

Cathedral Event for the Launch of the *Institute for New Anglicanism*

WHAT ON EARTH IS GOD DOING?

Diocese of Nelson and Bishopdale Theological College, New Zealand

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Speaking notes of Bishop John Harrower

One of the things that God is doing at this time is gifting to Gayelene and me this wonderful opportunity to holiday in New Zealand in celebration of 40 years of married life!

Yes! We are celebrating our 40th Wedding Anniversary. PTL! What a blessing. I take this opportunity to say a heartfelt, "Thank you", to my wonderful bride. ☺

The loving God of the universe delights in our loving relationships. Interestingly, the love of bride and groom captures the vision of our relationship with Jesus Christ in eternity.

The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is love within God's own Being. God the Lover creates to share his love and life with us. and all that he made was "Good".

In giving humanity the responsible stewardship for his created world, God gave us the privilege and pleasure to participate with him in his work in the world.

But how did God's world end up in such a mess?

In Adam and Eve, we all turned against God, the Loving Creator. We chose our own way, not God's way.

The result of our rebellion against God is alienation from God, and from each other. This is our tragedy, our shame. And from then on the whole story of God's loving pursuit of his beloved yet wayward bride, unfolds. This love story is not a happy one. The Lover is spurned time after time.

What is God the Lover doing?

Do you remember? - "Where are you?"

In the Garden of Eden: - Genesis 3:9

"Where are you?" Why are you hiding? God's call, "Where are you?" is both a haunting question and the basis of our hope in the God who continues to seek us out in love: "Where are you?"

Indeed, in many ways it is the story line of the rest of the Bible:

God seeking us out at great cost in order to restore our relationship with him and with one another.

Outside the Garden of Eden: - Genesis 4:9

The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

God's answer is a resounding, "Yes! You are your brother's keeper."

The Divine Lover continues this loving pursuit of us through –

God's rainbow promise to Noah: - Genesis 9:16

God's call of Abraham: - Genesis 12

a call to form a people, not just an individual, to bring about God's rescue mission.

God speaking to Moses at the burning bush:

and calling him into leadership of a people through whom God will accomplish his mission.

God showing Isaiah a vision for the world:

and the role of a coming Messiah who will be descended from King David (Jesse's son). - Isaiah 11

God calling the young Jeremiah: - Jeremiah 1:5-11

And supremely, in the coming of Jesus Christ:

Emmanuel: "God is with us." - Mark 1:14,15

The long wait of the people of God for a Messiah is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The parable of the prodigal sons: - Luke 15:11-32

'But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. . . let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.'

Can we hear God the Father's cry, 'Where are you? Come home!'

And yet the Messiah, Teacher and healer was himself to die so cruelly.

Calvary and the atoning death of Christ for us,

'It is finished!'

'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' – Mark 10:45

Resurrection - Matthew 28:5,6

Remember the women at the tomb and the astounding news,

- 'I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.
- He isn't here!
- He has been raised from the dead,
- just as he said would happen.'

The post resurrection Commissioning of the Disciples - Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus said to them,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Pentecost – Acts 2

The Holy Spirit acts with power in the lives of individuals and forms a new People of God, the Church, who will carry out his work in the world.

What on earth is God doing?

All of the above, and more!

Well we might ask, What has God's work achieved?

Rodney Stark's Conclusion:

Rodney Stark is a Professor of Sociology at Washington University who applied his professional skills to try and explain the rise of Christianity from an obscure, marginalized and persecuted sect to a worldwide community.

(The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries, by Rodney Stark, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996)

His conclusion:

"The central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating and effective social relations and organizations". (p.211)

"Christianity grew because Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate (an) 'invincible obstinacy' . . . The primary means of its growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbours to share the "good news". (p.208)

This 'good news' was sung by the early Christians.

One of my favourite hymns is the **Hymn of the Early Church**, although I have never heard it sung!

Despite never having heard it sung; its words move my heart.

The **Hymn of the Early Christians**, Colossians 1:15-20, declares,

Jesus Christ is the Son of God
 the image of the invisible God
 the living incarnation of God
 the living embodiment of God

To know	Him was	to know	God
To see		to see	God
To believe in		to believe in	God
To receive		to receive	God
To hate		to hate	God
To honour	Him was	to honour	God

And therefore Christ can say, “he who has seen me has seen the Father”.

