

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

**SUNDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2011**

**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**

**Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**

### **“The Choices we make”**

I could have started the sermon this morning by asking you who in this Church belongs to Trinity and who belongs to St. Aidan's. I hope that, after our reading from Corinthians, nobody would have put up their hands and you would have all waited for the next question: and who belongs to God?

Because St. Aidan's planted and Trinity watered, or perhaps it was the other way around, but whichever way it was, it is only God who gives the growth.

Over the years a lot of planting and watering has gone on in both our churches, and the growth has been as prolific at times as the grass and the garden outside are thriving on rain and suffocatingly humid weather at the moment. Of course, over the years, there have been other times as well. Times of drought and hard going where things were starting to look a bit dead and the work was not as easy.

But never, in the history of our two Churches, has it looked quite as grim as it does today. One Church closed and another looking at an age profile and a cultural context that gives every reason for concern. Church is out for most people of my age group and younger.

They all loved going to Sunday school in the seventies and eighties, and most of them will tell you they can see the benefit of Church, as a moral agency, as a place for reflection, as a community where good values are taught and supported. They like the stories, even the good old hymns and the old version of the Lord's prayer. They will come for weddings and seek our help with funerals, they bring their children for baptism, but they just don't get around to actually being involved in the place and taking responsibility. Because they are too busy, too caught up in other things, and for some of them: they have seen too much of the time and energy consuming downside of Church eating away at the life of their parents.

Did we do something wrong as a Church? Did we fail? As a community? As parents? As God's people? And are we now going to perish?

I think most of us feel the anxiety of those questions, even while we are trying to ignore or deny them. Of a future that looks incredibly insecure, of a next generation not taking over the baton. And the danger is that we, because of that anxiety, become like Sid. Hide in our cosy little hole and do not come out. Feeling we have tried really hard, explored every avenue, worked like dogs and now deserve a bit of a break. That we hang our walls with pictures of the old Sunday school, the old Church, the musicals, the youth groups, the fellowship, the..... Well you know better than I do what the glorious past was like.

Trinity celebrated and honoured that glorious past in style last week, and there wasn't a dry eye in the Church when we raised hundreds of voices to praise the Lord one more time before the doors closed behind the last person to leave the building. Here at St. Aidan's the old memories are equally treasured and precious, although perhaps not as close to the surface as they were for Trinity folk last Sunday.

It is hard to turn around when the future you're turning to is so uncertain and precarious as ours seems to be at the moment. It is frightening and we may feel like Sid, safe in his little hole in the ground, watching his friends depart, one by one, his certainties, the familiar, his comfort zone. And there may be the temptation to dig ourselves in deeper, hankering for what is warm and familiar. Sing the old hymns to the old tunes, pray the old prayers using the old words, go over the same old ground in the same old way and make sure that we keep whatever we've still got secure, protect what is left, make sure nobody gets a chance to take more away from us than we have already lost.

Trinity, St. Aidan's, each of you tell me that your cultures are very different. That your histories are very different. That you ARE very different. That there is the "past". That you're not sure if it is all going to work, that you'll perhaps sit on the fence for a bit to see what happens, and not get involved just yet, just in case it won't be what suits your particular taste, culture or history, in case you won't feel at home in the amalgamated congregation.

What then is Trinity? What then is St. Aidan's? Servants through whom you came to believe as the Lord assigned to each. They both planted, they both watered, and God gave the growth for each and every one of you. So neither the one who plants, nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together. We are God's field, God's building. Nothing more, nothing less.

One building has closed, another may have more potential and opportunities to face the challenges ahead. Who knows? Only God. It is possible St Aidan's will also have to face closure at some time in the future. By the same token, the drought may break and a period of prolific growth may be just around the corner. We don't know. And if we are truly people of faith, it doesn't really matter.

If we are truly people of faith the only thing that counts is making the choices Deuteronomy speaks about: the choice for life. The choice to live a godly life and be godly people in the world. Not Trinity people singing good old hymns with St. Aidan's people (or not), but godly people turning their lives to God like Sid the seed turned to the sun and found the freedom to poke his head through the blanket of soil above him. People that dare to leave the certainty, the familiarity and comfort of what was once a good and wonderful home for a future that is unknown and unfamiliar and plain daunting.

It is scary to poke your head out of the warm blanket of comfort that has been your home for such a long time and grow. Reach for the sky, spread your limbs, rustle your leaves, dare to change and be something different.

God calls us, as his people to a life that is more than the past, more than what we've been used to so far, more than Trinity or St. Aidan's. God calls us to go somewhere different. Somewhere where we can grow and thrive, as people. A place where we can break the chains of anxiety about what we might lose by the joyful excitement about what there is to gain when we surrender ourselves and our past to the future God has in store for us.

It may be hard to imagine that 500 in Sunday school and the pews filled may not be the be all and end all of Church life. It may be hard to imagine, but the letting go, the slipping away, the terror of this time of loss may be nothing but the beginning of a new way of being, if not for us, then for another generation. It may be hard to imagine, but perhaps something that will be right for this time, this cultural context, is breaking through the surface of what has been, so God's people will prosper and not perish.

For myself, I think I can see some delicate green shoots poking their heads up here and there. But I may be wrong and it may be somewhere completely different where the future is quietly finding its way into the world. I feel myself being filled with hope where I gather with people of other faiths and discover people seeking and serving God as I do, as I will today and tomorrow at a conference for women of the three Abrahamic faiths. I sometimes can suddenly see over the horizon when I meet artists giving new expression to new forms of spirituality. My heart warms where I see young people organise themselves to respond to challenges of justice and peace, address threats to the environment, and lose patience with institutions that don't deliver on claims of truth, meaning and morality. I don't know if these are the shoots that will grow into the trees that will provide abundance of fruit and shelter for the future, but they do tell me there are more exciting things to do than huddling in the dark, holding on to a past that has no future. There is growing to be done, there is hope to be found. God is beckoning us to look up, not down, move forward, not back, trusting that wherever it is that God will be leading us will be a place where light and life will embrace us in abundance. Amen.