

Cleveland Uniting Church 100th Anniversary

1 November, 2009

100th anniversary

- ✓ worship, witness, service
- ✓ cloud of witnesses surround us today on All Saints Day.

Week by week people have gathered to

Ministers

- ✓ diligent hours of preparation.
- ✓ Privileged place
 - Announce good news
 - Called people to respond in faith
 - Church lives by the power of the Word – sign of God's faithfulness

What has changed over the past 100 Years?

So what has changed over the past one hundred years.

- ✓ **Government**
- ✓ **Business**
- ✓ **Financial System**
- ✓ **Population**
- ✓ **Technology**
- ✓ **Energy use**
- ✓ **Physical Environment**
- ✓ **Food production and consumption:**
- ✓ **Transport**
- ✓ **Worldview**
- ✓ **Treatment of Indigenous people**
- ✓ **Marriage & Divorce**
- ✓ **Suicide (?)**

There is not an area of society that I could think of where there has not been massive change.

What hasn't changed?

Basic aspects of the human condition have not changed.

- ✓ People still sin and fail.
- ✓ People experience guilt, shame and disgrace.
- ✓ People become alienated and need restoration and reconciliation.
- ✓ People feel the pressure of the future and need purpose and hope!

1. **"Where there's life there's hope!"**

“Where there’s hope, there life!” Victor Frankl.

2. I am happy to accept a modified form of the affirmation: **Where there is the promise, purpose and power of God, there’s hope and there’s life!**

3. Today’s readings - promises that give hope to people in desperate circumstances.

4. Isaiah 25:6-9 part of Isaian Apocalypse, Isaiah 24-27.

✓ **Historical setting – exilic or post-exilic**

✓ **Earth lies polluted under its inhabitants.**

✓ **Two images**

(i) God’s hospitality - Banquet

(ii) The swallowing up of death and removal of disgrace.

Walter Brueggemann

✓ ***Death is all that circumscribes a life, that limits the life-space of humanity, that diminishes well-being, and that prevents community with human person or God”***

✓

Rev Dr Howard Wallace:

✓ ***Jerusalem....Here God will offer divine hospitality to all people.***

✓ ***In the theme of hospitality we possess a profound image that encompasses salvation, the nature of God, and Christian mission. The hospitality flowing from the heart of God finds tangible expression in the hospitality that God’s people offer to others in the world.***

5. **In the book of Revelation**, there is again a hope-filled vision, this time of a new heaven, a new earth and a new Jerusalem and the promise by God to make all things new. Isaiah 25 echoes. Jerusalem – symbol of God’s salvation and presence.

6. **The story of the resurrection of Lazarus is an unmistakable sign that Jesus is the life.** It is the last of seven signs in John’s gospel.

- (i) Water into wine in Cana of Galilee (2:1-11)
- (ii) Healing the official's son (4:46-54)
- (iii) The healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15)
- (iv) The multiplication of the loaves (6:1-15)
- (v) Walking on water (6:15-21)
- (vi) Healing of the blind man (9:1-7)
- (vii) Raising of Lazarus (11:38-44)

Richard Holloway "The raising of Lazarus from the grave ...is a sign of a much greater miracle, the promise of that eternal life which death cannot touch."¹

7. **Earlier in the gospel story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus says to Martha: (John 11:25-26) "I am the resurrection and the life.² Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. [Do you believe this?"]**

8. ***The New Interpreter's Bible: Vol. IX***

Verse 25b and 26a are the most far reaching promise anywhere in the Gospel of what relationship with Jesus offers those who embrace it. ...They offer a vision of life to the believer in which his or her days do not need to be reckoned by the inevitable power of death, but instead by the irrevocable promise of life with God. The two parts of vv. 25b and 26a invite the believer to a vision of life in which one remains in the full presence of God during life and after death. The physical reality of death is denied power over one's life with God, as is the metaphysical reality of death.

....

Jesus' claim in vv. 25-26 ...is that the reality of God that is present in Jesus has decisively altered human experience of life and death....

¹ *Signs of Glory*. 1982, 75.

² 1. John 6:35, 48 – "I am the bread of life."

2. John 8:12; 9:58 – "I am the light of the world."

[John 8:58 – "before Abraham was, I am."]

3. John 10:7, 9 – "I am the gate/door for the sheep."

4. John 10:11, 14 – "I am the good shepherd."

5. John 11:25 – "I am the resurrection and the life."

6. John 14:6 – "I am the way and the truth and the life."

7. John 15:1 – "I am the true vine."

Jesus' powerful announcement to Martha suggests that the church needs to embrace Jesus as the resurrection and the life not only at times of death, but also in the daily moments of human lives, because these moments too, whether one names them so or not, are also lived in the face of death.

John 11 asks the church to reflect that Jesus is the resurrection and the life not just for the crisis moment of death, but for all moments of life. Jesus as the resurrection and the life is God's decisive announcement at the end of the age, because he announces that the world is now definitively under God's care and power....Jesus' words here invite the church to claim that God's life-giving power in Jesus is the power that determines the believer's existence, not the power of death.

Holloway continues: "When we fall asleep in death, therefore, there will be no waking in a strange place. Instead, there will be Christ..."

9. Raymond Brown states (1966, 429):

All Jesus' mighty miracles are signs of what he is and what he has come to give to man, but in none of them does the sign more closely approach the reality than in the gift of life. ... the raising of Lazarus provides an ideal transition, the last sign in the Book of Signs leading into the Book of Glory. Moreover, the suggestion that the supreme miracle of giving life to man leads to the death of Jesus offers a dramatic paradox worthy of summing up Jesus' career.

The raising of Lazarus becomes a hinge in the gospel linking the Book of Signs to the Book of Glory. What is this glory in John's gospel?

