

Grace in our past, present and future

Readings: Psalm 126
 Isaiah 43: 16 – 21
 Philippians 3: 4b – 14
 John 12: 1 – 8

Celebrating Otago Anniversary is not only an opportunity for a longer weekend, but also a chance to reflect on how far we have come as a province and particularly as the city of Dunedin. We have a rich and proud history. It stems from tangata whenua as far back to the 1300s, the early European settlers, particularly the strong contingent from the Free Church of Scotland in the first half of the 1800s,

followed by Irish, Italians, French, Germans, Jews and Chinese from the gold rush era, and again, relatively more recent, by the diverse peoples from the Pacific and other parts of the world who have contributed significantly to our life here. Their legacies are well evident around us in the magnificent architecture, excellence in education and outstanding cultural arts that make our city well known as a cultural and heritage centre.

We may have a history, but we have a future as well. In this is the idea of the old and the new. We can't deny our past, but as we imagine our future, we have to decide what elements of our past do we identify, value,

retain and then use as blocks to build our future. This is important because our hope for today and the future is very much tied to those significant events of the past that have shaped our development. We evaluate events to see whether they give us a sense of meaning and purpose as well as satisfaction and joy, or not. We can either use them to move ahead or disregard them as unhelpful.

I think our readings from the Old Testament this morning give some idea of how significant things of the past can inform the plans for the future.

In prophesying their future return home, the language used in Isaiah 43 recalls a momentous event in their history – the old exodus story. “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (Is. 43:16-17). The passage of Israel through the sea and the subsequent destruction of their Egyptian pursuers demonstrated that both nature and history are under the sovereign control of God.

Isaiah then calls for the exiles in Babylon to draw confidence from this memory and, in

turn, use it to build hope for a new exodus. When the writer says not to remember “the former things or consider the things of old” (v. 18), one understanding of this is that the new exodus will not be through the water; instead says God, “I will make a way through the wilderness” (v. 19). The older wilderness tradition with Moses included very complex depictions of complaint, lack of food and water, God’s absence at times and the judgement of death over a whole generation. But in the “new thing” that God was about to do; instead of murmuring, God’s people will declare God’s praise (v. 21).

The return from exile was not only an act of divine grace but also testimony to God's purpose for Israel. Two generations earlier, their Babylonian overlords had led the Israelites eastward in chains. Now they would be marching homeward rejoicing in the good news of God's blessed deliverance as they went.

This sense of meaning and joy in the life of the Israelites is reflected in psalm 126. The restoration of God's people to their land involved those who at one time sowed "in tears" but now "reap with shouts of joy" (Ps. 126:5). They went out "weeping" but now are

coming “home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (v. 6).

Here we hear of the transition from the old ways into the new; transition from a past life of defeat, pain and bondage into a new future of freedom, restoration and joy – all this through God’s grace.

I think this was what the apostle Paul also conveyed about his own life in our Philippians reading. In a church thought to have consisted largely of Gentiles, there was some concern about those who were emphasising certain Jewish practices, particularly circumcision, as an essential mark of those who belonged to

God and the people God. This group was thought to be Jews or Jewish Christians. Other views were that they may have even been Gentiles who adopted the Jewish faith or Gentile Christians who assumed that it was necessary to accept all the practices of Judaism.

Paul's response to the possible divisiveness of this group was one that focused on his own life. Paul recalled his past experiences as a means of bringing him into a new future in Christ:

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:
circumcised on the eighth day,
a member of the people of Israel,

of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew born of Hebrews;
as to the law, a Pharisee;
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.
Yet whatever gains I had,
these I have come to regard as loss because of
Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss
because of the surpassing value of knowing
Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all
things,
and I regard them as rubbish,
in order that I may gain Christ and be found in
him,

not having a righteousness of my own that
comes from the law,
but one that comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God based on faith.”

