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ST PETER'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, WOOLLOOMOOLOO

SERVICE FOR THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE CHURCH

Sunday 26 July 1992

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Michael Kirby*

THE LOVER OF CONCORD

Even though I am not quite in the pulpit, this address this morning fulfils a lifetime's ambition. As a very young boy I grew up in the Anglican tradition of the Christian Church. I attended, and sang in the choir, of St Andrew's Church at Concord. Singing and participating in the beautiful service of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the values of tolerance and fairness - those very English values - were inculcated in me. I hope they remain with me all my days. In that small church, the Union Jack and the Australian flag hung above the alter. The prayers for the King's Majesty were faithfully said. In those far-away days, I was convinced that ours was a congregation chosen by God. Why else would the Collect say:

"Oh Lord who are the author of peace and lover of Concord."

The lover of Concord - the Lord - kept a special place for the

congregation of St Andrew's.

I was sent from the North Strathfield Public School to the Summer Hill Opportunity School as a result of departmental tests. At that school, on a summer's morning, two men in grey dust jackets came to administer a vocational examination. I remember clearly the question asked. "What do you want to be when you grow up?".

With a certain want of modesty, I wrote "A bishop or a judge". Now, the very lack of humble piety which led me to inscribe those answers thus, necessarily denied me advancement in the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church. There, worldly episcopal ambitions would have no place. Accordingly, I was doomed to enter the law and to end up a judge. You will observe that one way or the other, I was determined to get into a dressing gown for the performance of my daily duties.

My association with the Anglican tradition has lasted ever since those days. It accompanies me into this famous old church of St Peter's. As I stand here, the church reminds me of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Bangalore, India. I visited that church a few years ago. It was about the same size as this. But it was very run down. Occasionally it was used by an Assyrian Christian sect. Gone were the lords and ladies of the Raj. Bougainvillia almost blocked the crumbling entrance-way. A panel-beater plied his trade in the church grounds, where cattle peacefully grazed. Cobwebs were found in every nook and cranny of the church. In the front pew, to the right of the altar, was a small brass plaque. Dirty but still discernible were the words "His Excellency": for this was where the representative of the King Emperor sat and prayed. On the other side an equivalent plaque marked "The Commander-in-Chief". In Bangalore, a cantonment town, the army prayed with the State. The hymns of yesteryear haunted the atmosphere of that church. But the church was

deserted. Around the walls were the symbols of Empire very different from the AIDS Quilt - that icon of today - which decorates the rear wall of this place. The plaques of Bangalore told of the suffering of the soldiers who were the guardians of the Dominion upon which the sun would never set. John Smith died of cholera aged 23. Andrew Freeman, gunner, died of typhus, aged 19. The record of those earlier plagues and epidemics was on the wall where the history of faithful Anglican worshippers was noted.

Come forward in time. A month ago I was in the Anglican Cathedral of St Mary the Virgin in Johannesburg. It was a particularly sensitive time in that community. The massacre at Boipatong near Soweto had brought out a huge congregation. All varieties of people: men and women, young and old, black and white - all races joined to pray for deliverance from violence and oppression. The high relevance of that church was immediately noticeable. It was reaching out to the community with a message of the love of the Lord but also of the love of human freedom. Mind you, the tradition at St Mary's was quite different from that of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. The great body of the cathedral was filled with incense. Genuflexion was commonplace. The ceremony was very much in the Catholic tradition of the Anglican Church. But it is the capacity of Anglicanism to embrace different traditions of worship, and different conventions of the Church, that is its strength. It is its strength in this Diocese. I hope it endures and provides a source of inspiration by which the current crisis in the Church will be solved.

I say crisis - but crises seemed to be the way of the Anglican Church. This morning on the radio I heard the present crisis about the ordination of women discussed. It was recounted against the background of variety and divergency in the Church. Would the

current crisis split the Church? No way, came the reply. The opponents of ordination would never abandon the Church to "the opposition". At this time of difference, I hope that the spirit of fairness and compromise that is such a specially English feature of our branch of Christianity, will see us through to a just and modern resolution of all our differences.

THE EARLY DAYS

It is inappropriate, in these days of rapid change, recession and human suffering to dwell too long in the past. In Anglicanism, there is often a tendency to do just that. By the same token, when we celebrate the 125th anniversary of this church of St Peter it is impossible to ignore its past. It would be wrong to us to ignore the spirits of the men, women and children who congregated in this church in 125 years of service to its community.

