

A Colony of Heaven
27th Sunday, Year A
Philippians 4: 6-9
2 October 2011

Recently there have been a series of consultations held across the diocese to discuss the kind of priorities that ought to guide our rebuilds. The format consisted of a series of tables that you made your way to at which all comers discussed the topic listed on the table. For once I ignored my favourite topics such as sacred space, and transcendence and intimacy, and made straight for community engagement.

Here there was a party line being pushed, with which I vigorously disagreed. The assumption seemed to be that we should build predominantly multi use buildings so as to be kind and helpful to the surrounding community in a generic way as if this is the charter of the church's existence. An immediate memory came to mind of the primary school assemblies I used to attend as the curate of St Mary's Northampton in the English Midlands, where we often sang, "Jesus hands were kind hands, doing good to all." Yes, Jesus was kind I reflected, but his mighty works of healing the sick, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, and feeding the multitudes were not part of a social service programme. They were signs of the Kingdom powerfully present in his ministry. The rule of God is breaking in right now, was the message of the signs, not I am going to meet all your needs. So whatever good Jesus did, and whatever good we do in our neighbourhood, ought to be guided by shaping theological principles. Our good works are an ancillary part of our Kingdom agenda.

The other intellectually lazy assumption at the community engagement table was that highly visible social service and community development programmes would function as a recruiting tool for local churches. Again I had a flashback to my time at St Mary's Addington where as founder and co-ordinator of the Addington neighbourhood association I had an entrée into most households, and was publicly associated with a number of well known community development initiatives. But after years of productive and satisfying work in this capacity it had to be admitted that not one person had come to church or joined the parish as a result. People were appreciative of what had been done in this ministry, but they didn't see a reciprocal obligation in it to come and give thanks to God for it in his holy house. Indeed I came to see the point of all this activity as a no strings attached gift, a good thing to do for the local community in an act of gospel magnanimity that wasn't looking for a payoff.

But my deepest unease that night revolved around some unexamined assumptions about what Christian community consists of, and about what we think "our surrounding community" amounts to. Here we come to this morning's second lesson, one of my favourite bits of the Bible.

It is a thumbnail sketch of Christian community at its best. The God of peace lives in their midst. Trust and joy have driven away anxiety and worry. Joy and generosity abide with these people. And their minds are focused on moral excellence, on what is truthful, majestic, awe inspiring, just, pure, and on whatever calls forth love, and is winsome.

Are the Philippian Christians perfect people then, and is their church in a secure and advantaged

situation? Not a bit of it! There is an internal power struggle going on between two alpha females, and the church is under persecution from its surrounding pagan culture. As Paul is keen to point out there is a lot of room for improvement with these people. But even when he is telling them exactly what they should do to pull their socks up he does so in a spirit of happiness and rejoicing. This is because for all their problems there is a wonderful theological mystery working its way out in their collective life.

The code name for this mystery is Koinonia, an almost untranslatable word that relates to the extra edge that this community has compared to any other. Koinonia means rich and deep overlaying levels of fellowship that are formed by, and reflect, the inner life of God. The style and manner of the way the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to each other is being spiritually injected into the collective life of this small congregation at Philippi. This extra dimension of Divinely inspired community living has the capacity to overcome these internal difficulties like an enzyme that eats up selfish and misguided attitudes. God loves the church too much to let it go into self-destruct mode. And he pours in this regenerating capacity of his own inner Divine life to make it flourish and become healthy.

Christians today need to come to a deeper appreciation of this wonderful dimension to their life in the church. Sure, we often fail to sparkle and shine as the family of God, but if we tune in to this underlying electrical current that God is pouring in to our collective life then we will begin to glow like a neon sign. Become who you are is God's message to the church.

And that has implications for where I started this morning on the community engagement front. What we are surrounded by is not a local community because western society is running out of community. Increasingly people have retreated in to private worlds as they huddle around their computer screens at night and disappear in to cyber space, or become absorbed by the narcotic dreams of our society through the medium of their flickering TV screens.

The small units of collective association still left are often shaped in to something else by the privatistic tendencies in our culture. So neighbourhood associations tend to become neighbourhood beautification societies, rather than agents of community development and urban renewal. It is a tendency right across the board. As my sister says of her many journalistic visits to the many council consultation meetings across Christchurch, left of centre has become right of centre as the agendas of most forms of progressive voluntary associations become about promoting the members self interest, rather than pursuing the common good of all. And voluntary societies are in trouble. If you think churches are having difficulties recruiting and holding members, then take a look at what is happening to political parties and youth organisations.

So what church community engagement amounts to now is about what happens when Koinonia comes in to effective contact with the fragments of community, and the atomised individuals in the surrounding neighbourhood. It is at the collision point between genuine divinely inspired community and the etiolated remnants of community, or the total lack of it in the surrounding neighbourhood,

that the church's true work begins. We belong to a culture that has forgotten how to be community, but God has given us the gift of how to be in the groove of that way of relating to others.

Let me finish by quoting from my submission to the diocesan consultation process:

Therefore church plant should not be dominated by multi use community service purposes, particularly if this leads to buildings that are drained of spirit and starved of beauty. There are enough ugly buildings in the world already. So in its suite of social meeting areas a church complex may have rooms set aside for community outreach purposes, but they will be subordinate to, and reflecting of, those areas set aside for prayer and worship. In fact, the greatest benefit a church can provide is inviting space set aside for prayer and contemplation since their primary function is to put people in touch with God.

And let me conclude with a question. Suppose a church had a super duper social service operation on site that succeeded in meeting all the needs of everyone in the surrounding neighbourhood – would this amount to salvation for those people, would that be what God wants for the human race? No it would not. Because God isn't the answer to human needs. He is the generator of questions that human beings haven't even begun to put to themselves in which he acquaints them with needs they may not even be aware of right now. In a society increasingly dominated by the trite, the banal, and the trivial the transcendent, triune God has a point of view to present that will blow all that rubbish out of the water. We are a colony of heaven, Philippian style, and this is our community engagement agenda.