a licence from the Church of England.

Even though not under strict conditions, that gaol sentence was tribulation enough, he depending on the loving care of his wife who brought him food, and in turn he making shoe laces to sell to support his family, and in those circumstances writing his masterpiece including the second, gentler part, the story of Christiana and her companions, where the once very stern Puritan author can write of Mr Ready-to-halt, despite his crutches, getting up to dance- to dance sprightly with Miss Much-Afraid – can you picture it? And the author who once feared that the tower and bells of Elstow Abbey would fall upon him came to be able to write of bells ringing out on Mount Sion in the City of the Prince to welcome home the pilgrims.

And just as S.Aidan journeyed about the countryside, Bunyan did the same as he later visited gatherings of Christians in all sorts of places, such a great pastor or shepherd, that the common people who heard him gladly, called him Bishop Bunyan, but I associate him especially with his final journey, when he rode on horse-back along the rough roads to Reading in drenching rain in the hope of bringing about reconciliation between a father and a son. On that ride he caught a severe cold that quickly brought about his death – but of course not the end of his influence.

Indeed he is called the “Immortal Dreamer” of Bedford , making his own pilgrimage – even though at the end, like S.Paul, risking his life, losing his life, as it turned out, for the sake of reconciliation. He himself was a Mr Valiant-for-truth whose words at

the end of his journey exemplify the wonderful skill with words that the author possessed, and the author's faith. I have printed these words out on a little leaflet that you might like to have the service.

Listen to them now. "After this it was noised abroad that Mr.Valiant-for-truth was taken with a summons...When he understood it, he called for his friends, and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I have got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which as he went, he said, Death, where is thy sting? And as he went down deeper, he said, Grave, where is thy victory? So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

The third man commemorated today is Captain Arthur Phillip, our first Governor, founder of Sydney and Parramatta, founder of modern British Australia, whose 200th anniversary occurs on this 31st August and which will be marked by a special service at S.James's Parish Church this afternoon at 3 pm at which his latest successor as Governor, Dame Marie Bashir, will unveil a plaque in his memory, and Mr Justice Pembroke, author of a new book about Phillip, will give the address.

I did blink, recently, when I heard someone say in an address that Phillip was not a Christian but just a deist. Some are perhaps too quick to decide who is and who is not a Christian. It is true that Phillip would not have been interested in the Evangelical Revival of his day nor the beginnings of the Wesleyan movement, both of which especially in their more mature forms greatly influenced for good, British society in the 19th century, just as their Pentecostal successors now, in time I hope may be fresh yeast in our own community.

I am a bit more like Phillip than a Pentecostal and I sometimes feel a little guilty that I cannot get worked up in church services, or speak in tongues, or wave my hands about, without inhibition, unless I had some Dutch courage, though I am always moved – often to tears – when I see scenes of war and human conflict. But if the 18th century, apart from those revivals, was generally undemonstrative and temperate and tolerant – though in some aspects of religion unreformed and corrupt, that is not surprising, after the controversies and killings of the 16th century and the civil wars of the 17th, un-civil really, with their deadly regal and republican and religious conflicts.

Phillip a typical, baptised, member of the 18th century Church of England, much less devout than, say, Jane Austen his younger contemporary, though sharing her restraint and reserve in matters of religion – does not rule out, in her case for example, being quietly fervent in spirit.

Phillip was very human, for example, reasonably ambitious as indeed was Macquarie. And he was a man of his own day, not ours –but Michael Pembroke in that biography shows him as always conscientious, steady, dutiful, wise, an outstanding leader as he guided the First Fleet here upon on what was an appalling journey and as he battled here under very difficult circumstances, with inadequate support, to establish a settlement that he hoped would not be only a prison but a place for free settlers, a blessing for Britain, and not least where the indigenous people were respected – all backed by his own experience as a farmer of the soil during periods when he was on half-pay, and especially as a sailor of ships, and by his own integrity. Typically, when famine threatened, he insisted on having the same rations as everyone else.

In the third reading , we had a Gospel passage and if I had not wanted to speak about the three anniversaries that happen to coincide today, with some serendipity, the sermon would have been mainly about the Gospel reading, and I hope you will ponder it later on, especially our Lord's saying that "if anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me". Despite Phillip's ecclesiastical limitations, I don't think it is too extravagant to say that in his own not narrowly religious but still significant way, in some sense, he did that, following in some important respects the Christian way, the way of Jesus - the great pioneer. And we are called to do that also - I hope more explicitly – despite our limitations, by God's grace.

The Governor who led others in a great journey to what this methodical mariner, and later methodistical ministers, and so many others, including eventually, people of the dream-time at their best, have helped to make potentially a great south land of the holy Spirit – but as today's Gospel reminds us, in the end, and fundamentally, that possible only by journeying, following, steadily, without complaint, with integrity, in the way, in the manner, in the spirit of our Lord Jesus and by being willing to bear our cross, as we sang, till "our travelling days are done", and, as we shall sing in a moment, "as pilgrims on a journey, and companions" – that word in its origin means those who eat together, "pilgrims on a journey and companions on the road".

So, three passages of Scripture, three people whose day this is, and three journeys. The Celt, the Congregationalist *though Bunyan preferred to call himself just plain Christian*, the Celt, the Congregationalist, and the Captain. It is as simple as ABC to remember the three about whom I have spoken, and to ponder yourselves what they mean to you and for your journey – as simple as ABC – A for Aidan, B for Bunyan, C for Captain Phillip. On the train the other day I jotted down some doggerel in sonnet form. It's also on that little leaflet I have printed out.

Saint Aidan and John Bunyan for a while
join Captain Arthur Phillip – three wise men :
the Irish bishop on the Holy Isle,
who lit the northern fire of faith again,
the Bedford tinker, prisoner, teller of the tale
of Christian, Christiana, and their folk,
the naval farmer ordered to set sail
to plant a colony, an acorn for an oak :
three men on journeys – Aidan wandering
on northern tracks, and one who dreamt
of what a pilgrim meets in travelling,
and Phillip come to captain the unkempt :
dear God, through southern seasons guide our fleet :
with Jesus, make our voyaging complete. Amen.

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