

Future Orientation

Acts 11:1-18

178th Anniversary Sunday

1st May 2011

S So, how many of you got up early to watch the royal wedding on Friday morning? How many got up at 6 o'clock? 5 o'clock? 4 o'clock? Earlier? Was it worthwhile? Did you enjoy it? How about the men? Did you get up too?

Now, I don't like to gloat but while you lowly plebs were watching the coverage on CBC or CTV, some of us were lucky enough to have our own personal reporters, our ireporters right there, on the spot in London, sending first-hand messages and photos via Facebook. My sister, Juliet, was stationed among the crowds at Trafalgar Square, while our niece, Evie, found a spot within 10 metres of the gates of Buckingham Palace and got a really close-up view which we all enjoyed. Ah, the wonders of the electronic social media!

As I watched the wedding unfold on Friday, one thing that kept coming to mind. How greatly attitudes to the Monarchy have changed over the past 14 years since the dark days when Diana died. How back then the Royal Family felt unable to do the right thing, by showing the people they understood their grief or by flying the flag at half-mast over Buckingham Palace. At that time, people had such a negative view of the Royal Family that many were predicting its imminent demise. The death-knell of the monarchy was being sounded.

But, of course, since then, people's feelings towards the Royal Family have become much more positive – due in no small measure, of course, to William and Kate. It's almost as if they have taken the Royals by the scruff of the neck – gently, of course – and dragged them into the 21st century.

Which all goes to show, I think, that the institution of the Monarchy has a great deal of resilience. A great capacity for recreating itself. One need only look at the recent movie *The King's Speech* depicting the dark days after the abdication of Edward VIII in the late 1930s when the new King, George VI, struggled in the face of impending war to be able to make a commanding speech that would give strong leadership to his people in Britain and the Commonwealth. It looked as if the monarchy was going to be consigned to the scrapheap of history. And yet it soon appeared that this institution had within it the means to revitalise itself. To rise above the seemingly impossible challenges it faced.¹

There is, of course, one institution with an even greater ability to recreate and reinvigorate itself and that is, of course, the church of Jesus Christ. Time and again, it has seemed to be facing extinction, only to come bounding back, as the Spirit breathes new life into the dry bones and resurrects it to become once again a mighty instrument in the hands of God.

Over the centuries, sworn enemies of Christianity from pagan Roman emperors to Communist Soviet and Chinese leaders – have tried every means possible to eradicate the church from the face of the earth. But time and again they have failed. Because, when persecuted, the church always storms back, stronger than ever, with new life, new energy and new courage. In the 16th century, Protestant Reformer Theodore Beza reminded the French King of Navarre of this very fact. When he was commanded to disavow Christianity or face death, he replied, "May it please your majesty to remember that the church is an anvil which has broken many hammers."²

But, still today, there are the naysayers who believe that the church will vanish in times to come. Because of the secular rejection of Christianity and the resultant downturn in church growth, they say the church's days are numbered. That its people are an endangered species who will, one day, simply disappear.

I personally don't agree because, though the church is undergoing hard times in the western world today, this is not the case in other continents and countries. "As a global phenomenon," says one writer, "Christianity is by no means withering away under the assault of modernisation; the only exception is Europe [and parts of North America], where Christian decline is the rule."³ In most other parts of the world, Christianity is growing at an enormous rate. If you want confirmation, just speak to Eric and Mercy Prugh of our own congregation who will tell us a much different story about what is happening with the church in Zambia. There, and in other parts of Africa, it is the very reverse of what is happening here in the western world.

No, I do not believe that the global church is going to disappear any time soon. Nor do I believe that the same is going to happen to our own church of St. Paul's. Yes, in recent years, it has been difficult to compete with the secular forces that have lured people away from the church, presenting them with all sorts of alternative activities. Yes, we have had hard times competing for members in a city that is severely over-churched. But, challenges and all, here we still are. By the grace of God.

However, we can't console ourselves by saying, "Relax. Don't worry. Just hunker down, tough it out, wait for better times and everything will take care of itself." By no means. We are called to be proactive in changing our circumstances. To take those steps that will cause our church to grow and prosper in the years that lie ahead.

And to do this we, first, must become more future-oriented. We must become people who will look ahead rather than behind. People who will evaluate everything we do in the church – the money we spend, the energy we expend, the initiatives we embrace, the decisions we make

–in terms of the impact they have on the future of our life as a community of faith. We must become people of the future.

