**Soulmaking: 21 March 2021 Leigh Memorial**

**It seems such a long time ago. Way back then I was completing my time in Cambridge. I was working on a thesis which had to do with how the church might move into the future while respecting the past; I was seeking to think about how fresh theological thinking—that is the way we understand our faith, how we talk about God, how we talk about Christ, what we think the church is for, how we understand mission—how does fresh thinking make its way into the pews of the local church, into its lay life.**

**Back then, way back in the 1980s, the language of being inclusive which we have become so used to in the Uniting Church, that word wasn’t used: the preferred term was how can you be comprehensive: comprehensive. The word carried the idea of how, in times of change, times of transition, you take as many people with you from the past, sometimes through a crisis of belief, sometimes a crisis of faith, sometimes a crisis of confidence into a new future. How can you be comprehensive in times of transition when many become uncertain and unsure of the way ahead?**

**Out of the blue came a telegram: those were the days long before email, text messages, and even phoning home was expensive. You wrote letters. Telegrams – telegrams seemed to indicate someone had died. This telegram came from Christchurch. I scratched my head. I simply didn’t know anyone in Christchurch, let alone anyone who might have died. The name on the telegram was unknown to me but the Rev. Bob Coates asked me to phone him.**

**It turned out that this telegram was a call to a ministry placement - to a church and a suburb, St Ninians in Riccarton, I did not know and which, I was to discover, had already turned down or been turned down by 12 previous ministers. And so I was 13th choice. As it so happened I was duly inducted into the charge of that congregation virtually site unseen: it was like an arranged marriage, a gamble, a blind date.**

**They were a formidable group of people. Yes, there were some very ordinary, down to earth people and there were some who were rather wealthy who I would discover had very significant political connections. Now and then a cabinet minister, the minister of finance, or the governor of the reserve bank would be sitting in one of the front pews; there was the occasional CEO of an international business; on arrival there were 3 former University vice chancellors—I buried two of them. There were 6 professors, several lecturers, a newspaper editor, the chairperson of the Christian Conference of Asia, and the most significant body of feminists in the church I have come across anywhere. I was told I learned fast. In terms of human resources they were well stocked.**

**I would discover that this congregation had a lot of passion: they loved music; they put on a drama or two and a music version of the book of Nehemiah, believe it or not! They had the most profound and passionate commitment for how the call to follow Christ intersected with the care of the environment, with God’s good creation, with abused women, with refugees and with indigenous rights. They also knew how to disagree with one another!**

**I thought of this call, these people, with a profound sense of nostalgia this week. I thought about them while preparing this morning’s service and reflecting on what hymns we might sing or play.**

**Travelling the road to freedom, who wants to travel with me. Feted by noise and branches And banners hanging from every tree; Cheered on by frenzied people, Puzzled by what they hear and see: Travelling the road to freedom, Who wants to travel the road with me?**

**Strictly speaking this song should be sung next week. It is a song for Palm Sunday. It is phrased in the form of a song sung by Jesus contemplating his entry to Jerusalem and what fate will befall him. In his Lenten study book for this year Sam Wells of St Martins in the Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, reckons that this small word ‘with’ is one of the most important in the whole of the Easter story.**

**The words of this hymn have Jesus wondering how will those ‘with’ him negotiate their way through the next stage of their journey. Up until this time they have been with Jesus during the course of his public ministry in the places they know in Galilee: something new is being brought to birth but Jesus is with them in their home towns, now they are on the threshold of the unknown: will these staunch supporters, ‘come the dark turn and flee’;**

**This hymn, this contemporary song, was one of a number that I introduced to this congregation over a period of 6 years. It was one which I had come across - like many others - when I had worked in the abbey on the isle of Iona some years ago as a guide. These new hymns all sought to interpret what we might wish to say about Christ and the life of discipleship, the call to follow, in ways which speak into our everyday situations in life and the world we are experiencing.**

**It matters what words we sing. It matters because so many people get their understanding of what faith is all about through their favourite hymns rather than the biblical text. This congregation would in due course create their own hymn book – a practice which went hand in hand with an ongoing adult education program - which deepened their grasp of scripture, their confidence in expressing their faith and which led to something rather surprising;**

**the wife of the chair of the church council came to me one day and said we get on better with one another now than we ever have done in the past. While another woman said to me that these hymns demand so much more of us but they have made the life of faith and what is required of us so much more real. One man, one of those CEO figures, said of one hymn that its words were not easy to sing, but their message was right.**

