

ADDRESS AT ST PHILIP'S O'CONNOR ON Sunday 16 December 2018

By Robert Willson (Rector of the Parish, 1979-1985)

Thank you very much, Rector, for your invitation to preach in St Philips once again, as you embark on a three year reflection on the history and future of the Parish. In 2001 this Parish celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the dedication of the Church building in 1961 and the late Reverend Rob Lamerton asked me to preach on that occasion also, and on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Parish Hall by Bishop Burgmann in 1957. So this makes it three times. As a Tolkein fan might say: This is getting to be Hobbitt forming.

It is part of the Anglican tradition to link an important event with a saint's day if possible. This Church is dedicated to Saint Philip. I recall Bishop Warren, first rector of this parish, looking for a suitable day to Ordain me to the priesthood away back in 1974, 45 years ago. He looked through his diary and said "What about the beheading of John the Baptist? No, I think not." Then he moved on and I was eventually ordained on Saint Bartholomew's day, a day which commemorates a massacre of Christians in France and the brutal expulsion of the non conformist clergy from the Church of England in the seventeenth century. Neither day reflected much credit on the Church.

Our patron saint in this parish, Saint Philip, also enjoyed or endured a rather dramatic history.

Philip the apostle is listed among the Twelve in all the Gospels but the most detail we have about him is in John's Gospel. According to John 1, he came from Bethsaida in Galilee, where Peter and Andrew also lived. When Jesus called Philip he immediately found his friend Nathanael and brought him to Jesus also. In John 6 when Jesus questioned him about feeding the multitude Philip commented that it would take a large amount of money to feed such a multitude. In 21st century terms he had his eye on the bottom line! Later it was Philip whom the Greeks approached, perhaps because he had a Greek name, meaning lover of horses, when they wanted to see Jesus.

So he comes through as a pragmatic and sensible fellow but one who was willing to introduce others to Jesus. Like Andrew he was a great introducer. They were “public relations” experts.

My Bible dictionary says sternly that later traditions about Philip are legendary and uncertain. The strongest tradition says that he was martyred at Hierapolis in Turkey, according to Eusebius, a great early scholar and I visited that place in 1998.

Now we come down to the history of our St Philip’s Church. This Parish began as an offshoot of St John’s Parish, as the suburbs of Turner and O’Connor began to grow in the years after the end of the Second World War.

Archdeacon Bob Davies became rector of St Johns in 1949 and soon began to visit our area in company with Bp Burgmann and others. They chose this site and the lease was obtained in April 1951. Sunday School classes were held in the Turner Scout Hall and in various homes.

Two newly ordained clergymen, one of whom was Colin Sheumack, later Bishop Sheumack, were appointed to systematically visit all families in the district. A census in 1952 showed that 60% of the residents of O’Connor claimed to be Anglican.

I wrote to Bishop Sheumack some years ago, before his death, and asked him for his memories of those days. He replied that it was all so long ago that he could recall little about it.

He said that the Dept of the Interior set aside a house for an Anglican clergyman as the suburb went up, street by street. The Sheumacks moved into number 1 Pedder Street on the same day as all the other residents of Pedder Street moved in. All the stoves had been installed in all the houses but they had forgotten to remove the packing from the stoves. So every resident lit their stove for the evening meal and smoke poured out of every kitchen. Thus the whole population of Pedder Street found themselves meeting on the footpath outside! The department soon rectified the problem and repainted the kitchens that had been smoke blackened!

Sheumack said that he was the first clergyman to work in O'Connor and the emphasis was on door to door visiting. He said he remembered not getting past many front doors. I also did a lot of door to door visiting in my years here but I was generally made to feel welcome. One chap threatened to loose his dog if I did not leave but that was rare.

Bishop Sheumack recalled that the church asked to have the right to a bank account but that was refused. He could not remember the names of lay people but said he would look for photographs, though he said there was little to photograph at that time. In that immediately post war period it was a bit of a struggle.

By the mid nineteen fifties the Parish of North Canberra, centered on Ainslie, was carved out of St Johns, and O'Connor was part of that parish. Bishop Burgmann opened a church hall for Ainslie in 1950 and services were held there for the rest of that decade. However the Revd Ted Buckle, whom Burgmann described as a lunatic with a touch of genius, or a genius with a touch of lunacy, I am not sure which, got the idea of transporting the old Mortuary chapel from Rookwood to Canberra. It had stood there in Rookwood for a century during the time when funerals were by train, but now the motor car had done away with that. I was moved to discover that my Willson ancestors had been among those who were taken to Rookwood by train, via that station, in the early twentieth century.

As Ainslie developed as a parish the Turner and O'Connor area grew under the wings of Ainslie. Buckle was enthusiastic for a parish centre in O'Connor. Robert Jay often talked to me about the early history of the parish. He said that he had had doubts about the viability of the separate O'Connor Parish from the start.

However the Rector, Ted Buckle was enthusiastic and on 5 May, 1957, more than sixty ago, Bishop Burgmann laid the foundation stone of our parish centre. That was the first building on this site.

Let us try to recall what the world was like in 1957.

What a different world it was in some ways but not others.

