

# LAUNCH OF CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 1st February 2004

## **Introduction to the Readings of the day:**

Unusually for me, I won't be preaching directly on any of the passages set for today. Special readings were not chosen, instead we have used the Sunday Lectionary for today. Even so, these Scriptures speak to us, and in several ways appropriate for our celebration today:

### **Old Testament: Jeremiah 1: 4-10**

God had plans for Jeremiah even from the time he was being formed in his mother's womb.

God is the one who has brought us to birth. Surely he has had plans for us too? And continues to have plans for us?

### **Psalm: 71: 1-6**

Verses 5 & 6 contain very suitable words for our worship today: "For you Lord are my hope; you are my confidence O God from my youth upward. On you have I leaned since my birth; you are he that brought me out of my mother's womb and my praise is of you continually."

### **Gospel: Luke 4: 21-30**

Continuation from last Sunday – Jesus' early days of public ministry, after declaring in the synagogue the major purposes for which he had come, reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

### **New Testament: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13**

So well known, that it is almost ignored! Whilst often read at weddings, and suitable for application to love within marriage – this is principally addressed to a Christian community on the necessity of the ways of love. God, who embodies love, has built these into our existence!

## **Sermon:**

What **are** we doing this morning?

We are having a jolly good meal!

Firstly – the meal of God, shared with one another in worship in this act known as "Eucharist" – the early church's name for it, using a Greek word meaning "Thanksgiving". This "Holy Communion" is a

profound act, no matter where it is celebrated, with whom or on what occasion.

Secondly – the meal of our community – a jolly good breakfast, with God in our midst and amongst many of the people who make up our current congregation 100 years after it first began!

We are saying, in a formal way: This is the start of the 100th year of Christian community in Hilton, and we're going to celebrate that!

Let me also quickly say what we are **not** doing:

This is neither the major service nor the only event – it is the launch. There are other events dotted throughout year, and a highlight amongst our services will be in May on the Sunday closest to Ascension Day. We already have plans, and some rich liturgical ideas given us, ways in which symbolically we will remember the past in thanksgiving with God, recommit ourselves to the future with God, whilst rooted in our present... also very much with God.

We hope to have people from local churches join us in some of those, as well as a few dignitaries coming to celebrate with us; during the course of the year we will have past clergy of the parish join us in worship, and where possible, in preaching or other aspects of our worship. We have many Sundays for all of these – today is only one of them, albeit an important one.

Today is also not a major fundraising day. That is not because we are in any way awkward to talk about money, and you are all very welcome to empty every coin, note and credit card into the collection plate later! J On second thoughts: Keep the credit cards – we've only just wiped out our debt to the diocese and certainly don't need everyone's credit card debt!

But let's get real here: No-one expects any community to exist, let alone grow and flourish, without necessary and generous resources including people and funding. And this is our community – of course we want to ensure it is well resourced to do what it needs to do! I will be writing to you later this month about that, prompted also by a parishioner who wrote to me very positively on this subject late last year.

But, no... this is our launch service, in which we begin a year which will have many emphases, and most of all, an element of thanksgiving for what God has done in the past, is invited to continue doing in the present, and committing ourselves to being faithful children of God into the years to come.

It is often said that, in terms of recorded history at least, South Africa has little "sense of history" when compared to "old societies" with rich

records of past life, such as in Europe, China or Egypt, or even N. America with a longer recorded history than many other “new societies” like others.

On a visit around Hilton College in 2002, I was struck by memorials “to the War” and those who had died in them. Of course, “the War” refers to World War 2, doesn’t it? – or so I thought. But in fact, with its long history in this area, they refer to the fallen of the Anglo-Zulu Wars, the Boer Wars and World War 1, all long before WW2! Clearly, how you view history also depends on your perspectives, your generation, and your participation (or lack of) in an event or period of history.

Our centenary is insignificant in the grand international scheme of things. It is not much more significant in the national scheme of things. Even in our diocese, other churches have also recently or will soon be celebrating their centenaries. A church in town associated with the Cathedral celebrates 100 years this year. St. George’s in Parktown, Johannesburg also does – I mention it because it too is a Herbert Baker building like ours is, and a famous landmark at that – and was built in 1904, whereas ours was ‘only’ built in 1906 – 1907!

But: if we locate ourselves within grand stream of God’s purposes, then we have an eternal history. (Here, the words of God to Jeremiah the prophet, which I highlighted earlier, have special significance.)

We are part of a history that began at creation, continued through all of God’s dealings with humanity through the centuries, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continuing through today until the consummation – the fulfilment – of God’s purposes!

Therefore, during this year, there will not be so many activities that parishioners are exhausted at the end, and never again want to hear the words “centenary” and “celebrate”!