In the 1850s the Anglican Church in Sydney boasted in addition to garrison chapels, St Andrew's Cathedral, St James' Church from colonial days and the recently completed Church of St John's in Darlinghurst. A number of local citizens wanted to establish another church in the go-ahead district of Woolloomooloo. The first effort to do so led to the Reverend P Agnew. He had been a congregationalist Minister. He was given a licence as a priest of the Church of England. He preached to the prisoners at the Darlinghurst Gaol and at the gaol on Cockatoo Island. It fell to him to establish a new parish in Woolloomooloo. But as now, so then. A difference arose between Mr Agnew and the Bishop of Sydney. In the end, Mr Agnew's licence was cancelled. The parish was without a minister.

By 1864 the Bishop was ready to accede to the many demands for a priest. He designated the Reverend George Moreton to establish a

new church. Moreton had been priested in London after earlier service in Shanghai. He set about the task of choosing a site. The land upon which the church of St Peter stands was chosen. A grand sum of £1,200 was set aside for the new edifice. The architect, Lewis, was requested to design the Church after the English tradition. In May 1866 the foundation stone was laid. The Governor, Sir John Young, rode up on a horse from Government House to officiate:

"I lay this as the foundation and cornerstone of a Church, to be built in this place, to be named St Peter's Church, and to be set apart for the preaching of the pure Word of God and administration of the Sacraments according to the order of the United Church of England and Ireland, in the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

It seems that the history of this church is to be bound up with the Youngs. Now, one hundred and twenty-five years later, it was Mr Justice Peter Young who chaired the Lands Committee which has reviewed whether this Church should be closed and the land sold.

Sir John Young was quizzical as to whether such a large church, as planned, was really required in the open spaces and dairy farms of Woolloomooloo and Darlinghurst. But Moreton was a man for the future. He went ahead with his large church. An organ was purchased from the Prince of Wales theatre, not a particularly suitable one by all accounts. And eventually the building was completed. The first service was held here on 25 July 1867. That is one hundred and twenty five years ago yesterday. Moreton's service took the text from St Matthew's gospel:

"Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church."

Moreton had to move quickly after the first service. A parish council had to be elected. Representatives for the upcoming Synod

had to be designated. Even in those days, Synod business was deemed vital. Moreton was determined to reach out to the poorer members of the working class in Sydney who lived near his new church.

It would be tedious to recount all of the events of more than a hundred years which have passed since those early colonial days. Yet we should pause and look upon our inner eye - "the bliss of solitude" - which can conjure up the laughter, noise, excitement and anticipation of the opening of the new church. The spirits of those people are still in this place. All the marriages and funerals and baptisms and acts of worship. All the prayers, the grief, the joy of so many generations are here, with us, this morning. We are part of the continuity of this church.

In the tradition of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, the church served for many years as a centre of evangelical worship. That had the good side. It was open to working people, many of whom were marginalised in colonial society. It tended to the simplicity of the early gospel message. It was basically egalitarian.

But it had a censorious side which was reflected in the ministry of such priests as the Reverend R B S Hammond and the Reverend Bernard Judd. I say this in no criticism of them or of the service in this place. They were doubtless reflections of their times. But from their faithful ministries, the church gained a reputation as one which wagged a finger at Sydney and its perceived errors: so close by in Kings Cross and Darlinghurst. It was a church of the temperance movement. It was a church of Sabbath Day observance. With the passing of the years, its congregation dwindled. Before the current community was rebuilt, it was down to about five parishioners at Sunday's services.

THE REVIVAL

The history of the revival is told by Chris Roper's essay "New

Beginnings" in *Krossways*, Oct 1991. Chris Roper was visiting this part of Sydney in company with a colleague who had undergone theological studies with him. They were looking for a venue for a community of St Francis whose Founder had earlier received the message "go and rebuild my church".

In 1987 Chris Roper came into the gloom of St Peter's Church - much as I came into Holy Trinity in Bangalore. Yet he perceived immediately the way in which this place could be revitalised: being so well situated for communities in particular need of ministering. He, and later his friends, began to join the old congregation. They cleaned the brass railings. Eventually they moved the table. They printed books of the service. No questions were asked of those who came to worship and to meditate.

