

180th Dedication of St John's Halifax Street

Archbishop Geoff Smith

180th Dedication of St John's, Halifax Street

- Today we are celebrating the 180th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of the original St Johns church on October 19, 1839.
- It seems incredible that when that foundation stone was laid this church site was in the middle of paddocks. But it was.
- That original church was condemned in 1886 and this church was completed in 1887.
- So, given this is not the original church, today is not so much about a building but about ministry.
- Anglicans have been gathering on this site since the original church was opened in 1841. This site has been a place of worship and fellowship. A place where happy and sad times have been celebrated.
- Anglicans have gathered here through significant times in history which have tested the strength of the people. Two world wars, a crippling depression, the Korean and Vietnam wars plus much more.
- The city of Adelaide has changed very dramatically all around this place. But here we are 180 years later gathered for worship. It's not about buildings it's about people.
- The Old Testament reading and psalm for today are in some ways about a building- the temple in Jerusalem. They do focus on that building as the location of the presence of God. But actually, these readings too are about people. About faithfulness. About relationship with God. About seeking mercy and forgiveness. About

prayers to God being heard by God. The temple building is significant, but that relationship with the living God is even more so.

- The second two readings, while they use building imagery—for instance cornerstones, and house foundations, are also clearly concerning relationship with God.
- It's very easy to focus on church buildings because they are tangible. We can see them, we can invest in them. We can give things to build, furnish and renovate them. And they are important. Church buildings can be icons of the presence of God in a community. That there are church buildings visible in a community says something about that community.
- Church buildings are very useful for keeping the sun and rain off when we gather.
- And over time they are made holy I think by the prayers and the memories and the joys and sadnesses that are celebrated in them.
- But a church without a lively living worshipping community using it really is either a public hall for hire, or a museum. Neither of those are bad, in fact they are important for the community, but are not what it's all about.
- What this is all about is a lively community of Christians worshipping and serving God.
- Our diocesan Vision statement is that our vision and our yearning is to be a diocese of flourishing Anglican communities, united and connected, confident and competent to be disciples of Jesus in the power of the holy spirit. But the question is how do we flourish? The question is how do we be flourishing lively Anglican communities?
- Last week I was in Kota Kinabalu in Sabah. I am the Australian bishop representative on the Council of the Church of East Asia, and there was a full assembly of the Council in Sabah. So, bishops, clergy and lay

representatives gathered in KK, as the locals call it.

- The CCEA is an Anglican organisation in East Asia and includes the Anglican church in Korea, The Philippines, Taiwan, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia and Australia.
- Part of the program was a time of reporting from each of the provinces-Japan, Korea, Myanmar, the Philippines, South East Asia and Australia. Some of the reports included stories of religious persecution of Christians for instance in Malaysia, others living in a very fragile and unstable political environment, in Myanmar for instance where the civil war has raged for seventy years with impact especially on the Anglican church in whose dioceses some of the worst fighting has occurred.
- Some reports were about battling government corruption and injustice, with priests being imprisoned for their activism, for instance in the Philippines.
- But among the stories of difficulty there were also many stories of growth. The Anglican church in many of these places is numerically growing despite the very tough situations they are in.
- There were a couple of key themes which came out in the reports and they echo the second and third readings for today. The first is commitment to Jesus. And the second is planning and focus for growth.
- The gospel reading today, the little story about building on firm foundations, is actually about hearing the teaching of Jesus and putting it into practice.
- Today's reading comes at the end of the collection of teaching on discipleship known as the *sermon on the mount*. Three chapters in Matthews gospel of densely packed teaching about what it means in practical terms to follow Jesus-to be a disciple.
- Our diocesan vision is about being disciples of Jesus.
- We are all called to be disciples through our baptism, it doesn't matter whether our baptism happened when we were young or old, whether it used a lot of water or a

little, or which denomination it happened in. We are called, all of us, to follow Jesus. To learn from him, to take on his attitudes and priorities and to continue his ministry today.

- If it's been a while since you have read through the sermon on the mount can I encourage you this week to do that. We tend to be aware of the Beatitudes at the start of Matthew 5 and that's it, but the sermon on the mount starts at Matthew chapter 5 verse 1 and continues to the end of today's reading chapter 7 verse 27. This is among the most important teaching in the Bible because it sets out much of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. And today's passage is all about that taking that teaching seriously and trying to put it into practice.
- Jesus says-anyone who hears these words of mine-that is the teaching of the sermon on the mount, and acts on them will be like a wise man and so on. Everyone who hears these words of mine-the sermon on the mount, and does not act on them will be like a foolish man and so on.
- So, the first thing is to actually take the teaching of Jesus seriously. Not just to believe in God, but to put Jesus teaching into practice. The more a congregation has that commitment the more the congregation will flourish.
- The second theme comes from the reading from 1 Peter and I want to highlight a couple of verses towards the end of the reading. These verses are addressed to the Christians. They say this: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.
- You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, why? Not for our own enjoyment or satisfaction, but so that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

- One of the key features in the reports from the Asian churches that are growing is a commitment to spreading the good news about Jesus.
- The reality is that we have been blessed by God. We have been forgiven through Christ. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. We are part of God's great work of a new heaven and a new earth. We have hope for the future. That's all good news. We have been blessed so as to share that good news. To tell others what we have experienced of God. Not to bottle it up and keep it to ourselves, but to share this good news with others.
- We are like starving people who have discovered an endless supply of free food—we want to share that news with other people who need to know it.
- There is a huge stigma in our church against evangelism—about declaring the mighty acts of God. But in the end, all it is, is us sharing with others what we have discovered about God. How we have been blessed by God. How we have found God to be trustworthy and inviting others to check God out.
- There is also a pressure in our society not to admit we are Christians. I know that. I feel it myself. Even though half the population say they are Christians at census time, there is pressure to keep quiet. So that means we need the courage of our convictions. We need to be brave. Just as those Christians in Malaysia and Myanmar need to be brave. We have discovered something good and trustworthy and we need to be brave enough to share it and to push back against the pressure to be silent.
- There has so far been around 180 years of faithful ministry on this site in Halifax Street. No doubt the parish has waxed and waned through all those years. But we are here.
- And we are not here to be museum keepers or public hall curators, but to be a flourishing Anglican community. A community of disciples, all learning of Jesus and

committed to putting his teaching into practice. A community of disciples competent and confident to share what we have experienced of God-the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

- That's the point. That's the purpose for St Johns Halifax Street. In order for that to be reality commitment will be needed. Intention and planned action will be needed. It's not going to be automatic or happen all by itself-and that's up to us-all of us.
- As we celebrate this anniversary of ministry and presence may the Lord grant us the strength we need to be his people, to follow our Lord and to let the wider community know the good news that is Jesus. Amen.