

SERMON HOLY COVENANT 40th ANNIVERSARY 27 July 2008

Romans 8: 26-39

Matthew 13: 31-34, 44-52

**May we show your love in our lives, O God of compassion.
Amen.**

40 – such a Biblical number! For 40 days Noah, his family and the animals on the ark were tossed around on a chaotic flood; for 40 years the raggle taggle band of Hebrews wandered through the desert before reaching the promised land; for 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness as he came to grips with the enormity of his calling...

And for you, here at Holy Covenant, no floods, apart perhaps from the occasional pooling of water outside the kitchen door, no desert wanderings, no wilderness, but nonetheless a 40 year journey as people of faith: a journey with its own stories, its own triumphs and difficulties, joys and sorrows, its heroes and its saints.

40 years is, after all, a long time – it is long enough to be born, grow up, partner or not, have kids or not, and start the slide into middle age. Indeed, It was a salutary moment for me when I realised that I was here as parish administrator more than half your lifetime ago (21 years to be precise) and that the 5 year old boy who came and drew pictures through the services while I was a deacon in the parish some years later is now a bearded university student.

40 years ago, Canberra ended at Coulter Drive – the new suburbs of Weetangera and Hawker were just being created, the red clay dust of the earthworks being blown into the homes in Macquarie and Cook. Belconnen Mall wouldn't open for another 10 years and people from old Canberra were complaining about how far out the new suburbs beyond Black Mountain were.

You were pioneers, prayerfully seeking God's leading about what it meant to be Christian community in the midst of these new suburbs. We can ask today – what has changed? You are

now part of 'old Canberra' but you are still prayerfully seeking what it means to be Christian community in this place at this time.

There have been different answers to that question at different times: in the beginning there was a decade of close ecumenical relationship, sharing income, resources and ministry with the Churches of Christ, the Congregational, Methodist and the Presbyterian churches, later the Uniting Church.

Over the last thirty years, Holy Covenant has operated as an Anglican parish, covering the suburbs of Aranda, Bruce, Belconnen, Cook and Macquarie.

There has always, however, been a strong commitment to ministry within and for the wider community – through chaplaincies, shopfronts, ministry to nursing homes, religious instruction in schools – you name it, the people of Holy Covenant have lovingly perceived need and sought to meet it, in Christ's name.

There is much to celebrate about the 40 year journey so far: God has been loved and worshipped in liturgy, music, in dance, in play, in art, even in the very architecture of this building. And neighbours have been loved through many types of community action. The two great commandments have been lived out and expressed in your life together.

As Noah stepped out in faith and built the ark, so the pioneers of the parish stepped out in faith and built a church community. As the Hebrews forged their identity as a nation in the 40 year pilgrimage in the desert, so you have forged your identity over 40 years of Christian community. As Jesus confronted the reality of his calling in his 40 days in the wilderness, so too have you confronted the reality of your calling as the people of God.

This reality is to do with being caught up in the kingdom of heaven. Somehow, wonderfully, we are linked in to God's kingdom and are called to follow God's leading. My ways are not your ways, says God – and ain't that the truth! Just when we think we've got things nicely pegged down and we are steaming along comfortably, implementing our strategies,

resourcing our programs and measuring our key performance indicators, along comes God to challenge us, move us in new directions, to close some doors and open some new ones.

The parables in today's Gospel reading all talk about the kingdom of heaven. Multiple images cascade into our brains and really challenge us to make some sense of them. They don't fit together, they tumble around like the lenses of a kaleidoscope, conveying colour and pattern rather than a single clearly defined picture of the kingdom of heaven.

There are the images of abundant growth in unexpected places – huge mustard bushes from tiny seeds; light, airy, tasty bread from flat, unappetising flour and yeast. The mustard bushes provide shelter, the bread is nutritious and sustains life. In the kingdom of heaven, expect good things to grow from unlikely beginnings.

And then, just as we have come to grips with these images, there are the images of treasure and pearls, which seem to speak of the value of the kingdom itself. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure or a fine pearl and it is worth going to great lengths to acquire it, even shady dealings with the owner of the field. Or are we human beings the treasure and the pearl – the items of great value on whose account God has given of God's very self?

And then, on top of all this, we are told that the kingdom of heaven is like a net scooping up fish of every kind, which then gets sorted into good and bad. The writer of Matthew has gone on to interpret this as a judgment story, meaning that some people will be in and some people will be out, once the angels do their little bit of triage at the end of time. This seems fierce but it is making the same point as last week's parable of the wheat and the weeds. It is not our job to decide who is part of the kingdom of heaven and who isn't. That's God's job – later. Our task is just to get on with it and to welcome everyone. Which you have done, magnificently, for 40 years.

So, what does it mean to be Christian community in this place at this time? It means thankfulness for the journey so far, it means openness to the unexpected, it means openness to

each other that you might see Christ in each other, it means confidence in God's great love for you. And today, it means celebration of all that has gone before you and all that is to come, journeying on the path Christ sets before us. Amen.

**Sarah Macneil
July 2008**