The old timers eventually caught the enthusiasm of this new congregation - Lillian, Peter, Joyce. Chris Roper's friends (many of them here today) founded a new company to worship at St Peter's: Lawrence Lian, Andrew Smith, Margaret Coaldrake, Graeme Curry. Music was added in the splendid Anglican tradition. More and more came. Norman lifted the voices of the congregation from the organ keyboard.

But in the middle of this development, so full of hope, a new crisis struck St Peter's. I hope its origins lay only in the perceived need of the Diocese for rationalisation of church property. I hope it did not lie in any desire to marginalise some of those who came in to share in the congregation. This church is at the very centre of the largest concentration of people in our country who are living with AIDS. It is also near the centres of the sex industry. It ministers to many sex workers who come here for meditation and spiritual quiet. It ministers to intravenous drug users and also to ordinary men and women of families in this district and beyond. It is a very special, particular, tolerant, united

congregation. One might say a special congregation, many with special needs to which a modern church will gladly minister.

If you think that tolerance is abroad in our society, and that Australians of today love a "fair go", I have news for you. Unfortunately, there is in the community - including amongst otherwise pious Christians - a deep well of prejudice and even hatred directed against people living with AIDS, sex workers, IV drug users, gay and bisexual fellow citizens. This is totally incompatible with Christ's teachings. Earlier this week there were reported words of prejudice in the part of a judge of this State. I read them with a mounting sense of shock and shame. But they only bore out what the Anti-Discrimination Board of this State had earlier reported. In its report on *The Other Epidemic* the Board told countless tales of prejudice and discrimination against people living with AIDS. The local story is not an isolated one. Earlier this month the Vatican declared its support for discrimination against homosexual and bisexual people in areas such as public housing, family health benefits, the hiring of teachers and military personnel. The statement was sent last month to Roman Catholic Bishops around the world. It urged the promotion of the traditional family and the protection of society. It said that these were areas in which it was "not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account":

"The Church has a responsibility to promote the public morality of the entire civil society on the basis of fundamental moral values." (Washington Post, 17 July 1992 A1).

This is like endorsing prejudice and discrimination against left-handed people. We should all bluntly say so.

So in Sydney, Australia and around the world there is a great deal of prejudice and fear. It seems a very long way from the message of Jesus Christ: a message of love, hope and

reconciliation. It is a long way from the practical and kindly acts of Christian observance that one can see at St Vincent's Hospital and at the Hospice conducted by the Sisters of the Order of the Sacred Heart. It is a long way from the spirit of this congregation which no longer presumes to stigmatize fellow citizens and co-parishioners: but reaches out to all in a spirit of love, reconciliation and peace.

A SPRING IN THE VALLEY OF DRYNESS

The words of Psalm 84 which we read this morning talked of the traveller:

"Who going through the valley of dryness finds there a spring from which to drink till the autumn rain shall clothe it with blessings."

Whatever may be the future of this Church, and of this congregation, I hope that provision will always be made in this district of Sydney for a spring from which to drink till better times have come. These are hard and in many ways dark times. They are times of much pain and suffering. They are times of endurance. They are times of economic despair: of youth unemployment and of loss of work amongst good people of middle years. These are times of sacrifice and suffering. They provide the need for churches to renew themselves: including in places such as this amongst people with a special need for an open church which brings a comforting message of the hope of Christ's Gospel.

In the Gospel of St Matthew (chapter 21 v 12-16) read to us, we heard how the blind and the lame came to the temple and He healed them. The healing process must go on. It is needed in this part of this city of this nation: more than in many other places.

I am proud to have been invited to join in this service to mark

the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of such a special church. I am humble to join in this service with so many parishioners. We who are here should reflect upon the spirits of the past ministers and parishioners. We should rejoice in the spirits of those who are here. On the day of the opening of the Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, we should be uplifted by the motto of the games. It urges humanity to strive for the best that man and woman can achieve. Higher. Faster. Stronger. They are the invocations of the Olympics. They are worthy aspirations.

But the message of the Gospel is to think also of those lower in the hierarchy of achievement. Those slower in the dash for success. Those who have less power in society. Lower. Slower. Less power. These have always been included in the congregation of this church over one hundred and twenty-five years. May the spirit of those who went before and the spirit of those here today continue to enrich this congregation in the years to come - to further the enriching instruction of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

* Justice Michael Kirby, President of the Court of Appeal of New South Wales. Personal views.