

The Foundation Stones of the Heavenly City
Remembrance Sunday
31 October 2010

For over 30 years now I have been in regular attendance at sick beds and deathbeds, and have come to regard death therefore as just a normal part of the life cycle. Of course there are always surprises and new experiences along the way. This past week, for instance, someone died just as I was administering the last rites to them, right at the moment that I laid hands on them. And of course the death of my mother in July brought this routine pastoral reality home to me in a personal and intense way.

I remember the late Saturday afternoon when I walked across the parish boundaries in to Phillipstown to see my mother's body as it was laid out in the undertakers viewing room. Caught up as I was in the operational momentum of preparing to take her funeral it was a time to catch up with what had actually happened as my relationship with her changed in this startling way. She seemed very much at peace, and this will be my last and most precious and perhaps most enduring memory of her.

This community of faith has said goodbye to some much loved members in the past 12 months. We knew that Fred Murray had been preparing to leave this life for quite some time, and it was my privilege to minister to him on pretty much a daily basis during those last few months of his life. Brian Horniblow had returned to be with us in Harper Gardens, and the love of his family and the prayers of the Church too surrounded him in his journey in to the life of the world to come. Vicky Bartlett, who appears in parish photos going right back to the 1950's, and who had acquired an almost bird like fragility in her Holdsworth house existence, finally flew away during the winter months. And of course there was the major shock to us all when the kind, warm, and comparatively young Sandra Tozer suddenly died early this year. She has left quite a gap.

In one-way or another these folk were foundation stones of this parish, or of our family lives. Their personal contribution, their presence in our midst, their gifts and talents and oddities, have left some thing behind which somehow changes the mix of who we are, and what we are as a parish. Just like the fabric of the Church building, soon to be lovingly restored, they are a small component of the richness and beauty of this house of God. They have changed us, and added to us, as a result of their time among us. And that is even more true for those of you here today who think about their contribution within your family life.

But I am going to be arguing that they are foundation stones also of the heavenly city. That they contribute to our life not just down the hallways of fleeting memory, or by the traits and characteristics they passed on to us. They are part of the heavenly building, not made by human hands, of which one-day we hope to be a part. To understand how that is we need to think about the ways in which Jesus Christ has been, is, and will be present to those who love him.

For about thirty years, give or take a few years, Jesus of Nazareth was present to his contemporaries in Palestine in what we might call his biological form. He shared a bodily kind of existence that is our way of being present to one another, and that is our way of thinking about who and what we are. In this individual biological way of being he made known to those who would listen the loving will of our heavenly Father, which he communicated by teaching and example, by signs and wonders.

After his death, or we should say his judicial murder, he appeared to his closest followers for a limited period of time as a resurrected spiritual body. The purpose of these resurrection appearances was to convince his inner circle that he had rolled back the last enemy death that he unambiguously was the true God, and that with this assurance they could take heart and join in his mission to the world.

The success of their endeavours is shown by the fact that 2,000 years later here we are at the bottom of the world, in islands that were completely uninhabited when Jesus was born, caught up in and continuing the mission and witness of the apostles, that they in turn caught from him. What is more we are not just doing this as a kind of functional, pragmatic teaching organisation, but also as a symbolic community that carries the mana and reputation and hidden presence of its founder.

In the New Testament the Church has titles like the body of Christ, the bride of Christ. What that means is that the risen Jesus identifies with the Church so closely that it becomes the place in the world where he can be known more explicitly than anywhere else. That puts a weight of responsibility on us who are the present expression of the Church to be as credible in that high calling as we can be. But even when and where the Jesus community lets him down his presence and power continues as an underlying reality.

We see that every Sunday morning when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. As I never tire of telling you the Holy Communion is not a kind of bowser where we pull in to top up our tank with our individual refuelling of the risen life of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. The effect of the Eucharistic action, this combination of ritual action, Scriptural words, and appropriate signs, is to make us Christ collectively present in this place for a fleeting period of time. We

become him here in Avonside as the crucial parts of the Eucharist are celebrated. And the more the local Church can assume this collective presence of Jesus Christ in other and often costly ways the more it becomes what it was always intended to be.

Christianity is an intensely communal business. So the community of faith is where we find out true identity as human persons. Hell is to lead an isolated, cut off kind of existence, the kind of life that finally killed Howard Hughes. Heaven is to be connected in a network of relationships that hook us up to the life of God.

And that leads us to the fourth and final form of Jesus Christ's mode of existence. In heaven, Augustine of Hippo assured us, we will become what he called the *totus Christus*, the collective Christ, the communal form of Jesus Christ's mode of being. That is to say we will become both intensely ourselves in a fully realised individuality, while at the same time relating attentively and effectively to all the other Christians who have ever been in such a way as to make up the collective presence of Jesus Christ in his fully realised form.

The individual biological form of Jesus Christ's earthly existence, and its transformed spiritual style of resurrection appearances, was only half the story of who he was, and of what he was up to. He always intended to gather us all up, and to take us home to live with him in the blessed circle of the Father and the Holy Spirit. The name of the game of his gospel mission was to unite the world of creatures to himself, and to offer it to the Father in a generous act of return. And he will do this by gathering us in to the very fabric of his personality. We will become him, with all the changes that will be required of us in this intensely communal style of being.

Which is why Sandra, and Fred, and Vicky, and Rae and Fay are part of the foundation stones of the heavenly city. They are not just part of the collective memory and identity of Holy Trinity Avonside. They are in the process of becoming part of the heavenly company of the collective Jesus Christ, who lives eternally within the exchange of love and energy between the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the expanded personal being that he will assume. Within him we will know them, and countless other interesting Christians who we have always wanted to meet.