

Address for St Giles day service, parish of St Giles Mt Roskill

Sunday 7 September 1997

Judge Fred McElrea, Auckland District Court

Thank you for the invitation to address your annual St Giles day service - your opportunity to celebrate your Mission, your community and your place in the community.

The two readings for today (Isaiah 58:1-12 and Luke 4:16-21) are a call to action and a challenge to those like the scribes and pharisees sought salvation through ceremony and ritual such as fasting. At verses 6-8 of the Isaiah reading:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter -

when you see the naked, to clothe him,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn

and your healing will quickly appear ...

A similar impatience with religious formalism is found in the prophet Amos:

Spare me the sound of your songs;

I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes.

Instead let justice flow on like a river

and righteousness like a never-failing torrent.

(Amos, 5:21-24; transl. Revised English Bible.)

And so we are called to act in the world as God's agents to help bring in his kingdom. As one speaker said yesterday at a seminar on legal ethics from a Christian perspective (Associate Professor Warren Brookbanks) -

"It is the role of the Church to impart the life of Christ into the community,

rather than being an institution which we attend"

Or, as another speaker yesterday put it (Simon Maude), we are to be "God's hands in a broken world."

Mother Theresa's life was a wonderful example of this truth. On the television news last night was a clip from her interview in 1969 with Malcolm Muggeridge which in 1971 formed the core of the little book *Something Beautiful for God*. She said:

For being unwanted

except there are willing hands to serve them

and a loving heart to love them

then I don't think that terrible disease will ever be cured.

Sydney Carter dedicated a poem in Mother Theresa's honour ("Your Levity"). It was about a dying destitute:

No revolution will come in time
to alter this man's life
except the one surprise of being loved.

He has no interest in Civil Rights
neo-Marxism,
psychiatry
or any kind of sex.

He has only 12 more hours to live. ...

You wash the feet that will not walk tomorrow.

So that is the first of my three points for today - that the whole point of being "God's hands in this broken world" - by feeding the hungry, loosing the chains of injustice, etc - is to bring God's love to the world. And because the Christian's God is love,

"Life is only for love.

Time is only that we might find God." [From a news sheet at St George's, Epsom]

My second point is about peace-making. In both the Old and New Testaments peace and justice are very closely linked.

Isaiah 32:17 The work of justice is peace;
 and the effects thereof quietness and confidence forever.

Psalms 85:10 Mercy and faithfulness have met;
 justice and peace have embraced.

James 3:18 The peace sown by peacemakers
 brings a harvest of justice.

It is in this area of peacemaking that I know St Giles parish has made a unique and invaluable contribution. In 1994 I had given a paper to a District Court Judges conference proposing a system of community group conferences based on the family group conferences in the Youth Court. Shortly afterwards the Revd Douglas Mansill happened to be in the District Court supporting a family known to him when I raised the possibility of trying such a conference in that case. His facilitation of that first community group conference was the beginnings of the Te Oritenga Restorative Justice Group, based here at St Giles. That group has trained up 15 or more facilitators who are able to be used when these conferences are arranged on a voluntary basis. (There is no statutory basis for them yet.)

This is a new model of justice for us, but it involves ancient and biblical precepts of peacemaking - repentance, reconciliation and making whole. While one system focuses heavily on punishment, the other seeks to put right the wrong, to heal the scars of conflict. By bringing together victim and offender in a supportive community context, a process of healing and reconciliation can occur.

It is no coincidence that the church is involved in this work - it is a wonderful piece of gospel-based ministry. The Auckland District Court judges know and value highly the Revd Doug Mansill's work in this area of restorative justice, and rely on Te Oritenga as the only such group in existence to handle such cases competently and professionally.

Believe me, it is a breath of fresh air to the courts, putting
creative outcomes in the place of punitive ones
consensus in the place of imposed outcomes
inclusiveness and community in the place of professional capture
mutual obligations in the place of a clash of rights, and
cultural sensitivity in the place of monocultural rigidity.

I know the time commitment to Te Oritenga must be high, and it could only happen with the support of the parish - so THANK YOU St Giles, for being peacemakers. "The peace sown by the peacemakers brings a harvest of justice". You are a blessing to others.

My third and last point is about time - God's time.

Princess Diana's sister Lady Jane Fellows, in that wonderful funeral service last night:

“Time is too slow for those who wait ...”

That struck a chord with me. The Justice Department (now Ministry) has been three years producing a report on restorative justice which I thought might take three months - and meanwhile other countries are pressing on, while we seem to have stalled. Overseas they cannot understand why we have not built on the revolutionary foundations that were laid down by the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989. It is easy to despair, to say it's too hard, it won't happen.

But there has to be a better way than we are doing with adults. We cannot just keep on trying more of the same when it does not work and creates so much misery. The Church's prophetic role requires it to be a prophet of justice - to call the nation to repentance and to renewal.

One answer to the inevitable question “How long, O Lord, how long?!” is to be found in a wonderful passage from Psalm 103:

The Lord knows how we are made,
remembers we are dust.

Our days pass by like grass
our prime like a flower in bloom.
A wind comes, the flower goes,
empty now its place.

God's love is from all ages,
God's justice beyond all time
for believers of each generation:

That is a great reminder of our mortality, and the measure of God's time.

Another is the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, born 1917, murdered 1980. He was a spokesman for the poor and the powerless who died because he spoke out in God's name against injustice

A Future Not Our Own

It helps now and then to step back

and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,

it is even beyond our vision.

We can accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction

of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete;

which is another way of saying

that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our Faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No programme accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of Goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,

knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects

far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter
and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between
the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.