

Situation Report 23 March 2011

The parish office has had limited contact with the outside world for the past two weeks. Power was cut off for over a week while our power lines were bifurcated, and when it was put back on it blew out our PABX system, the result - no broadband or phones. It is surprising how much cyberspace makes you feel connected to a wider world. Then just to make things interesting water was cut off to the St Francis hall for the past week and a half.

Still we held our AGM last Sunday, and managed to present audited accounts, and our usual book of reports. An issue that was brought to parishioner's attention was the challenging financial situation that lies ahead of us. Avonside House Trust residents can no longer live in our severely damaged hall, and the loss of that rental income means that our annual budget must shrink from around \$140,000 to around \$105,000. There was much discussion at the meeting as to whether we would be able to stage our major fund raising and community interaction event, the fair. Without the hall there is a major question mark as to whether the trash and treasure, the big earner, could proceed. But parishioners were surprisingly determined to make it happen, though it might need to be in a different form and on a smaller scale. It was pointed out that the recently postponed Parish Arts Festival could be incorporated into the event.

The last fortnight has seen a steady stream of officials, tradesmen and the bringers of managerial problems coming to the office door. Dealing with these unpredictable and often difficult issues can take up a lot of psychic energy, and deflects me away from being the Minister of Word and Sacrament that is supposed to be my primary function. It also means there is less time and energy to be out there in the community. The imposed role of crisis manager brings in to clear focus one of the chief frustrations of ministry in the contemporary church. You get ordained thinking that it is all about being an agent of people's spiritual growth and assisting their walk with Christ, but the ever increasing demands of managerialism squeeze that most rewarding part of the vocation in to a small part of each week's activities.

The partial demolition of Crichton Cobbers Boys Club on Fitzgerald Avenue, now a gym, highlights how significant memorials of the past are fading away. The club was built to commemorate a son of the parish who was killed at Ypres in the last days of 1917. A stained glass window in the southeastern corner of our nave also memorialised this member of the Holy Trinity Avonside Bible class, but that has been completely destroyed.

I had to smile when the stonemasons, who had been working on the shoring up of the Church, came around. They have reinvented themselves as deconstruction agents. Already they have the contract to bring the Lyttelton Time Ball down. But they have a point – a skilled extraction process will be necessary to remove as many of the conservation features of the Church as possible. For instance you can see some of Benjamin Mountfort's hand painted roof beams sticking out of the rubble of the Chancel. In that respect the heritage conservation project that we have been running these last three years has brought some important gains in our present troubles. So for example the paint conservators report tells us exactly what to do to paint on the walls a copy of the hand painted stencilled designs that Mountfort put above the dado in the Chancel. And the organ was dismantled and taken in to safe storage in Timaru.

Christ Trotter's excellent article in yesterday's Press calls in to question the attempts many of us clergy have been making to distance God from responsibility for what has happened here. For him the argument that the God who has made a world with tectonic plates must stand back and allow these natural processes to get on with it doesn't wash. It ignores the data of Scripture that speaks of God as the maker of weal and woe, who is master of the forces of nature, and whose inscrutable purposes work through the events of the world. Such a God is not to be trifled with, and cannot be tamed to our domestic agendas or easy explanations. This view of God can easily tip over in to the dark Gnostic Jungian God who is beyond morality, or the wrathful God of thwarted, resentful, self-righteous street preachers. But properly and carefully expressed this powerful doctrine of God is closer to the mark than the limited "I share your pain" God of pallid liberal Protestantism.