

Sermon on UCA 40th Anniversary Sunday Between the Wilderness and the Promised Land

There is perhaps no more resonant biblical number than 40.

When we hear the number 40 our theological ears prick up.

Symbolising a 'significant period of time', the number 40 shapes so many of the Bible's great narratives:

for 40 days the great flood came upon the earth, the people of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years, both Moses and Elijah fasted for 40 days, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, and following his resurrection he appeared on the earth for 40 days before ascending into heaven.

The number 40 in the Bible tells us something important is happening.

Some experience of note is going on.

Some process of transformation is taking place.

So we pay attention to what God might be telling us and revealing of his word and purposes.

40 is the biblical authors' way of saying, listen, this is important.

Way back in the beginning, Abram is called out from his homeland, his safety, his family and given a promise of God:

I will make you a great nation and you shall be a blessing to all.

Here begins the story of Israel and the great journey of faith to the promised land of God's provision.

Abram takes to the road.

And he has little or no idea what awaits him.

All he knows is the call of God and the divine promise of blessing in order to be a blessing.

And so he goes with nothing but trust in his hands, believing that God, Yahweh, the Lord, is to be trusted.

That this covenant relationship will not be broken.

And the OT traces his footsteps, and the footsteps of his people through long and winding roads, through travails and joys, through captivity and exodus, through scarcity and abundance, and eventually into the land that was promised.

Life for the Hebrew people is rarely settled though.

They are driven into exile and taken captive once more.

Things fall apart.

After years of exile they return again and the story continues.

They are faithful and then disobedient over and over again.

In searching to be the people they have been called to be they fail and despair as much as they succeed and celebrate.

Through it all, however, two things are constant the OT tells us: the faithfulness of God in mercy and judgment, in presence and power, in forgiveness and restoration, and the call for the people to be faithful in response; to be the blessing Abram was called to be back in the beginning.

Whether they are wandering in the desert or settling in the land or somewhere in between, these two truths remain: God's faithfulness and the divine call for the people to be.

The Uniting Church is 40 today, according to biblical symbolism we might see this as significant.

That there's perhaps something we should be attentive to here and at this time.

What has been learnt?

What workings of God have been revealed from which we might take heart and continue to grow in faith?

Where have we fallen away from God's way and how does that failing help us to be more faithful?

Refined by the refiner's fire?

Formed in the crucible of God's grace which is always costly?

Where have we been tested, undergoing wilderness times, and where have we known the power of the resurrected Jesus walking in our midst, molding us into the body of Christ?

What is God saying to us through it all, what word does he have for us today, and where is he calling us for tomorrow?

So much of the DNA of the UC is about being a people on the way, pressing on, a movement in motion, like a wind which blows and never stops, never settles.

So as we mark this day, this time, this significant moment, where does God's breath blow us now?

And how do we go on participating in God's own mission of love?

Like the people of Israel the UCA has sought to respond to God's holy call to be faithful in the time it has been placed.

It all began with three denominations which believed unity was not just a practical aspiration, but a divine imperative.

They took Jesus' great prayer in John 17 at its word – 'that they might be one, Father, as you and I are one.'

As Christians we are bound together in Christ whatever denominational flag we fly, but perhaps if we actually looked like it a bit more in practice, that wouldn't be a bad thing.

In union the church sought to reflect in organic, earthly reality what is true eternally.

That the church is one in Christ, the head.

In our highly polarised world, this remains a radically faithful move, because it means sacrificing power and control for the sake of being together.

And there's something very Christlike about that.

I'm still amazed looking back that it happened at all.

NT scholar Tom Wright was asked recently in an interview what St Paul would be most shocked by in the modern church if he could see it and Wright answered immediately, 'Our total collusion with disunity.'

Some follow Apollos, some follow Cephas, some follow Christ, said Paul in a rebuking tone, and 2 millennia later not much has changed.

If anything it has become worse.

On the road of faith, uniting is a challenging business, and yet it has a Gospel glow about it.

Not that we have already obtained all this, but rather that we press on seeking greater union with Christians of all stripes.

The UCA has also recognised from the beginning that the Gospel has social and political ramifications and it has sought to live them out.

Christian faith cannot be hidden away in the privacy of our own hearts and lives.

One need not agree with every position or action the UCA takes on certain political or social issues to acknowledge the underlying theological truth that the Gospel is inherently political.

It is public truth, indeed cosmic truth.

Jesus, as Rick Lischer powerfully says, was not crucified on another planet, but in our world, in the most publicly humiliating act the world at that time had devised.

And yet in that public humiliation was the power that overturned the tables of every political actor before and since.

Because it emptied force and violence of all its apparent power and made love, of all things, love, the giving away of self for others, the most powerful force of all.

