

**Rekindling our future by drinking from the well from which we have come.  
John 20.19-23**

It is wonderful to be back in this place sharing this weekend with so many people from those formative years of my youth. It is a place that has a lot of memories and its just so good to be speaking here at an event other than a funeral. On the hall, the theme for this centenary, I preached my first sermon here as a 20 year old in 1970 in the old hall while the new church was being built, and after the service Jim Dickson's wife Elva came up to me and grasped my hand with hers and said "Kevin we need young men like you in the ministry", and that was a very significant moment in my journey into that. And here I am 45 years later, so thank you Peter for taking the risk and trusting a raw young man who liked to challenge the status quo and giving me the opportunity. My dad built the hall extensions that were done to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1964 and its fitting that some money from mum and dad's estate was able to be used to help fund these new extensions for this centenary celebration. I am sure they are delighted.

I come back here of course not as a Baptist minister, which I was for many years, but as a turn coat Presbyterian minister – although I am able to inform you that there are at least two others from here who I know who went on to do likewise, and looking through some historical material one of those who I got to know again in recent years, Donald Wilson who was tragically killed in an accident last year, preached at that 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, so I am standing in a good tradition that Wilson St. seems to have established and hopefully you will keep at your 150<sup>th</sup>, although I won't be here. And being Presbyterian has helped me to reflect a lot on the journey of the church over those 50 years since that 1964 celebration. Back in those days there was a large Sunday School and youth group here as in most churches. Of course we Baptists being rather separatist back then thought we and the Brethren (where I had my earliest church experience) were the only real Christians, and a bit of a beleaguered minority. But I have come to discover that Timaru was a very Presbyterian town and of course they along with the Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics, had vastly larger numbers of young people, many of whom were equally fine Christians.

But then in 1964 also the Beatles arrived in NZ bringing the 60s and everything changed. 1963 was the peak year for the Bible Class movements in the Presbyterian and Anglican churches and they then began to decline and Baptists followed sometime after. I sometimes go through a list of all the people I knew in the youth group back then and list all those, including my own family, who have only been rarely inside a church since, and we've all talked about some of those this weekend. And I should add I could so easily have been one of those having given up on church when I moved to university in Christchurch but God hadn't given up on me and like the lover God is drew me back. And those of you who live in Timaru are well aware of what has happened to those once strong Presbyterian churches. Overall in NZ the percentage of the population in church has halved in that period, and as the latest census shows even those who bucked the trends for much of that time, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, are now also in decline. For the first time less than half the population identified as Christian, rather ironic as we celebrate 200 years since the arrival of the gospel, and as media headlines put it "New Zealand no longer a Christian country." If the trends continue in the next census those saying they have no religion will be the largest group.

So what is the future of the church in countries like NZ. Are we in fact "Losing Our Religion?" the question I ask in one of my books, and are we destined to one day enter a truly secular and irreligious condition, as one of my predecessors at Knox, Professor Lloyd Geering began predicting in the 1960s – although interestingly he predicted the Presbyterian Church would be finished by the end of last century – which let me assure you it is not, even if in Timaru it is on fairly shaky ground!

So what might provide some basis for hope for the church in NZ, when most of what I hear is despair. In much of the talk about the church in this new context, what many describe as post Christendom, one in which the culture no longer gives a privileged place to the church or encourages people toward it, one of the key biblical passages which has emerged is this one we read at the end of John's gospel [John 20.19-23]

Interesting question of discussion, when did the church begin. Was it when Jesus called the first disciples. Well of course the church could only come into existence after the death and resurrection of Jesus and gift of the Spirit. So the day of Pentecost, Acts 2, is generally regarded as the birthday of the church. So where does this earlier scene in John fit, where the risen Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on to his followers. An issue of some theological debate, on which biblical commentaries spend many pages, and this is not the place to go into it. But I simply want to say regardless of what we decide about that, this passage contains in it everything that is needed to take the church into the future, both as it progressed over the following story in Acts or as we lean into whatever our future might be.

(1) The first thing to note is where this first church was. **The disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews.** A few days ago there were 13 of them. But they had seen their leader go, another had committed suicide after letting the side down, and a third was missing. Now only 10 and wondering how they had dwindled so quickly, and who was going to be next? Would they go down and down till no one was left? Sounds just like many churches up and down NZ today?

