

Sunday 25 March – *Anniversary Service*

Anne Thomson

Readings: Ephesians 4:1-7

read by Phil Dowsett, President of Settlers' Association

John 15:9-17

read by Fergus Sime, Executive Officer of Synod of Otago & Southland



163 years ago the first anniversary of the settlers' arrival in Otago was celebrated on 23 and 24 March.

Rev. Thomas Burns called for a day of Public Thanksgiving, Humiliation and Prayer before God, with services at 11am and 2pm. But others in the fledgling settlement (including an English attorney whom Burns felt to be a bitter enemy of the Free Church) organised a day of public sports, followed by a race meeting on the second day.

Despite the deep desire of those who had worked hard to establish Otago as a Scottish Free Church settlement, from the beginning there was diversity of opinion and of behaviour here.

That was hard for some to accept – Captain Cargill didn't want the Methodist minister at Waikouaiti to offer an Anglican communion service to settlers in Dunedin. But Thomas Burns was happy to extend hospitality to Bishop Selwyn when he was visiting the south.



How would they have welcomed or wondered at the variety of Christian denominations now represented in Dunedin, not to mention the presence of other faiths – and the prevalence of those with no religious faith at all?

The words we read from Ephesians this morning remind us that 'being one' is important for the people whom God has called to be the Church – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. All of which reflects the one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Often within the church we have seen this 'oneness'. this unity as measured by sameness, by uniformity – if we are one, then we must all think alike, act alike, behave alike, believe alike – and almost always, 'alike' means 'like me'.

It is easy for us to see that those who settled Dunedin tended to think like that – they believed that the way to establish a godly society was by bringing together people with a common understanding of the Christian faith who would adhere to the ways of the Free Church, and they were often suspicious of those who saw things or did things differently.



But Ephesians reminds us that our unity in the church does not come from being the same, but from the Spirit, it is a gift from the Spirit of God, the God who is above all and through all and in all.

In the church we are not all alike, but we are all called by God, we are all baptised, we are all under the Lordship of Christ, we are all part of the body of Christ.

These words in Ephesians are addressed to us here in First Church, in the 165th year of our history.

There is more visible diversity among us now. We bring together a number of different traditions and customs and

ways of seeing the world and ways of expressing out faith.

What does it mean for us to preserve the unity that the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds us together?

These ancient words say:

Be humble, gentle and patient always; show your love by being tolerant with one another, bearing with one another.

We recognise the truth of these words and the challenge of these words –

in any community of people, these are the qualities that will enable people to live together well.



Humility – not assuming that my way is the only way, but making room for others, listening to others.

Gentleness – treating others with respect, with care, not riding roughshod over their opinions or their ways of doing things

Patience – not giving up when things don't work out immediately, but being willing to wait patiently

Being tolerant with others – bearing with the different ways that people do things, the different ways they express their ideas, the different assumptions and expectations that others have

And why? - because that is the way to show love: the love that God has shown me.

Love is at the heart of the unity we receive and the unity we share – the love God has for us, the love we then have to share with one another.

We know what love is when we look at Jesus, who said “Love one another as I have loved you”. Jesus' love for his friends involved service and self-giving and compassion and healing and continual commitment to them.

Jesus was humble and gentle and patient. He was tolerant with his friends who took so long to understand and who let him down so often. He loved them to the uttermost.



For 164 years people in this place have sought to be the people of God in this community.

At their best they have enabled the light of God's love to be seen in this city.

At their best they have maintained the unity of their calling, not by being the same, but by being one in Christ.

And now it is our turn to be the people of God in this place, at

First Church.

Not by being the same, but by being one in Christ.

What will that look like in the 165th year of our history?



Photos:

- (1) Arrival of "Philip Laing" at Port Chalmers, painting by D O Robertson for 50th anniversary*
- (2) Rev. Thomas Burns*
- (3) Moray Place Congregational Church – amalgamated with First Church in 1966*
- (4) St Andrews Presbyterian Church – amalgamated with First Church in 1978*
- (5) First Church Sunday School, 2010*
- (6) First Church of Otago*