There will, however, be enough to express thankfulness for God’s love made known to us and experienced in countless ways in this place:

- The day in 1904 that Christian people in the tiny hamlet of Hilton, a lengthy cart-ride or train journey from Pietermaritzburg, got together to form a church community
- The day they decided to call it “Kirby-Hilton”, the formal name by which our church still is known, meaning “Kirk of Hilton” or “Church of the place of Hilton”
- People’s shared lives – especially sharing faith and love with one another
- People brought to knowledge of God’s love, nurtured in it, and
- People commended to God in faith, especially on death

- Lives touched by actions of Gods Spirit through the members who have worshipped here
- People who have enjoyed this building, worshipped in it, done important things within it, including the obvious – baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals – and the less-obvious but no less important – anniversaries celebrated, prayer in times of crisis, tears of thanksgiving, tears of pain, tears of laughter
- Impact on lives of people – local and far away; people who grew up here with firm faith, having moved elsewhere and contributing to the faith communities of which they now are a part
- Includes region / social context / social and political activism and working towards justice
- Encouraged people in their work, missions and ministries, their works of compassion, which whilst located outside these walls are also rooted here in worship and doing all things in relation to God

I am sure we want to commit ourselves to continue doing those same things.

Some are grand. Some grab no headlines.

Some are hard, some easy.

- There is much to be sorry about too, and things of which we need to repent: failed or missed opportunities
- failures to live up to Christian calling
- individual failures of morality / faith – some of which may have had huge consequences
- disputes, clashes and strained relationships
- for that is a “given” in community living

In our liturgies today and later in the year, there is opportunity prayerfully to remember all these things.

During the year we will embark on a process called the Parish Charter – a process in which the whole Diocese will participate, and which will include evaluations and considerations of our purpose and mission. This is a very opportune year for it.

Towards Conclusion:

J Due to my Greek and Irish genetic inheritance, there is much more I could say, but I have saved that for next week and beyond...

I am going to end with a reminder of a setback. You may think that’s a terribly “bad news” way to end a sermon – especially considering that last week we were reminded that we are “a Good News people” because of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is my opinion that this is good news, from which we can be reminded of a useful perspective on life and faith.

Less than 4 months ago, we were preparing for the launch of our Centenary year, due to take place in early October via a dinner and theatrical production well known in the Midlands. Due to insurmountable problems – over which we had no control – we were informed by the cast that the event could not proceed; and this, barely 2 weeks from the event.

There was huge disappointment! I had to announce the news in church on a Sunday morning, and our plans for launching the Centenary year ahead of time and in style, seemed to fall flat! For the organisers and the provider of the dinner theatre, it was a huge blow, and for a few days I was very despondent, even though there was nothing we could have done in the situation!

Whilst mere mention of this will be unpleasant for a handful of people, I bet almost nobody else even remembers it now, except that I have reminded you of it. And whilst it is too early to proclaim the success of today, I am confident that we will achieve what we set out to do, and confident that God will bless our Centenary year, as God has blessed every preceding year!

And I suggest that as a useful perspective to hold – on our Centenary, on our life, and on our faith. Setbacks will occur - of varying intensity, varying emotional responses, and at different levels of our personal and corporate lives. For surely, in the past hundred-year experience of worshipping and sharing life together that this church has gone through, there will have been many setbacks, those long forgotten and never recorded, and those more recent.

And yet – here we are successfully ready to thank God for 100 years of Christian community in Hilton, and to mark a significant historical point in its life.

And I want to root this Centenary Celebration in such experience of life, just as our faith is rooted in it. It is the experience of Jesus' disciples on his arrest and even more so, on his crucifixion. It is very easy for us to have the hindsight we have of the resurrection – and we are reminded of how absolutely dramatic was that experience, how it radically transformed the lives of those who knew that resurrection had occurred – crowds numbering in hundreds we are told by eye-witness accounts, as well as one-on-one encounters with various people including famous “doubting Thomas”. We are excited and inspired by hearing that, but all too easily forget the short time in-between when all must have seemed dark and gloom!

I am not saying our Centenary compares in importance to that event. I am not being dismissive of the massive disappointments and traumas that occur in people's lives, which are far more than “a temporary setback”!

What I am saying is that even for a church community, a hundred years of living as God's imperfect people in an imperfect world, will have brought many things including disappointments and failures. But living in the light of the resurrection, we know that God has the ability to transform every one of those into something able to bring glory to God, and able to draw us closer to God.

And perhaps that is also part of the perspective I am suggesting we should have: That every opportunity of life, including the most successful, and everything else, be used for drawing us closer to God and/or sustaining us in our walk with God.

Life is not meant to be utopian, and for our sinfulness never quite will be. Perfection is experienced by those unencumbered by sin – and that is only on the other side of life and death. Our seeking of it is a hunger for the perfection God intended for creation.

May our lives, our faith, and our celebration of our centenary be rooted in that – seeking after God, being reminded that we live as Good News people in the light of the resurrection with all its transforming power, and drawing us closer to God as a result.

Amen.