(Philippians 3: 4b-9)

His was a life once based on the righteousness of the Law, but now transformed into a life based on the righteousness of Christ. As a Jew and Pharisee, the Law and traditions of Israel were grounds for Paul being confident in himself and his practices. But through his encounter with Christ on his Damascus road journey, Paul's faith journey took a new route. The building blocks of his past began to take on new meaning. Although he once considered these things as "gain", he now regarded them as "loss" (Phil. 3:7-8). He even went to the extreme of stating them as "rubbish" (v. 8) as if the past events of his life were a waste.

But the events of our past can never be denied. In retrospect we understand them in light of what meaning and purpose they bring to our present situation or future.

For Paul, his personal history, and that of the Jews, was not really a complete loss or something utterly worthless; rather in truth, he now interpreted them in a new light, through Christ. Where circumcision was once the crucial identity marker for him and a select few; true circumcision was now that of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29) where “faith” rather than law enabled a new humanity inclusive of all peoples regardless of ethnicity and culture.

I believe Paul did not waste life. The reality was that his history served to give him, and us today, a new and precious understanding of God's grace. This is grace that is given freely and abundantly by God despite our selves; our strengths and weaknesses.

This is reflected in what Mary of Bethany did for Jesus before Jesus' arrest, trial and death in Jerusalem. Her extravagant use of perfumed oil on Jesus was interpreted by Judas as totally inappropriate and unnecessary. In Matthew and Mark's account of this story Judas saw this extravagance as a "waste" (Mt. 26:8; Mk. 14:4). But, Jesus saw beyond what others saw. He saw, as the

Gospel writers did, that her actions were very appropriate in preparation for his burial. Instead of a waste, Matthew and Mark have Jesus saying that it was “a fine and beautiful thing” (Mt. 26:10; Mk. 14:6).

In God’s grace there is no waste. In grace, God grants us the time and space to change, regardless of where we’ve been and what we’ve done. In grace we have the opportunity see things differently as Paul did and, therefore, change the course of our life. As our minds and spirits are renewed through Christ, so too can the effect be upon how we interpret our past, present and future.

Those who founded our city over 170 years ago did so through their vision and conviction that God was at work in them. They did not carve out a life through sheer guts, sweat and tears for themselves only, but they did so for the generations that would follow; generations that call Otago home and continue their journey here now with joy and shouts of praise.

We have every reason to be proud of our province and city. We are not a city stuck in the past, as some may think; instead the events of our history have been stepping stones that have pushed us forward and upward.

We were and still are leaders in New Zealand. We had the vision and courage to establish the country's first university; one that continues to lead the way in research; that continues to draw more and more people who increasingly recognise the distinction of its qualifications world-wide.

We led the way for the introduction of cable trams. Early in the 1880s the inauguration of the frozen meat industry, with the first shipment leaving from Port Chalmers in 1882, saw the beginning of a later great national industry. In the 1930s and early 1940s a new generation of artists such as M.T. (Toss) Woollaston, Doris Lusk, Anne Hamblett,

Colin McCahon and Patrick Hayman once again represented the best of the country's talent. Numerous large companies had been established in Dunedin, many of which became national leaders. Late among them was Fletcher Construction, founded by Sir James Fletcher in the early 20th century. Kempthorne Prosser, established in 1879 in Stafford Street, was the largest fertiliser and drug manufacturer in the country for over 100 years. G. Methven, a metalworking and tap manufacturer based in South Dunedin, was also a leading firm, as was H. E. Shacklock, an iron founder and appliance manufacturer later taken over by the Auckland concern Fisher and Paykel. Hallensteins was the

colloquial name of a menswear manufacturer and national retail chain while the DIC and Arthur Barnett were department stores, the former a nationwide concern. Coulls, Somerville Wilkie – later part of the Whitcoulls group – had its origins in Dunedin in the 19th century.

We have a proud history behind us and a fantastic future ahead as a province, city and church. We press ahead as people of faith; exploring the unknown and trusting that we are not alone. We will make mistakes, but they will not be the end of our story. They will be stepping stones; part of our journey of learning together; part of God's story of grace

that gives us the time and space to change
here in Otago; here in Dunedin. Amen.