

On the 18th of November the people of Marysville and those who have shared with them in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires and the rebuilding of the town came together for the consecration of the new Church. This was a significant moment not only for the Anglican congregation but also as a symbol of the ongoing process of healing for the community.

A Sermon on the Occasion of the Consecration of Christ Church Marysville.

'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times'. So Charles Dickens begins his novel set around the French Revolution. In this global world we are ever conscious that things are not as we would wish them to be. Wars and threats of wars, persecution, injustice, social displacement, poverty and exploitation are before us every day in our mass media saturated world. It's not hard to think that we live in the worst of times, and not the best of times.

In the 17th century the emphasis was on the local, and not the global. And in my home country things were as bad. The mid-1600s were a terrible time in England. The Puritan revolutionaries had executed a king, Parliament and political life were a chaotic mess. A typhus epidemic turned the whole island into a hospital. The bubonic plague, followed by the great fire of London, would turn it into a mortuary.

In Leicestershire, not so far from my birthplace, there is a small church with a plaque on the wall which reads: "In the year of 1653, when all things sacred were ... either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, [built] this church; whose singular praise it is, To have done the best things in the worst times, and hoped them in the most calamitous."

To have done the best of things in the worst of times.

I had been Bishop of Wangaratta for less than three months when Black Saturday happened. It was clear from first thing that day that things were not going to end well.

Searing temperatures, gusting winds blowing ever stronger. Messages filtering through that either end of the Diocese was engulfed in conflagration.

I will never forget that phone call from Norm Hart as he and the family waited to be evacuated. People were just names the cure of whose souls I was responsible for, but people I had never met. Andrew Schreuder was not accounted for. Ed and Di Cherry were not accounted for. What to do? I spent the next few days at the evacuation centre in Alexandra, mostly listening to folk who needed to tell their stories over and over. Seeing folk who had escaped with what they stood up in sitting numbed in shock, or clinging to a pet. This episcopate was forged in the fires of Black Saturday. And I was but an outsider.

Many of you lived through the horror of that day and its horrific aftermath. I can't imagine what it was like for you in the midst of this overwhelming demonstration of the destructive power of nature. When I was finally able to visit, I understood what razed to the ground actually meant. I have a photo in the office, taken through the rear view mirror of a fleeing car, of Christ Church spontaneously bursting into flame. The Church destroyed; the rectory almost untouched.

And now we are here today, consecrating a new church building built on the foundations of the old. It has been a long journey to get to this place. And the journey has had its share of potholes. I had hoped to be able to facilitate a process of healing – perhaps despite my best efforts I proved to be an obstacle rather than a resource. No matter. God has brought an outcome, and we understand as people of faith that God always brings an outcome – not always the outcome we want but always the outcome we need.

And so as we gather in this beautiful building we express our confidence that God gives us a future with him; that we are able to begin again to raise up on old foundations new signs of hope. As we dedicate this church and begin its life afresh, we are setting down in this community here a sign of the love of God which never goes away. Here is a community that has known great suffering, real devastation; a community that has been almost literally levelled to the ground by the suffering that it

has endured. A community which lost 45 of its members, ten per cent of its population.

And in such places where suffering and disaster bow people down to the ground, God does not go away. God is there. As one of the great saints of the Church said, "When we are brought down to the ground in humiliation, God is already there stretched out on the ground, his crucified body bowed down to the ground by the suffering of Jesus Christ, so that he is with us when we are bowed down. When we are grieved and broken, he is there."ⁱ

This church looks over the main street of the town. It proclaims to this community the abiding truth: God is here and God does not go away. We are consecrating a church as an Anglican place of worship. But we are at the same time offering it as a gift and a resource to the whole community. In our time without a building, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have offered us hospitality in their demountable. We are deeply grateful for this demonstration of our real, if not fully realised communion. We now offer this place as a sign and symbol of the new life which is ours in Christ. Out of the worst of times, we have sought to do the best of things.

The reading we have heard from the First Book of the Kings is for us both a call to mission and a solemn warning. As King Solomon prays at the consecration of the Temple which King David planned but was not build he says these words:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! (1 Kings 8.27)

Karl Barth was perhaps the greatest theologian of the 20th Century. In his book Dogmatics in Outline he writes this.

"The Church runs like a herald to deliver the message. It is not a snail that carries its little house on its back and is so well off in it, that only now and then it sticks out its feelers. Where the Church is living, it must ask itself whether it is serving this commission or whether it is a purpose in itself."

King Solomon and Karl Barth both point to the truth that no God shaped box can contain or constrain the sovereign will of the God who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4.6) The completion of this church building is not an end in itself, but rather a vehicle to a greater end. It is all too easy that the building itself becomes an idol, so that we lose sight of the God to whom it is dedicated.

In the latter part of 2003, I was appointed Dean of Brisbane. My commission was to oversee and facilitate the completion of the John Loughborough Pearson designed neo Gothic masterpiece dedicated to St John the Evangelist. In the Sermon at my installation I said something like this. If we are merely completing this Cathedral building in order to prove to ourselves or to an increasingly secular world that we are still here despite everything, then we of all people are most to be pitied. The worth of the cathedral will be in direct proportion to the quality of ministry it offers and sustains. As it is with St John's cathedral Brisbane, so it is with Christ Church, Marysville.

The great Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, puts it thus:

When (God) has promised to be with us, he does not break that promise, and we who believe in him, we who are Christians, we are to make that promise real in our lives. We don't go away. The Church does not go away from need and suffering. The Church is there where people are bowed down, and you and I are there to offer God's compassion and God's promise to those broken, anxious and in pain. So when we say that today we re-dedicate ourselves to God's service, what we are doing is to promise again that we will be signs of God's promise; we will be signs of God's faithfulness and God's presence in the midst of a community that suffers and struggles. It is for us to show in our words, in our lives, in our faces, that same love which does not go away.ⁱⁱ

The iconic value of this building to the community of Marysville cannot be overestimated. But it will be a hollow gift if we who are the church in this place do not ourselves become living stones, built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2.5)

As we come now to consecrate this building to the honour of Christ, and pledge ourselves to be living stones built into a spiritual house I offer as mine the prayer of King Solomon:

Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. (1 Kings 8.28-29)

For Christ's sake!

The Rt Revd. John Parkes AM
Bishop of Wangaratta

ⁱ I have taken ideas in these last two paragraphs from Rowan Williams:
<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/884/sermon-of-dedication-of-the-new-church-of-st-john>

ⁱⁱ ibid