The Hymn sings **of Jesus Christ in His relationship to God, the Creation, the Church and Ourselves**,

- *Jesus Christ is the image and fullness of God
- *Jesus Christ is the Lord and heir of the creation
- *Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the Church
- *Jesus Christ is the only mediator through whom
 God has reconciled us to Himself.

Two thousand years have passed since the singing of that hymn.
 And I hear the same passion for Christ in the ringing final words of the final public address of the great mission leader, Lesslie Newbigin -

“It seems to me, the resurrection of Jesus was a kind of nuclear explosion which sent out a radioactive cloud, not lethal but life-giving, and that the mission of the church is simply the continuing communication of that joy – joy in the Lord”.

(Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History, Lesslie Newbigin, Eerdmans, Cambridge, 2003.)

Lesslie Newbigin reminds us of the centrality of resurrection faith in God’s call on us to be players, not spectators, in God's work in the world.

Is resurrection faith just academic? - NO!

An inspirational example of a life lived in resurrection faith comes from *The Letters of Henry Venn* (Banner of Truth) which was shared last month at the CMS Tasmania Summerview Conference by Peter Adam, Principal of Ridley Melbourne:

The great English Evangelical Anglican leader, **Henry Venn**, was the Vicar of Huddlesford, in with 5 or 6 children when his wife died.

Being responsible for the children's education, he said to them, one of whom would become the secretary of CMS, 'tonight I want to show you something remarkable which you will remember for the rest of your lives. This is part of my education (for you).'

Henry Venn took his children to a little hovel one evening to see a very poor and very sick young man.

The man's name was Abraham Midwood. He was 19 years of age, had constant fever, 9 painful ulcers and was dying. He was a believer.

Henry Venn gathered the children around Abraham's bedside and asked him a most unusual question: he asked Abraham if he was happy!

'Abraham, I have brought my children here to show them that it's possible to be happy in a state of disease and poverty and want. Tell them, if it's not so.'

Abraham replied,

'I would not change my state with the richest person upon earth who is destitute of those views which I possess, that is, my faith. This is nothing to bear while the presence of God cheers my soul and while I have access to him by constant prayer through faith in Jesus.

'Indeed I am truly happy and I trust to be happy and blessed through eternity and every hour I thank God who has brought me from the state of darkness into his marvellous light and has given me to enjoy the unsearchable riches of his grace.'

Can we see what God is doing?

Can we see what God is doing in the life of Abraham Midwood? Yes!

Can we see what God is doing in the lives of the hymn singing early Christians? Yes!

Can Rodney Stark demonstrate through social studies what God is doing? Yes!

God is at work in his world and we are called to participate in God's work.

God is the God who creates,
gathers
inhabits
restores.

Do we really believe God that can do these things?

Do we really believe God that can do these things through us?

Do we really believe, trust and live in the truth and strength of the resurrection?

Not just in the season of harvest, but in the seasons of want?

Do we believe God could do anything about Christ's cold body lying in a cold tomb?
Well, Yes! He raised his Son from the dead.

Can God change me? Yes! He raised his Son.
 Can God convert my neighbour? Yes! He raised his Son.
 Can God bless the Diocese of Nelson? Yes! He raised his Son.
 Can God work powerfully through the Institute for New Anglicanism?
 Yes! He raised his Son.
 Can God transform New Zealand? Yes! He raised his Son.
 Can God prepare the Church to be his bride? Yes! He raised his Son.

Can God empower and embolden his people afresh to commit themselves to participating in God's work in the world? Yes! He raised his Son.

God has empowered and emboldened you, the people of the Diocese of Nelson, to participate strongly in God's work in the world.

How do I know this?

Because of your new venture which we launch this evening the *Institute for New Anglicanism*. This is a strategic initiative to strengthen your participation in God's work in the world. It is an exciting initiative. It is a missionary initiative from your heart, and it is God's heart.

Because of the *Institute for New Anglicanism* I have no doubt that many men and women, and boys and girls, will be at that ultimate wedding celebration: the wedding banquet of Jesus Christ and his Bride, the Church. What a celebration of God's love for us!

May God bless mightily the *Institute for New Anglicanism*, in the name of God the Triune Lover, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

John Harrower
Bishop of Tasmania