

St. Paul's, Milford
6th Sunday of Easter
Sunday 10 May 2015: 8.00 and 9.30

Love one another as I have loved you.

This, of course, is my first Sunday with you at St. Paul's and I must say it's something I've been looking forward to since the Bishop first approached me about coming here as priest-in-charge.

Last Sunday you farewelled Joyce and John and I know it was a great occasion. It would have been an emotional time for many and that's not at all a bad thing. In ministry we develop relationships, we work together to achieve particular goals, we learn from each other, hopefully we each grow as individuals. And it is right that we should give thanks.

Today's Gospel teaches that great commandment Jesus taught us: *That you love one another as I have loved you. And you are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer.*

But I wonder if you noticed some other words there? Some strangely familiar words:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Where have you heard those words? The answer, of course, is on Anzac Day.

They're part of that Anzac Day vocabulary, alongside:

Lest we forget.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them.

Those who mourned the loss of young lives in the 1st World War made an easy connection between the death of their young men and the love that Jesus showed on the cross, the idea of sacrifice. It was a common experience: in my own family we remember my uncle, who died in 1918 at the ripe old age of 20 and has no known grave. His memorial reads: Known only to God. And there were thousands of others like him. The young men who went off to fight the war as often as not went with a sense of adventure. Many of them, most of them, came from small towns and rural NZ where life wasn't all that exciting, to be honest. They saw it as an OE experience. They said so on their postcards. They saw sights and places they had only dreamed about. We'll be home by

Christmas! But when they arrived in Europe they experienced something else. The bloodshed and the terror in the trenches, the shellfire and the explosions and the sheer horror of it all made everyone soon realise this was something very different. This was hell on earth. And most of them, those who survived, never talked about it for the rest of their lives.

And their loved ones? Well, they searched for words to explain it, to comfort them, to justify what had happened. Their search sometimes took them to the Scriptures. There they found words like these: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

And there are some other words in the Gospel: *You did not choose me but I chose you.* That, incidentally, has got nothing much to do with my arrival here! You didn't choose me; I didn't choose you! No, we were rather thrust together! It was an arranged marriage!

The situation you are in at the moment is a very rare one. My understanding is that the parish was established in 1971, after having been included in Takapuna before that. That's 44 years ago. And in that time you have had only four vicars. The scary thing for me is that I've known all four of them! This is only the fifth time you've been involved in filling a vacancy. But this gives you a wonderful opportunity to review your life, to stand back a bit and ask some searching questions: Where do we go from here? What will best take us into the future?

But I don't think we need to get ahead of ourselves. I know that you really want to get this thing sorted out and have a new vicar in residence as soon as possible. I know too that you don't want to lose momentum. Things are going very well, you might say, let's not drop the ball. Many parishes just want to replace their old vicar with someone who's much the same. The diocese, however, takes the view that this is a good opportunity to take stock, to take a fresh look. And you'll be hearing more about that over the next few months. Yes, I'm afraid we are talking about a few months rather than a few weeks.

Only four vicars in 44 years and now the fifth opportunity to participate in this unique bringing together of the past, the present and the future.

Last Sunday the focus was on the Past, giving thanks for the past, farewelling people who have been part of your lives. Saying thank you and bidding farewell. The Past.

Next Sunday, your Future Directions Workshop. Where do we go from here? The questions are all set out in the newsletter. The Future.

Part of that future will involve you in the process for the appointment of a new vicar. Only a few of you, of course, will be directly involved in the process, but here I would make a point. This is not a selection process like you would find in the business world. Put it this way: I believe that God already has a person in mind for this position. The job of the church is to discern, to discover who that person may be. And it will do this by:

Calling for expressions of interest (who might be interested?),
Considering applications (those who can see themselves in this position),
By interviews (how do they come across?),
By hearing the comments of referees (what do others think?), and
By prayer (giving time to reflect on all these things).
It takes time; it shouldn't be rushed.

Today, however, and I hope throughout the coming months, I hope you will also acknowledge that as well as the Past, as well as the Future, there's the Present. The Present builds on the past; the Present prepares us for the Future. The Present is where we are and where we can make the greatest impact.