Maybe back then in the 60s and 70s we were like the church of Acts 2 – out there confidently in the market place boldly proclaiming the gospel. Billy Graham coming in 1959 and 25% of New Zealanders going to hear him, let alone those who listened on landlines. Again in 1969 hundreds travelling by train from Timaru to Dunedin, including myself (how many others...?). But not today. Like this, a dwindling group in a largely empty building, huddled behind closed doors, fearful of a culture that ridicules and dismisses them, afraid to speak of their faith or identify themselves as a follower of Jesus outside. Everywhere I go in churches I find a sense of despair and hopelessness. Like this bunch here thinking back of the times not so long ago when Jesus was alive and amongst them and now he's gone and all is lost, and all we have is wonderful memories of the past, like we heard yesterday afternoon.

(2) Then suddenly Jesus shows up and stands amongst them and greets them. **Peace be with you.** Then he breathed on them an empowering breath of the Holy Spirit, the same breath with which he blew open their locked door and says **Receive the Holy Spirit.**

Jesus words **peace be with you**, repeated again a few verses later, were a standard Hebrew greeting, still used in the Middle East today. But here the words are far more than just a casual greeting. At a profoundly personal level Jesus is summing up the essence of his work and presence in the world. Peace, *shalom*, is the gift of God's reign. In his teaching to them in the Upper Room he promised it to them, twice, and now through his death and resurrection he has delivered it. And when they see Jesus and hear his voice their fear is turned to joy. And this is the first essence of being the church. The presence of the risen Christ in our midst. Having moved from Baptist to Presbyterian one is caused to reflect on different understandings of what makes a church. Other denominations tend to criticise Baptists as having no theology of church, simply being satisfied with Jesus assurance that **wherever two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst.** Well I think it might take a little more than that, although not much, and in essence you are right.

(3) But then we need to notice who this risen Jesus is who is standing amongst them. It was when he showed them his hands and his side they knew it was him and not some apparition or hallucination. It was the crucified and risen Christ. That is why the cross has for so long been the symbol of the Christian church. Some sections of the church focus so much on the resurrection and victory of Jesus that they have no place for suffering and the cross in their understanding of what it means to be the church, creating a sense of triumphalism and are unable to deal with the disappointments, losses and suffering that Christ's followers still encounter, and I know most of us have experienced. It is the cross and resurrection together which brings healing and joy to both individuals and the community of God's people. That is why whenever the church has gathered together through the ages in whatever context they have shared together in eating bread and drinking wine, as we will soon, to remind us that it is through Christ's broken body and shed blood that we are redeemed and made whole. And it

is only because of this we are reconciled with God and receive God's gift of the Spirit which brings us joy.

But not only is there this physical representation of the death of Jesus we share but also words are spoken. **Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit.** So again throughout history when the church has gathered, as well as sharing bread and wine the other central element has been reading the scriptures together and hearing the word of God. In the Reformed tradition of the church, to which we as Presbyterians and Baptists both belong, we hold that "wherever the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered there the church is to be found." So whatever different forms the church needs to take in this very different world we are inhabiting, these elements still need to remain central, and it is great we are celebrating tonight with both sacraments, baptism and communion, and preaching. We do need to find new ways of gathering other than sitting like people in a bus in straight rows looking at the back of the head of the person in front for an hour on Sunday morning, but the church is not just a social gathering. It is a gathering of people to meet with Christ and the primary way it does that is through sharing bread and wine and hearing the gospel of Christ in the scriptures.

(4) And so the next thing is the content of the words that Jesus speaks and the consequences that followed. **Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.** In other words as God has sent me out into the world so I am sending you out to engage the world from which you have retreated. I don't want you in here, I need you out there.

Throughout John's gospel Jesus has been described as the One who was sent by God. Now with his work nearly completed his final task is to commission his followers just as he was commissioned by God. So, just as Jesus was God's special representative sent into the world, so to his followers become Jesus representatives sent into the world witnessing to the reality of Christ and the God who sent him.

But also in this gospel, one feature of Jesus' commission that is emphasised more than anywhere else, is his empowering by the Spirit. God not only sent his Son but also empowered him with the Spirit. So in Jesus' baptism the central event as John's tells it is not the water baptism itself, but the anointing in the Spirit that came to Jesus. Our first introduction to Jesus came from the prophetic words of John the Baptist, who God had told **He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.**

Above all Jesus is described as the One in whom the Spirit flows like a living spring, a source of life and refreshment and renewal that following his death and resurrection will be offered to all. And so v.22 becomes the climax of John's gospel. Now that Jesus is departing the Spirit, promised in the Upper Room, is given as his farewell gift with the words **As the Father has sent me so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit**

There is so much that is so important for us, as the followers of Jesus today, the continuation of the church that was birthed when the Holy Spirit blew upon them, to understand and be grasped by as we picture who we are and what in the world we are called to do. How many remember the glory days of charismatic renewal in the 1970s and 80s??? I was pretty deeply involved in all of that, and there is much for which I am still very grateful, but I have come to see that in all the excitement about the rediscovery of the importance of the Spirit in the life of the church, and all the freedom and creativity that brought, there was something absolutely critical that was lost, as the selfish 80s evolved, and that is by and large why it all dribbled out in the 90s. And it is this.

