

THE PEOPLE OF ST HILDA'S, UPPER HUTT

A CONSIDERATION OF THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF THE 100 PEOPLE WHO ARE ST HILDA'S

INTRODUCTION

I believe that what I will say today will disturb some of you. I fully expect that some will not buy it; perhaps thinking that I am asking too much; even getting it wrong! Some of you; perhaps those with most vested interest in St Hilda's will feel threatened, even unappreciated. My desire is to speak with love, the kind of love that is sometimes described as tough love. Here goes...

I have been amongst the parishioners of Upper Hutt Parish since the beginning of March this year as your interim Priest. That's a little over six months. Recently I learned that it may take six months or more to arrange a permanent priest appointment. That will take us through Easter (1st April) next year. I am asking myself, before suggesting to you, what I/we might helpfully do to encourage the strengthening of the parish during these next six months if I am to remain as your interim Priest.

SYNOD 2017

Last weekend the annual Diocesan Synod met in Palmerston North and I was there with Parish representatives, Sue Woodhouse and Dave Pullar. It was the first time I had been at synod in nine years. A lot has changed since my last appearance there. Bishop Justin 5 years into his episcopate, has his feet well and truly under the table. His vision to see the Diocesan ministry units grow as communities of faith reaching the least, last and lost is being realised. There were several presentations during Synod that captured this movement. In his address to Synod, Justin highlighted the challenge for each unit to change and grow courageously facing their issues head on, honestly and with a focus on results and developing intentional community/ies. I was very moved and challenged personally by his message, and Bishop Eleanor's reflection on Rosa Parks igniting the US Civil Rights movement in the 1960's, and the climate there of intentional, community and spirit led transformation.

As I returned home this week and reflected on these things I have been taking a close look at who we are and what we are doing at St Hilda's, asking where might similar intentional change and growth be possible at St Hilda's. I discussed some of these things with Vestry on Tuesday night. I have taken a close look at the Parish Roll and movements in it over the past year.

Today's first scripture verse, Jonah 3:10 speaks of the God of change,

3¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Of course, this did not meet with Jonah's approval. He had written off the people of Nineveh. Why would God repent of the evil He planned to bring upon them? They deserved it, Yet God loved the Ninevites and saw potential in them for change and redemption,

4¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

Could it be that same God is looking upon St Hilda's? Musing that there is so much potential; much that could be changed. That God will now stay His hand from allowing further decline and allow the faith and the ministry of St Hilda-ites to flourish and reap rich dividends for Upper Hutt and for God's kingdom.

POSITIVE INITIATIVES

Vestry members on Tuesday night highlighted how they see Messy Church as a cornerstone element of the renewal of the Parish. People on the edge are suggesting this is their Church. Gatherings this year have been 35-50 per monthly session. Bishop Justin has address Messy Church people in the Diocese with the suggestion that meeting once a month does not establish a community; it needs to be at least fortnightly. Do we need to claim another 10:30am service slot for a second Messy Church gathering? What will this mean for resourcing?

The revival of the playgroup this term has been a further encouragement. Numbers are not great yet but Glennis and the two Jocelyn's are doing a great job with parent support. How can we develop an intentional community here?

This year around 25 people committed to a Weekly Lenten study on Wednesday afternoon or evening. This ran for six weeks and the support for it seems to indicate that another Lenten Study should be replicated next Lent: Wednesday 14 February to Wednesday 28 March 2018. Building on this year's momentum, how can we use the Lenten study focus to build more intentional community that reaches to society's edge. The 2018 study theme is, "A Sent People."

What else might we consider that will promote this kind of change and growth? How might we positively adapt what we currently do in services, small groups, fundraising and otherwise so that intentionally we develop community and grow the kingdom of God at St Hilda's? An environment that people in Upper Hutt experience as life giving, transformative personally and for the community, and attractive so that they want to draw nearer...

LET'S CONSIDER WHO WE ARE

When I arrived at St Hilda's at the beginning of March 2017 I was given the Parish Roll that numbered 318 people. Of these people 82 were on the electoral roll; in other words, they can vote at the annual parish meeting and presumably are the core members of the Parish.