It is the glory of the Son of Man being lifted up on the cross.³

³ **John 12:20** Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.** ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵

Plans to kill Jesus begin to be made immediately after this sign.

It is the full expression of what John 3:14-15 states: 14 And just as Moses **lifted up** the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be **lifted up**,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

God deals with our disgrace through the disgrace of his Son who is lifted up on a cross, suffers and dies for us. He takes our disgrace and makes it his own and so opens to us the grace of God.

10. **"Hope is stronger than memory."** This saying is attributed to church consultant, Kennon Callahan and it used to be quoted regularly by certain people in meetings that I attended.

On the other hand, Spanish film director, **Luis Bunuel** (1900-1983. *My Last Sigh*, 1983, Ch. 1) writes: You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. **Life without memory is no life at all**, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. **Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.**

So, is hope stronger than memory? Should we focus on what we hope for rather than remembering what has been over the past century?

11. Each time we gather at the Table of the Lord, as God's saints have done in this part of God's world for the past one hundred years, we live in a moment when the past, the present and the future or Memory, Celebration, and Hope are inextricably bound together.⁴ We celebrate

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say -- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.³² And I, when I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all people to myself."³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

⁴ **Luke 22:19** Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of

afresh God's hospitality extended to us through the response of humility, obedience and trust that Jesus Christ made through his life, ministry and death.

1 Corinthians 11:23 *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,*

²⁴ *and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in **remembrance** of me."*

²⁵ *In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

²⁶ *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.***

So is hope stronger than memory? Theologically, hope is based upon memory, or more specifically the memorializing of God's promise and saving action in Jesus Christ.

[MEMORY]

Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love. Jesus himself, in his life and death, made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain. In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love....

[HOPE]

*The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, **always on the way towards a promised goal**; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way. [Para. 3 of the Basis of Union.]*

[HOPE & MEMORY combine into conviction!]

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord

me." ²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. [Para. 4 of the Basis of Union.]

We memorialize God's coming to us in his Son Jesus Christ **and we look forward** to the consummation of history, of God's saving purpose in Jesus Christ, when all things have been brought into subjection.

Perhaps the Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871, ch. 5) was right when she said:

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

Memory and hope are inextricably linked for the Christian church and celebrated each time God's people gather at the table of the Lord. There they are reminded of God's strong purpose of saving, reconciling love in Jesus Christ which is grounded in his life, death, resurrection and ascension, and which will be fully realized in the coming of Jesus Christ the Son, as the risen Lord of time and eternity at the end of the age.

12. **Prayer of Marta**

On 20 August, 1968, Warsaw Pact troops and tanks invaded Czechoslovakia. In Prague approx. 100 people were killed and 400 injured. On 23rd and 24th August, just a couple of days after the invasion, Marta Kubišová who was a well known pop-singer, recorded a song, a Prayer of Marta. Those who worked with her had to keep moving to avoid the Russian troops. She tells how her voice quivered as she recorded as there was a Russian helicopter hovering overhead at one stage.

The composer Brabec was going to the recording studio in Petynka where he was expected by Marta Kubišová. Soviet soldiers shot through the tyre of his car and so there was no other way than to dictate the lyrics to Marta by phone in the studio where she was to record it. The singer literally sang the song from the score. Marta Kubišová then managed to sneak the recording, which was hidden in the front pocket of her jacket, to the sound broadcasting studios which were in Novodvorská. As she was making her way there, she and the camera man were apprehended by Russian soldiers who searched their car. The song became the symbol of the opposition by the people of Czechoslovakia to the Russian, even though the song was banned from being broadcast on the radio and also on TV.

*Let peace remain with the land,
Malice, envy hatred, fear and discord,
Let them pass, let them pass already.
Now that the lost government of your affairs
Returns to you, people,
Returns to you.*

When Alexander Dubcek, who had sought to liberalise communism by giving it a human face, returned to the Prague from his detention in Moscow, Marta greeted him publicly, giving him a gift of flowers and a small bracelet with an angel on it. Marta was banned from singing in public from January, 1970 and for almost twenty years her voice was not heard. However, in 1989, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the people took to the streets in Prague in a Velvet Revolution. Marta was asked to sing the Prayer of Marta to the enormous crowd that had gathered in Prague and so, after almost twenty years of silence, she stepped out before the enormous crowd and sang her hope-filled prayer which, twenty years after it had first been recorded in secret, was now sung publicly in gratitude and celebration.

13. We do not know what the church will look like in 100 years time and it would be foolish to speculate. What is going to enable us to face the ever changing future where many of the things that we now take for granted will be no more?

The Basis of Union offers us some guidance when it says:

*The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; **here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.***

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.

We are thus **reminded** that we are a Pilgrim People, a motly crew whom God has drawn together through union with the Son, Jesus Christ, in the eternal Spirit. **We are a hopeful people because our identity, our purpose our pathway and our provisions are gifts given**

to us in and through our union with Jesus Christ in God's loving, saving, reconciling purpose which embraces the whole of creation.

Having been so generously fed at the banquet that God has so hospitably prepared for all peoples, can we do any less that share God's hospitality with a world where the pall of death still hangs over the hearts and lives of so many.

The story of God's people in this place remains unfinished. The next chapter is yet to be written. Is it going to be written by people who have those qualities of vision and conviction in the gracious invitation of God which offers God's hospitality to all peoples through Jesus Christ?

Is it going to be written by people who live and believe in Jesus Christ and are thus able to confront in his name all that diminishes people and communities and offer Jesus invitation to life?

May God inspire this part of the body of Christ to boldly share the invitation to God's banquet that God has prepared and the Good News that God is for life and against all that diminishes it. And to God be the glory in Christ Jesus.

Amen.