**What was happening was a form of spiritual nurture. What was happening was a form of what Alan Jones – not the Alan Jones you might listen to on the radio – but what the Alan Jones who had been dean of the cathedral in San Francisco has called ‘soul making’. What was happening was a form of what the apostle Paul refers to in his letters as ‘edification’ or a building up of the spiritual life of the congregation.**

**In times of change, in times of transition, in times of uncertainty, that is the time – that is the very time – the New Testament has a word for time, *Kairos* time – the right time, the opportune time, the God-given time - when there is a need to consider what kind of church you have been and what kind of church you aspire to be. This time is not the same as *chronos* time – that is the time you measure by clocks, calendars, diaries, days and weeks. In the New Testament  *Kairos* time refers to discerning who Jesus is, the drawing near of the kingdom of God and being able to respond rightly.**

**In times of change, in times of transition, in times of uncertainty – that is the time, that is the *Kairos* time, when there is a need to reflect on what you sing in worship, what you put in place for an informed discussion around Scripture, how you care for one another, and for the stranger;**

**what do you put in place to sustain the prayer and spiritual life of a congregation and how you respect a Christian ethic – that is, how you seek to respond to life’s issues by way of letting that issue be informed by your desire to imitate the way of the Jesus who told the crowds and disciples to go and do likewise.**

**No church, no congregation, no mission does these things perfectly: St Ninians in Christchurch continued to have its faults and flaws: we are always fragile in our Christian life together. We are only human. But that fact does not take away from the demands of the *Kairos* moment and the invitation of Christ: Travelling the road to freedom, who wants to travel with me...**

**Strictly speaking this hymn is a Palm Sunday hymn. It fits rather well in with the flow of Mark’s gospel: And the way in which this gospel depends upon a journey to the cross, the slowing down of time and the sheer uncertainty of the disciples as to who this secretive Jesus really is and what his likely fate is.**

**Our reading this morning though comes from the gospel of John. It follows hard upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The way in which John tells the Easter story is very different from the other three. Jesus now foretells his death and being raised again. In this gospel the Easter events are a sign of his ‘hour’ has now come: it is time for him to be ‘glorified’. In this gospel there is no anguish in the garden of Gethsemane; there is no cry of dereliction from the cross; there are no words to do with ‘forgive them for they know not what they do’; there is no exchange with the other condemned men on the cross.**

**Our reading this morning conveys the nearest this gospel comes close to Jesus’ suffering. 27“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. It lasts for one verse. In this gospel it is clear who Jesus is:**

**there is one ‘I am’ saying after another: I am the good shepherd; I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the gate: I am the true vine; I am the resurrection and the life: the father and I are one. In no other gospel does Jesus speaks like this; why?**

**The writer of this gospel was telling the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection for the sake of a particular community. It has sometimes been called the Johannine community: where they lived is unclear. They found themselves as a minority in the midst of much larger society where they needed to work out who they were as followers of Christ – and how they differed from their Jewish neighbours.**

**From our vantage point we might say they needed to come to an understanding of who Christ is for them; how they will worship; how they will relate to those who lived around them; how they might withstand persecution. The language that was used was not the language of freedom. It was more one of light, bearing witness, and service. Travelling the road to freedom …. Who wants to travel the way with me …**

**Every church, every congregation needs to spend time discerning their kairos moment. Most of our lives we are caught up in the unfolding of days and its demands; we find ourselves in strange times. We are still seeking to negotiate our way through what can be done and what cannot be done in a season of Covid-19. In times to come we will have to think through faith in the face of the climate emergency.**

**All the while we are in the midst of great changes in the life of the mission and the way ahead is far from clear. We might say we are in a wilderness moment; some might say the life of faith these days is in a condition of exile – and others imitate an idea taken from 1 Peter, that we live in a situation of dispersal, of scattering, of seeds being scattered.**

**In the midst of this uncertainty we are invited to take steps to discern how this present is a Kairos moment; how is Christ coming to us and what is being expected of us? What is the gospel we seek to proclaim? How do we serve the mission of God – for it is not our own mission. It is the mission of God. How do we bear witness and reflect the inbreaking of the kingdom of God?**

**We are not St Ninians in Christchurch; we are not the Johannine community. We are called to find our own words, or own actions, our own deeds that allow us to be open to spiritual nurture, to soulmaking – not just for ourselves but so that we might indeed aspire to inspire Parramatta for the sake of the common good. There is biblical, theological, spiritual work to be done in the name of the one whose ‘hour’ had come for him to be ‘glorified’.**