Today, a little over six months later I have been re-looking at the Parish Roll, or at least those who have been actively involved in the life of the Parish during these six months.

In summary:

- Exactly 100 people are currently active parishioners.
- The current electoral roll still totals 82 people.
- 62 of these people (62%) are 65 and older.
- 7 of these people (7%) are under 18 years. (Does not include Messy Church or Play Group attendees)
- 9 of these people (9%) are 18-45 years.
- 22 of these people (22%) are 46-64 years.
- 56 of these people (56%) attend Sunday 9am service. Average service attendance is about 42.
- 23 of these people (23%) attend Sunday 10:30am service. Average service attendance is about 17.

- 15 of these people (15%) attend Thursday 10am service. Average service attendance is 12.

WHO IS MISSING

This year I am unaware of any new people attending Sunday or Thursday worship services. There have been occasional visitors. Some new faces have appeared in Messy Church and Thursday Playgroup. I cannot quantify how many.

Conversely, I can identify 7 people who were worshipping actively at the beginning of this year who are now no longer with us. 4 of these have left during the six months of my ministry; all 4 moving overseas. This is not unusual when a long term priestly ministry concludes; and where there is some uncertainty about the ministry that will follow.

INTERIM PRIESTLY MINISTRY – THE NEXT SIX MONTHS

My focus during the six months of my ministry amongst you has been to attend and/or lead Sunday & Thursday communion services, attend Messy Church, Vestry, Lenten Studies, Wardens, Worship & Pastoral group meetings. I have attended a pre-Synod meeting and Synod and some Cluster meetings, diocesan training days and some ad hoc other diocesan meetings. I have re-established a monthly Elderslea Communion service and offer monthly Home Communion. I have visited several (mainly elderly) people in their homes. I have re-established the Parish website and have begun setting up an email communication system.

During these next six months I intend to maintain eucharistic ministry, while being more intentional about visiting younger people and their families; both active members and those on the edge. I hope to meet some of the younger members in groups with a view to listening and seeking to discern how we might better support them and together impact younger people in our community. Diocesan demands will be less during this period. I will train people to manage the website. I will encourage and train some to be eucharistic ministers for Home Communion and pastoral visitation, especially to over 65's. I will fully participate in Lenten studies during February & March 2018.

SUMMARY

In preparation for the appointment of a permanent Priest at St Hilda's, we need to create a positive environment at St Hilda's that will hopefully be characterised by:

1. Greater participation in lifegiving fellowship and ministry acts;
2. A deepening sense that we are intentional, Spirit-led communities living sacrificially;
3. Sacrificial commitment because we are committed to ministering with God's love and power (eg. Healing Euch);
4. Measurable, tangible growth in personal and corporate spirituality and numerical indicators;
5. A willingness to change where we discern that the old ways are no longer God's ways, mindful that we are called to serve beyond ourselves.

I want to conclude by reflecting on the Parable of the day labouring workers in the vineyard and why they were all paid the same wage when the hours they work were different.

Aside: In 1814 my great great great grandfather Wilhelm Melchior Alfer married Anna Elizabeth Lamsfusz in Huckeswagen. Johann Georg Oules the Frenchman, burgermeister of Huckeswagen noted in the record of the marriage that both mothers of the couple gave their assent to the marriage. His record further noted that Wilhelm was a cart driver. However by the time of the birth of his and Anna's children (1815-1825) his occupation is recorded as a 'Day Labourer.'

As it was in the story of Nineveh we reflected on earlier, so it is in today's Gospel Parable, God is always patient, forbearing, waiting and watching before acting. God's grace knows no bounds and God's justice is impeccable. The Gospel reading concluded,

Matthew 20¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.' [Some Add: *for many are called but few are chosen*]

Another way of looking at all of this is that a similar, great reversal in attitude and action will go a long way to aligning St Hilda's with what God wants for us now... the last and the least will be first and we will all see the kingdom of God afresh and be amazed.

Terry Alve – 22nd September 2017