And ever since, the church has been called to take that love into the heart of political debate and turmoil.

Martin Luther King Jnr didn't have a program for social change, he had a Gospel, a word of good news that all were created equal and of inherent worth and dignity in the sight of God.

All he did then was preached it, lived it, and worked for social change lovingly and non violently.

As Christians we can disagree in good faith about social issues, and indeed the sign of a mature church is that it can do so and remain in relationship.

Yet we cannot avoid the call to live our faith publicly.

And be led wherever the Spirit may take us.

For the UCA that has been into social services like aged and disability care, political protest at certain times, cross cultural ministries, and most poignantly deep engagement and a commitment to ongoing relationship with the indigenous people of this land.

To acknowledge and address past wrongs, and seek to live for reconciliation in the now.

While I have not, and do not agree with every political stance it takes, at the same time I affirm the Gospel imperative.

And believe we should continue to listen for where God is calling us in this regard, to what social and political engagement the love of Jesus leads us.

But the UCA has spent its time in the wilderness as well on this 40 year journey of faith.

It has been tested and tried and will continue to be no doubt.

In just about every respect, the church has declined since union.

This should call us to some contrite reflection.

While it is possible to see wider societal factors at play here, we have not always helped ourselves.

There has often been a kind of proud self consciousness in the UCA which is both theologically unseemly and practically divisive.

‘Why are you a member of the UCA?’, I was once asked at college after expressing a disagreement about a certain formal church policy.

Likewise, Rodney Smith the Sydney University academic wrote that since the beginning the church has been over governed.

Too many councils, committees, processes.

And often very hard to make a decision or even to know who has the authority to make a decision.

This has led to internal distrust at just about all stages of the UCA's life.

As a Presbytery Chairperson and minister I know from personal experience that this destructive phenomenon is still healthy and active.

We're well practiced at tending and feeding it.

Congregations don't trust Presbytery, Presbytery doesn't trust Synod, Synod doesn't trust Assembly, and the circle works in reverse or different orders as well.

For a uniting church we seem to be pretty disuniting a lot of the time.

This is a systemic theological and ecclesial problem, one from which the church continues to suffer.

Internal debates over contentious issues have not always been handled well and too often we default away from the church's first language of theology to management, business, or political speech.

When I take the ordination orientation at college I make a point of not using the word 'leadership' for the entire three days.

The wilderness of decline, distrust, and theological hollowing out is a testing part of our existence.

The challenge to recover our first principles is always there – to recover the heart of the Gospel which calls for un self conscious worship, witness, and service in Jesus' name and to his glory.

Not to get bogged down in the church minutiae, but to live into our calling with faith and hope for where God's tomorrow may lead us.

Do this, and the UCA, I believe can recover its vibrancy as a movement of people on the way as well.

In wilderness times the wise learn, rather than despair or divide.

There is of course much more that could be said.

But on this 40 year anniversary of the UCA, as it was for Abram, Israel, and later the church itself, whether we feel ourselves in the wilderness or the promised land, or somewhere in between, God remains faithful, present, and calling us to faithfulness.

Above all else, this 'significant time' where we might have been listening for the voice of God reminds us of that fact.

Our old friend Lloyd Vidler never worried about the church. God had never left it alone, he reminded me on more than one occasion, and that faithfulness would remain in times of joy and of sorrow.

So don't worry, just have faith and follow after Jesus. Paul reminds his friends in Philippi that we are citizens of heaven.

This is our fundamental identity.

There is no ongoing earthly city, rather the company of Christians seek to live for heaven in the here and now.

To live God's future today.

Our fundamental identity is of another realm even as we must faithfully walk the way in this broken reality of the world, just as Jesus himself did.

Even as we must endure the fragilities we all know and struggle with.

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus, Paul says.

And that remains our calling.

Just as Abram went out, as the disciples did with nothing in their hands, and as the early church did with little more than a divine word of good news, we must as well.

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.

We have this rich heritage from three deep and faithful traditions, but it must not become an idol.

It must help to shape us to be God's people today, always with a view to God's eternal tomorrow.

You are a part of that great calling.

You are being swept up in the movement of the Spirit and called out onto the road to worship, witness, and service.

For you personally, for us congregationally, and for the UCA as a wider company, movement of Christians, between the wilderness and the promised land of faith we may rest assured that God is always with us in Jesus.

And that is the most significant thing of all.

He is not a distant memory, not a remote deity, not an ethereal doctrine.

He is the living presence of God set among us and leading us onwards.

And while we cling to his cruciform way, we can trust that he is uniting us with God and each other, and all those of the great communion who proclaim Jesus as Lord, each and every step of the way.

All we need do, as the old hymn says, is trust and obey.

To God be the glory, father, son, and HS, as it was in the beginning so now and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.