This is not a time for radical change and I don't want to be turning everything upside down. But I can't promise things will be exactly as they have been. I just happen to be different (we all are) and there are things that I will do and things that I will say simply because I'm me! And I mightn't even be aware of it. I guess I've become set in my ways – but so have you!

There is an obvious difference. I'm not a Vicar. I'm a Priest in charge (which is an odd sort of title when you think about it because I don't feel that I'm in charge of anything particularly!). I'm not living in the parish and I'll usually be here perhaps 2-3 days a week. That will vary a bit. But don't be put off by that. I'm as close as the telephone and as close as an email. Driving here is, of course, a bit of a challenge. It's taken me an hour and a quarter during the week and perhaps 40 mins on Sunday. And so, of course, I want to be sensible about my use of time and vehicle so I'll be concentrating my activities, making the best use of the time I have here. And I know you will understand that. But equally understand that I want to take a full part in the life of St. Paul's for as

long as I'm with you. And basically, the sign that appears on the shop window reads 'Business as Usual'!

One of the very attractive things about this parish is that it sees itself as being part of the wider community. It seeks to serve that community in a variety of ways. Things like Seasons, Mainly Music and the Op Shop. This place resembles a railway station with people coming and going. It's a place of hospitality too. And I very much like the way we pray for the people living in certain streets Sunday by Sunday. That says a lot about the character, the nature of Anglicanism. We define an Anglican parish in geographical terms: all the people living in certain streets. It sounds legalistic, but in fact it's very inclusive. We refrain from setting rigid standards of belief and behaviour.

After all, we're on a pilgrimage where the journey is just as important as the destination. Some of us stride out, others dawdle, others again stop occasionally and take time out. Some even go backwards for a time.

Basically, there are two types of church.

One gathers together like-minded people; it gathers them from a sometimes hostile world and encourages them to separate themselves.

Others remain fully engaged in the world. Engaged in the world rather than escaping from it. The danger is, of course, that we become over-identified with the world and lose any sort of distinctiveness.

And we need to remind ourselves that we are to be salt of the earth; salt that gives taste and flavour.

That great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, argued that the church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of its non-members. I'd like to add another point: that the only reason we come to church is in order to leave afterwards! Just think about it: At the start of the service we celebrate our coming together, a little later we exchange the peace as a sign of our being together and at the peace we greet each other. But what happens at the end? We're told to go. Not just to go, of course, but to go and serve the Lord. And we say something that echoes that: We go in the name of Christ.

Let me say a couple of things to conclude. There are many activities in this parish that carry on through the hard work and commitment of lay leaders like yourselves. Those things will continue. My job is probably that of offering encouragement, taking an interest, popping in for a chat and so on. For some years I was a chaplain in the Navy Reserve. One of the things I liked about it

was that the job of the chaplain was to be 'a friend and advisor to all on board'. That was helped by the fact that, unlike the other services, the chaplain holds no rank: he takes on the rank of whomever he is speaking to, whether an ordinary seaman or a senior officer. Now I couldn't help it that the first wedding I ever took was for the Admiral and so it meant that when I was speaking to him I became his equal. I too was an admiral for the time being! I like the idea of being 'a friend and advisor to all on board' this ship; this Church of St. Paul's by the Sea!

I will have a specific responsibility for pastoral care which is why I'll be visiting rest homes, taking communion to the housebound, dealing with funerals, popping in to visit people, perhaps meeting them for coffee and so on.

But I suppose the most public ministry I'll be involved in is public worship. It's something I take very seriously. Preparing a sermon, selecting the readings, devising the prayers, choosing the hymns, knitting it altogether. This is the church's shop window. It deserves to be taken seriously. It will start on time and it will not run overtime (maybe not today!). If it does it runs the risk of melt-down, losing the plot.

Just one thing (and beware of clergy who say that because they usually don't mean it) I hope we can enjoy each other. Life's too precious to be wasted on bad humour or lack of vision or sense of proportion. Let us enjoy one another and be joyful in the Lord. Let us go away with a spring in our steps!