

Builders of the Church

St. Paul's, Milford: Sunday 30 August 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

Today – or rather Tuesday – is designated as the feast of the Builders of the Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Because of that our services today have something of a NZ flavour.

Why do we have such a celebration? Well, we can answer that on a number of different levels. But just think for a moment of your own family. Many/most families celebrate important events – birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, shifting house, birth of a new baby, taking off for or returning from an overseas trip, a graduation, a funeral. Some of you will have worked on your family tree or family history. Discovered what ship your family came out to NZ on; what part of England or whatever country they came from. Maybe one of our relatives served overseas in the armed forces or did particular work during the war. We might also discover they had played some sport or belonged to a number of organisations. Whatever the circumstances, before long we can learn a good deal about our family and what made them unique. And that's true too of those who have come from Asia or Africa or the Pacific. It's important for you too to be aware of your roots and to have a story you can pass on.

One of the fastest growing hobbies or interests in New Zealand is genealogy; constructing a family tree, discovering our ancestors, slowly but surely learning something about them and the lives they lived. I must confess that I'm one of these strange people who digs into the past, daring to dig where no one has dug before. Happily I haven't found too many skeletons in the cupboard, not too many dark sheep in the closet, not too much dirty linen. Forgive me for using three clichés in a single sentence!

The Church has always done this sort of thing. In fact, no other group in society has done it quite so much. In the first place we have the great saints of the church – St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Andrew, St. John, St. Luke, St. Mark, St. Mary, or if you're particularly greedy how about **All Saints**? We're all familiar with churches that commemorate these great figures, the apostles, the first followers of Jesus.

Then there are the saints of the Church of England. Many of these feature in NZ because the generations before us were very conscious that the foundations of the NZ Church were laid by those who came from England. And

so we have churches like St. Aidan, St. Chad, St. Columba, St. Augustine, St. Cuthbert, St. Alban, St. Hilda and certainly St. George, patron saint of England. However, in the Anglican Church the practice of honouring particular individuals ceased at the time of the Reformation. And we reached the strange situation where a person had to have died 1000 or more years ago before we honoured them. We had no one after the year 1500! It's only in comparatively recent times that we've honoured great figures like St. Francis of Assisi, now one of the most popular of saints because of his love of animals and nature and his carefree spirit.

Probably from around the 1960s we began to realise that there were some great figures in the church we ought to be celebrating. William Willberforce, Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Fry, John and Charles Wesley, John Henry Newman. It looked like a very English list. And it was some years before we recognised great figures from other parts of the world: the Martyrs of Japan in 1597, Apolo Kivebulaya, the Apostle to the Pygmies, the Martyrs of Uganda in 1886, Sadhu Sundar Singh and Bishop Azariah in India.

Then around 1970, I think it was, as part of the process that led to the publication of a NZ Prayer Book, we realised that there were a number of figures in the history of our own Church who deserved recognition. People like Bishop Selwyn, the missionary Henry Williams, Samuel Marsden, Churchill Julius our first archbishop, John Coleridge Patteson, 1st Bishop of Melanesia, Charles Fox (of whom we'll say something next week) and Mother Edith, founder of the Community of the Sacred Name in Christchurch.

A number of Maori figures were added. In fact, there's a considerable number of Maori in the list, a reflection perhaps that Maori find it very natural to honour their forebears. The concept of *whakapapa* comes naturally. Maori can teach us a lot about their *whakapapa* – when they introduce themselves on the *marae*, whenever they give a significant speech, they start off by saying who they are in the context of those who have gone before them.

Other people like C.S. Lewis, famous writer, have been added. Lewis was one of the great apologists of our day; an intellectual who could speak and write in such a way as to captivate his readers and draw them to the faith. Mother Teresa is also there. So too is Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, a priest who died in order that someone else might live in the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

In fact the number of Pakeha New Zealanders is very small. I believe it should be expanded. With people like Bishop Cowie, who followed Selwyn and served this diocese for 30 years, establishing most of the parishes in our diocese. And Mrs Cowie for that matter, who set up the first homes for women and children. She was so closely identified with this work that the first such home was simply called 'Mrs Cowie's Home'.

We can think too of James Dilworth, a very wealthy man whose farm included much of modern Remuera and Epsom. When he died he had no family and so he left his estate to set up a school for boys of families who had suffered the loss of their father or some other adversity – and so today we have Dilworth School – or schools. Derek Firth can fill in the gaps for you.

We think too of Jasper Calder, the founder of the Auckland City Mission, who started his ministry as a curate in Whangarei. There he earned notoriety by taking part in a buck jumping contest and coming out the winner. He came to the city and worked in the poorer western suburbs at the Church of the Epiphany in Karangahape Road. That struggling parish couldn't find a stipend and couldn't find a priest. He then set up a home for children, a campsite on Waiheke, a soup kitchen and a doss house. He held church services in a picture theatre and installed a Wurlitzer organ; anything to make the church more accessible to ordinary people. He once went to California for a holiday and worked for his passage as a seaman on a cargo vessel. He served as chaplain to the jockeys at the Auckland Racing Club. When he retired from the mission he settled on a farm in Pakuranga and grew vegetables for various charities. For 10 years he operated two large launches and took an estimated 6000 needy people for excursions on the harbour. He's described as a mercurial extrovert, who took pleasure and pride in being himself, with little regard for conventional manners or the opinions of strait-laced people. He had a ready tongue, a flow of rough wit and a consistent delight in doing the unexpected thing. He was reported to have once said that what he didn't know about life could be written on a cigarette paper. He had a strong sense of duty to all types of unsuccessful and unfortunate folk, whom he helped during most of his life. His motto: we don't give a handout – we offer a hand up.

Now he's just one. There were the Sisters of the Order of the Good Shepherd who ran the children's home and the orphanage, Janet Hancock, matron of St Mary's Home for unmarried mothers, who died in the great influenza epidemic, Frederick Thatcher the architect who designed All Saints Howick, the

St. John's College chapel and many others and who was later ordained. Dr Algernon Purchas, first Vicar of Onehunga, who was also a doctor, a great musician, early environmentalist, an architect, who took a keen interest in the Blind Institute and was a keen inventor. Those are just a few of them; just some of the great men and women we remember today.

But there are many, many more; people we knew and loved and learned from, people whom the world has forgotten, but who are known to God. Today's first reading was that great passage from the Apocrypha which begins with those stirring words: *Now let us praise famous men* (of course they also include women) and goes on to recount some of their great deeds. But then it pauses, takes a breath and says: *But of others, there is no memory ... They have become as though they had never been born ... but these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten ... and their glory will never be blotted out.*

That expresses well the point I've tried to make. And it's confirmed for us in the Gospel, in the passage we know as the Beatitudes. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who mourn* – a sort of roll call of those on whom God bestows special favour. God's favourites, the real heroes of the Kingdom of Heaven. That is what today is all about. And from these people we can learn and by these people we can be encouraged. From them we can draw strength just as we can from our own loved ones.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. Amen.