

# Christchurch Cathedral

## Apocalypse now? Apocalypse not!

### Hope in a cataclysmic world

Address by Rod Oram, Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009

*Old Testament: Isaiah 35: 4-10*      *Gospel: Luke 10: 29-37*

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life. Amen.

Like the man lying stricken by the side of the road, do you sometimes feel mugged and abandoned?

If you do -- as I do sometimes -- we have many good reasons for feeling so.

Hour-by-hour, we're assailed by deeply distressing news:

- Social...such as murders here in Christchurch or in Auckland news of a 2 year old girl washed tens of metres down a 38cm wide drainage pipe, drowning in a tangle of willow roots far, far from air, light...freedom, life.

- Economic...such as rising unemployment, towering debt and other traumas of the biggest economic upheaval in 80 years.

- Humanitarian...such as hundreds of millions of people living in slums of megalopolises, as we saw in the film *Slum Dog Millionaire*.

- Environmental...such as more frequent incidents of drought and polluted waterways in our own country; or diminishing ice at the poles or rising temperatures thanks to burgeoning greenhouse gases.

Apocalypse now? No. Apocalypse *not!*

These and other crises are increasingly inter-linked, increasingly global. Thus, they mutually exacerbate their complexity and impact.

Paradoxically, the more global the crisis, the more local the solution has to be. Going for a direct global solution would be far too complicated. Only when each community solves the problem can the response compound positively across the nation and the planet.

So, we have to respond locally with greater speed, precision, effectiveness and collaboration. To do so, we need greater understanding of the issues, creativity in finding solutions, enthusiasm to embrace change within each community...and a strong desire to empower each other to do so.

But we don't. Like the Levite in this morning's parable we pass by, driven by fear or self-interest. Like the priest, our churches often avoid the issues. Rather than work for redemption for all, they offer us personal salvation.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey has likened the Church of England to a doddering old lady "who mutters away to herself in a corner, ignored most of the time."

So who is our Good Samaritan today? Who will cross the road to pick us up, help us to move on?

It is the very same person today as it was in Luke's Gospel. It is a person made whole and great by his or her compassion and mercy. And, of course, Samaritans need help too. In a healthy community, we are Samaritans to each other.

To Jesus' audience, it was scandalous of him to point to a Samaritan as the person, who through their actions, reveals then rights the wrongs of society. The Samaritans were outcasts. They had broken away from Judaism to establish their own parallel religion and community. Their Jewish neighbours despised them.

But the Samaritan had probably experienced plenty of pain within and without his own community. His instinct, honed by Samaritans' help of each other in their endless quest for survival, was to help this distressed man by the side of the road.

That sense of community was essential to Samaritans back then. And, handily, each community could afford to be largely self-sufficient. Jews and Samaritans could live lives separated physically, economically, culturally and emotionally.

Such a simple, isolated approach to co-existence was easy for them. But it is in no way an option for us. Name any big issue you like, and you quickly see the astonishing inter-connectedness of communities around the world.

- When the US housing market fell into deep crisis...the ASB Community Trust here in New Zealand had to stop giving grants for a while earlier this year. Why? Because its invested capital suffered a dramatic loss in value in financial markets.

- When a string of British banks collapse...an upmarket hotel and staff in Marlborough suffer a dreadful summer season (along with many similar establishments around the country) because well-off British tourists are staying away in droves.

- When Afghanistan or Iraq or one of dozens of other countries suffers a bloody civil war...refugees eventually arrive here and in other countries, placing demands on government budgets and social fabric.

- When the sea level rises...the dispossessed among our island neighbours will come here to rebuild their lives. When massive greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere in the world cause the sea level to rise...it will rise here too and the Canterbury plain will have to live behind high dykes like the Dutch.

We could attempt to isolate ourselves: "We'll look after ourselves. You look after yourselves," we could tell others.

But it won't work. We can't isolate ourselves. We need what the rest of the world produces – pharmaceuticals, cars, planes, computers, to name a few things – and to some extent they need what we produce – food, some clever engineering, talented people, to name a few. We must work together.

Nor can we isolate ourselves here. Moving to a nice suburb or retreating behind a locked gate won't keep our neighbours out of our lives.

And there's an even more destructive form of isolation: it is psychological. It is the denial of the reality that we have to solve these inter-connected issues before they destroy us.

So what should our communities look like? What would the world look like if it were a functional global community of healthy local communities?

We would be like the residents of the real Mumbai slum in which *Slum Dog Millionaire* was filmed. Asked by a visiting American journalist what was life like in such an awful place, they reacted very angrily. "What d'you mean... a terrible place? This is our home. We help each other. We dream of making it better."

We would be like the residents of Waitakere City this past week. When Aisling Symes was lost, they searched, helped and prayed. When she was found dead they grieved, talked and came together, says Mayor Bob Harvey. More than ever, I heard him say yesterday at a community broadcasters' conference, the people of Waitakere are determined to progress together.

How might we replicate such stories across all our communities, across all the many, many hard things we're trying to work on?

The starting point is to believe in humankind and our God-given attributes.

As Hamlet says,

"What a piece of work is man,  
How noble in reason,  
How infinite in faculties,  
In form and moving how express and admirable,  
In action how like an angel,  
In apprehension how like a god!  
The beauty of the world,  
The paragon of animals --"

But Hamlet is deeply depressed about humankind...things aren't going well in Elsinore. Someone murdered his Dad, he drove his lover to suicide and he is planning murder himself...

...so he goes on to say to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old friends who have double-crossed him but he doesn't know it yet:

“-- and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?  
Man delights not me -- nor woman neither”

If we lose our faith in humankind, we're doomed.

But if we believe our God-given ingenuity is infinite...we can meet all those towering challenges.

One of the greatest, for example, is to find a way in December in Copenhagen to bring those of us in developed countries together with our neighbours in developing countries. Only together will we find ways to tackle climate change...and improve our natural, social and economic well-being in the process.

We could buckle under these great burdens. We've buckled before, as we heard in this morning's Gospel story. The Levite and priest were frightened of the robbed man. They had three choices:

- If he were Jewish and alive they might have helped him. But they didn't because they were afraid the robbers were still about.

- If he were Jewish and dead...and they had touched him to find out if he was dead...they would be made unclean. Then they would lose their livelihood. So they didn't help him.

- If he were not Jewish – alive or dead – why bother to help him? He was not one of them.

Their tragedy is this: all three of their responses were conditioned by society, not by God.

And if we were conditioned by God, what would we look like?

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus asks this about the Levite, the priest and the Samaritan: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour of the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“The one who showed him mercy,” said a lawyer in the crowd.

“Go and do likewise,” said Jesus.

And Isaiah offers us these five tips for healthy communities in this morning's Old Testament reading:

Rescue each other...

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God’.”

Revive each other...

“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

Restore nature...

“Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”

Re-commit to each other...

“A highway shall be there...no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.”

Rejoice with each other...

“We shall come singing into our communities, towns, cities and countryside; everlasting joy shall be upon our heads; we shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Amen.

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