One of the best *Peanuts* cartoons depicts Lucy at her five-cent psychology booth, where Charlie Brown has stopped for advice. “Life is like a deck-chair, Charlie,” she says, “On the cruise ship of life, some people place their deck-chair at the rear of the ship so they can see where they’ve been. Others place their deck-chair at the front so they can see where they are going. So, which way is your deck-chair facing, Charlie?” After pondering for a moment, Charlie replies glumly, “I can’t even get my deck-chair unfolded!” Now, I think if Jesus were to talk to us through the Gospel of Peanuts, he would be saying, “Stop fumbling about with that deck-chair and get it to the front of the ship immediately. Because that’s where I expect my followers to be.”⁴

Like so many, mainline churches today, St. Paul’s is suffering from the challenges of a world where the traditional understanding of Christianity is being stood on its head. A world that our founding minister, John Morrice Roger, would find incomprehensible. A world that wants spirituality but not organised religion. A world that wants a pick-and-choose, cafeteria-style faith rather than sacrificial commitment. The dilemma for us is: How are going to meet the challenge with which this new religious world order faces us?

If we are simply going to sit on the back of the cruise-ship of life, fixated with the past, then we might as well throw in the towel right now. But if we heed Jesus’ call to become people of the future, if we are willing to become a more forward-facing congregation, then I believe all sorts of exciting new possibilities can open up. We can ensure that, rather than be a monument to the past, we can rise to become a more vibrant mission centre here at the heart of Peterborough, serving our city as Christ calls us to do.

A second thing we must do is become more proactive in terms of reaching out. Reaching out, not just to the less fortunate in our community, which is obviously of utmost importance. But reaching out in new ways to those who are seekers of faith outside our church or those who have not yet been challenged by the Gospel..

Reach out. Isn’t that what Peter felt called to do when he had that vision we read about in Acts 11? A vision that went so greatly against the grain of everything he as a Jew had learned since childhood. A vision he felt compelled to share with the other early Christians: Consider Gentiles as equals and reach out to share with them the Good News of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Today, we are similarly called to reach out anew to people beyond the church. To reach out to seekers of faith and spirituality. To those who consider themselves beyond the pale of God’s love. To those who want to find God and find their place in a community of faith. And we are called to do this against the grain of the received wisdom that says people outside the church are just not interested. Or, against the grain of those who say let newcomers come and

find us if they are interested.

Yes, we are called to reach out to others beyond our walls. We are called, as Jesus commands, to, “Go into all the world and make disciple of all nations.”⁵

And we must not do this in an insipid, half-hearted way, as just another item on the agenda. Rather, we are called to reach out with great intentionality. Looking for new insights and directions. Researching the issues involved. Developing a new strategy. Treating it as a congregational priority Reaching out to others, in other words, must become Job #1. A job that must be undertaken with new energy and new passion.

Lutheran Pastor Daniel Bohlman from Argyle, Wisconsin, tells how one time the Board of his church decided to take out the back pews in their sanctuary. They wanted to create a fellowship space for visiting with newcomers after services. A minor adjustment, it was thought. No big deal. Until, that is, certain outraged members of the church protested loudly and vocally. The opposition was so intense, said Pastor Bohlman, that “It seemed easier to rally the congregation together to fight to keep a pew from leaving the church than getting them to fight to put people in it.”⁶

Oh, what a step forward we would take in equipping our congregation to become stronger and more vibrant, ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century, if we could just but harness the energy we can so readily find for the minor causes in our church and direct it into the major causes. Oh what a step forward we would take if we would just but put more of our resources of energy and passion into the fight to reach out to the people who are beyond our walls and invite them into our community of faith.

Let it be our 178th Anniversary prayer that, with God’s strength and guidance, we commit ourselves to doing these very things.

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¹ The King’s Speech, Director: Tom Hooper; Writer: David Seidler; Starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter, Bedlam Productions, 2010

² Donald B. Strobe, “Why The Church?” Collected Words, Donald B. Strobe, Dynamic Preaching, 2005.

³ David Barrett, “The Status of Global Mission”, says that, “Christian growth in Africa is nothing short of astonishing. There were 8.7 million African Christians in 1900; there are 389 million African Christians today – and a projected growth of 600 million by 2025.” Tidings-Online <http://www.the-tidings.com/>

⁴ Charles M Schulz, *Peanuts*, www.peanuts.com

⁵ Matthew 28:19

⁶ Daniel L. Bohlman, “The Pew”, *The Clergy Journal*, March 200, pp.12-14, cited by King Duncan, “Is it time to tear the church down?”, Dynamic Preaching 2005.