In 1957 Sir William Slim was G G and he would come to lay the foundation stone for this church a year or so later, after declaring the Church Hall open for business.

Mr Menzies was Prime Minister and the ACT did not have self government.

Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother visited Australia that year That year the gates closed to form the Adaminaby Dam, centre piece of the Snowy Scheme. The waters began to cover Old Adaminaby village which had to be moved and people said that the old village was gone forever. However in a terrible drought years later the foundations actually reappeared as the waters dried up.

Britain was testing nuclear weapons in Australia in 1957. Neville Shute published a novel called ON THE BEACH that year, and Slim Dusty recorded a song: THE PUB WITH NO BEER which became very popular, I am not sure why.

Utzon won first prize in a design for the Opera House. That same year the Opera House lottery started, in order to pay for it. The estimated total white population of Australia was about nine and a half million people, less than a third of what it is today.

Some things never changed at all. The Eastern States were caught in a severe drought in 1957.

If you had a small black and white TV you could watch Bob Dyer's PICK A BOX on it. Barry Jones was to appear on that show years later and became a national celebrity: "AND STILL THEY GAZED AND STILL THE WONDER GREW, THAT ONE SMALL HEAD COULD CARRY ALL HE KNEW.

Bishop Burgmann had been Bishop for twenty years here and would retire in another three years or so.

The day of the laying of the foundation stone of the Hall was the scene of a crisis. Bob Jay told me that the night before the event Ted Buckle had appeared at his door in Turner. The stone for the laying was in his car boot but the mason had spelled the name of the Bishop incorrectly, with only one "n" and no room for another one. So the Mason sat up all

night to recut the inscription on the other side. Bob Jay said that if you were to dig the stone out of the wall you would find the incorrect inscription on the other side, but I am not advocating it.

On 25 May 1958 the Hall was opened and the Governor General laid the foundation stone of a circular church. It was a radical design, looking like a space ship that had just landed. The plaque dedicated by Sir William Slim was to be the base of the great metal cross at the centre of the circular dome of the church.

Slim said: “In your design you have moved away from the conventional. As the Church rises so will some eyebrows. Christianity is not a dull static affair. It is, or it ought to be, dynamic, pulsing with life.”

However in the case of St Philip’s it seems that too many eyebrows raised at this revolutionary design. Eventually the round church design was abandoned and the present A frame design was settled on. The 20 metre cross in the courtyard remains as a reminder of the original design.

O’Connor continued as an offshoot of Ainslie until February 1960 when the Reverend Cecil Warren was appointed the first incumbent of the Parish and work commenced on the Church building. On 16 December 1961 Bishop Clements dedicated the completed Church, though a large debt remained on the building.

The plaque states that this event took place with Cecil Warren as Rector. Exactly twenty years later in 1981, during my ministry, we finally managed to wipe out the debt through the hard work of many people. Among them were the catering group under the leadership of Connie Savage and Marie Lewis. I vividly recall late nights at various Canberra venues catering for meals and washing up, with all hands to the pump or the washing tub. We had a lot of fun.

So I was delighted to invite Bishop Warren back to consecrate the Church in 1981 and I had another plaque set up with Warren as Bishop and myself as Rector. He said to me: “Don’t get any ideas for the third plaque!” I assured him that I had no designs on his Episcopal throne!

I commend you to read the Bishop’s own account of those years from his perspective in his autobiography A LITTLE FOOLISHNESS. I had

first met him during his time as Rector here, at an SCM conference in Armidale where he led a bible study group. Later I came to St Philip's to talk to Bishop Gordon Arthur about becoming an Anglican, little dreaming that within a few years I too would be Rector of this Parish. I had great respect for both Cecil Warren and Gordon Arthur. Cecil ordained me to the priesthood 45 years ago. I followed Gordon Arthur in three parishes, Wagga, Berridale, and O'Connor and I heard in all those parishes tales of his enthusiasm for parish visiting and his love for people. While waiting for dinner at Connie Savage's home he ducked out to visit the lady next door!

As I look back on our six years at O'Connor I reflect on some of the marks of a LIVING PARISH.. Three things stand out.

- a) **WORSHIP OF GOD IS CENTRAL.** This parish has a long tradition of liturgical adventure and the St Philips liturgy was a pioneer for the revision of the Prayer Book. I recall the magnificent musical moments we had in the Parish.
- b) **LOVE FOR PEOPLE** is central in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We had a pastoral care visiting programme with a magazine to provide a stimulus to visiting. I enjoyed those years very much. I managed to collect most of the issues of our Magazine "The Grapevine" and they are in the National Library. Sadly, after I left, the Grapevine withered.
- c) **A DETERMINATION TO KNOW WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT** is vital. This has always been a thoughtful Parish. We took seriously the challenge of the Scripture to love God with mind as well as heart and to think about the faith. I am sure you still do. We tried to keep strong links with the ANU and I completed a post graduate degree while I was your Rector here. Beth worked for many years in the Pre-School Kindergarten which was a very valuable service to the Community here as well as a good source of Income. Like St Philip, the bottom line is important.

I CONGRATULATE St Philips O'Connor on your many years of achievements and struggles. I certainly hope I might be here for your centenary but I will not promise it!. God Bless you!