The point of receiving the Spirit it's abundantly clear here, is not to give the disciples new spiritual experiences so they could have a good time together, though they were going to have those. Nor is it to set them apart from ordinary people, a sort of holier than thou club, God's special few. The point is the Spirit is given so that they can do for the whole world, what Jesus has been doing, bringing good news to the poor, release to those in bondage, sight to the blind. **As the Father has sent me so I am**

**sending you.** That's why they needed the Spirit, God's breath, to enable them to do the task they could never otherwise dream of doing. And they did.

I was given a WEC Newsletter by Irelle before service and it began with the heading The Missional Church, and there is much talk today about the missional church, and one thing I am sure of is that the church going forward needs to be missional, but I'm not sure if it is much understood. It's as if putting the word missional in front of anything makes it ok. But at its heart this passage is what it is all about. The parallel between the sending of Jesus into the world by God and the sending of the church, into the world by Christ, both empowered by the same Spirit. So if the parallel is true then mission must have the same importance for the church as it had for Jesus.

Particularly in John's gospel Jesus defines himself as the 'sent one' and God is defined as the 'sender', and the Spirit is the means by which Jesus is sent. The word from which we get the English word mission is *missio*, meaning to send. And so the Godhead itself is defined in terms of mission, sending. God is a sending God. Mission is not some added extra for a church that already exists for other reasons, some department among several the church can add on.

I remember when I was a university student, sitting with a group of others in what was then the manse where we met on Friday night, while Peter Millichamp tried to explain the Trinity to us. Its been a life time journey for me, and I have never fully grasped it - whoever has? - but I do understand it a bit more now. And mission reaches right back into the relationships of the three persons of this God we call Trinity, in the dynamic interchange of sender, sent and sending as some define this God we have traditionally called Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it, "It is not so much a case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church but the church for mission." Or as the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, put it more simply "It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world."

The church is a result of, and continuation of, the mission of God in Christ. It is its reason for being, and when we forget that and become preoccupied or focussed on other things we lose our essence. As another theologian put it, "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." Might our loss of this explain much of our current malaise? We do not understand what our mission is, or if we do we think the world doesn't want to hear it and so we gather fearful and beleaguered with our dwindling numbers behind closed doors.

What is that mission? Notice that Jesus mentions **peace** twice. Once when the church is gathered together, and then as he sends them into the world. This is the mission we are called to share in. Not keeping the wonderful peace and joy which Christ brings to ourselves as we have a great time together but, as we go, sharing it with a broken and hurting world. **If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven.** The wonderful privilege is ours of pronouncing the forgiveness that God offers to all through the death of Jesus and the joy that comes from the gift of the Spirit. This is our missional calling as a church. A community of forgiveness, reconciliation, *shalom*, joy, which we experience as we gather around Christ, but not to keep for ourselves but to take it with us as we go from and return to that community so others can be welcomed into participation in the peace that Christ brings. Isn't that still after 200 years in NZ, 2000 years globally what people still long for? Even in Timaru?

What will the church be like going forward? Does the church even have a future in our land, in Timaru? The reformers 500 years ago reformed the church in the light of the word of God, and out of that came the Protestant church which covered much of Europe and was then exported all over the world, even downunder. It was a form of church that served well for 5 centuries, during a period known as Christendom, when you just had to ring the bell on Sunday morning, open the church doors and it would be full. But that is all gone, the last remnants disappeared in the 60s and 70s and we need to rediscover what kind of church we need to be now. One of the principles of the reformers was

*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, “the church reformed is always being reformed”. They didn’t just reform the church back there once and for all, something we should freeze frame for all time, but recognised it would need to be continually reformed. But the principle by which it continues to be reformed is the same as for them – in the light of the Word of God. The church faces a time when it needs renewing and reforming again and we need to allow the Spirit to kindle our imaginations by passages such as this, and as we do I have confidence that the presence of the living Christ among us can also turn our fear to joy and despair to hope, as the Spirit breathes on us bringing God’s shalom to share with those among whom we are sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.

My prayer for you as you move into your future is that in your going you may go living in *the spacious love of God, the redeeming grace of Christ and the empowering breath of the Spirit.*