

Jubilee - 23 April 2005

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The events which took place in this church 25 years ago signalled a new chapter in the history of the Archdiocese of Wellington, and the introduction to the history of the Diocese of Palmerston North.

Those events came out of the Second Vatican Council's programme for a thorough-going renewal of the Church. The down-sizing of dioceses was one aspect of that renewal, and was intended to bring about a closer relationship between people, priests and bishop. Which shows that the creation of this diocese was an event that belonged equally to all of us, and so too does its 25th anniversary.

In fact, what happened here in 1980 had its roots in an even longer history, - in the lives of wonderful people who lived and practised and treasured their faith and handed it down to us. In some respects this building symbolises their faith, because this year as we celebrate 25 years of our diocese, this building celebrates its 80th anniversary. We stand as it were on the shoulders of those who celebrated their baptisms and confirmations, Eucharist, reconciliation, marriages, ordinations and religious professions in this building. My own parents celebrated their marriage in this building in which I was to be consecrated 44 years later.

And what would you expect me to say 25 years further on? I can only echo Pope John Paul II's answer to a question put to him when all the bishops of Oceania were over there in 1998. During the Synod, bishops had their one-to-one talk with the Pope, and the Vicar Apostolic of the Martial Islands had said to the Pope: "Holy Father, I wouldn't have your job for quids". No doubt he was thinking of the awesome responsibility that the Pope takes on and lives with day-by-day. But that was not what first came to the Pope's mind when he replied. He simply said "it's a privilege". For him, to be in the service of the universal Church and the peoples of the earth was a privilege.

"Privilege" first because it is a way of giving one's life in the service of Christ who had given his life for us. It's a privilege also because serving others highlights the dignity of those we serve. And it is a privilege because the call to serve is never owed to anyone nor is it something we can ever be worthy of.

What priest or bishop has not had glimpses of what John Paul meant? To be at the service of even one other person, whose *deepest human need* is to know their life matters – that they matter – and to be entrusted with the news that they actually do, and will do so forever, - that is indeed a privilege.

To accompany another for even a small part of their journey towards the wonderful destiny that God has in store for us; to be close to them during their moments of doubt or difficulty; and to find that one's own words have been used by Christ to do what only Christ can do; and knowing that when they came to us they were looking for him; and that they found him in what we were authorised to do in his name – these are humbling experiences.

To be entrusted with a person's secrets, faced with their pain, struggles, hopes and joys, and to be privy to the mysteries of God's own dealings with them: these are experiences that repeatedly humble us and amaze us, because they face us with the mystery of our own calling which has its origins in choices God did not have to make.

And so, confronted by the faith of those we serve, it is we who are lifted up and ministered to in the very act of ministering to others. Yet somehow, when that happens, it always

surprises. Perhaps it's an example of what Timothy Radcliffe called "God's unpredictable grace". He recently told a gathering in Wellington that the role of a leader is to be "at the service of God's unpredictable grace". He went on to say that's why a leader should be the *last one* to know what's going on – because what's going on is what *God* is doing in the lives of people all over the place.

So where to from here? Over the past 25 years, the focus of renewal has been on creating opportunities for more participation – participation by all the baptised – in the liturgy, in ministries and leadership, in decision-making processes, in pastoral councils, etc. All this is good and necessary, but it is *not* what matters most. Renewal is first of all the deepening of our relationship with the risen Christ. After all, the Church is not a *thing*; it is actually a Person! In St Paul's language: "The mystery we speak of is Christ among you". And so, the *renewal* of the Church is the deepening of our relationship with him.

Wherever renewal has focused on deepening that relationship, there has been a remarkable resurgence in the prayer-life of people, a greater commitment to the works of mercy and justice, to apostolates, and an increase in vocations and in the Church's credibility. Today, and to mark this day, I am asking that all of us, in responding to the Church's call to Renewal, we focus on deepening our relationship with the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Before his death/resurrection, what people experienced, what they somehow came to know intimately and with deep assurance, was that they mattered to God. After his death/resurrection, they knew the lengths that God had gone to for our sakes, and how much we mean to God. They also reflected on what it had cost Jesus personally; we seek this in that remarkable passage from the letter to the Hebrews (which is indicated on the logo of our diocese):

During his life on earth he offered up prayer and entreaty
aloud and in silent tears to the One who had the power
to save him out of death.
He submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.
Although he was the Son, he learned to obey through suffering
(that is he accepted the cost of being faithful to his Father)/
Having been made perfect in this way,
he became for all who believe in him
the source of eternal life.

This is the person who now shares his risen life with us, and invites us to spend time – heaps of time – with him in prayer. Why wouldn't we?

Of course, "the mystery of Christ among you" is most sharply focused in the celebration of the Eucharist. Here we are called by Him, gathered around Him, united with Him, sent by Him, to make the difference that he still makes. Because his presence is real, so too is our union with him. Our lives become an acceptable offering, because they are united to his.

The best jubilee present we could ourselves is to rediscover the Church as the Person - the Person of Christ among us – awaiting our recognition, deserving our gratitude, and in whose light we re-discover ourselves.

It is through union with Him that we become the Church.

This is the renewal that flows over into everything else, and ultimately justifies Pope John Paul's decision to make us the Diocese of Palmerston North. It also justifies the Second Vatican Council's call to renewal, which John Paul's worthy successor has pledged himself to continue.