

Commonwealth Sunday Sermon, March 2009

If I were to suggest that we all jot down, say on the back of our hymn-sheets, one word that summed up what the Commonwealth meant to us, I wonder what we would put.

Perhaps some of us would not write anything. Maybe 'commonwealth' isn't a word we've thought much about, or we're not quite sure what it means or the significance of this service.

Others of us might find it difficult to sum up our thoughts in just one word, especially those who have seen the organisation we are celebrating this morning evolve from 'the British empire' into a network of 53 self-governing nations, working together for democracy, human rights and peace.

Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to do this exercise, but I did try it myself. And the word I would choose to express my feelings about the Commonwealth is 'hope' - because it seems to me that, in a time of great uncertainty and crisis like today, it is to institutions like the Commonwealth that we look to realise our hopes for a better and more peaceful world.

I need not dwell long on what I mean by the crises we face:

the reality of global warming and the very real prospect – within the lifetime of some in this congregation - of half the world's population facing permanent water shortage and the members of whole nation states needing to relocate;

the increasing number of 'natural' disasters, which may or may not be linked to climate change – like the devastating tsunami of 2004, the hurricanes in New Orleans and the Caribbean, and the dreadful flooding in so many parts of the world including, most recently of course, across the Tasman;

our inability, as a global community, to bring justice to the poor countries of the world, to change the structures and systems which condemn 50,000 children, women and men to die *every day* from hunger and easily-preventable disease;

the spectre of terrorism – perhaps not new but, since September 2001, a reality which leaves all of us in constant fear of the unthinkable and always on our guard;

and now 'the global economic crisis', bringing even greater hardship for those already at the bottom of the heap, and the spectre of financial ruin, unemployment and homelessness to others (not to mention the possibility of growing social unrest).

It's not a cheerful picture to share with you at this service of celebration, but as I have hinted, I do not want to be a prophet of doom and gloom – in fact, quite the opposite!

One way to look at these 'problems' is not in fact as problems but as *challenges* – interestingly a word that the Queen chose in her address read to us this morning.

Because the world is now so much smaller we all feel affected by them, involved in them, united by them.

And we also know that, being *global* phenomena, we have to face them as a *global* community. The economic down-turn, the depletion of the ozone layer, the reach of the terrorist – none is limited to just one country, or even, for that matter, just one continent or even just one hemisphere.

No longer can the challenges we face be resolved simply by individual nation states. *Global* challenges require *global* solutions, and hence we look to our global institutions to lead in co-ordinating our response – and among them, of course, the Commonwealth.

Bringing together 2 billion people – one third of the world's population – the Commonwealth is a unique organisation.

Unlike many other global bodies it gives equal status, equal recognition and an equal voice to each of its member countries, which are drawn from both the developed and the developing world.

The fact that one third of Commonwealth citizens live on less than one dollar a day – the universally accepted definition of a poverty existence – gives an added urgency to its work, as does the fact that among its member countries are some most at risk of extinction through global warming.

As Don McKinnon himself once put it, because the Commonwealth embraces so many people on the margins of existence, it not only has an interest in seeing poverty eradicated but also a *responsibility* to do it.

But where does all this leave us? Is the need for global governance a step back from greater democratic engagement, a move towards less rather than more 'citizen empowerment'?

The Commonwealth's motto for 2009 is 'serving a new generation', but what scope is there for young people to help shape the world that they will have to live in? Young people make up one half of the population of the Commonwealth: what difference can they make?

In fact the Commonwealth provides great opportunities for young people to get involved in shaping the world:

- by offering support and resources for new enterprises;
 - by providing opportunities for education, training and development;
 - by making available networks for exchanging ideas and experiences;
 - by supporting cultural, artistic, sporting and leisure pursuits;
- and in many other ways.

And importantly, as with all democratic institutions, it is only as effective as those who work with it and those who pressure it to act. For what we need to remember – and this is affirmed by politicians across the globe – is that slowing down global warming, or eliminating poverty, or reducing conflict, are not beyond our capacity as a race to achieve. It is a matter of our leaders having the *political will* to make these things happen.

And this should encourage us, young and old alike, to continue to lobby those leaders to use the means at their disposal – including, in our case, a forum such as the Commonwealth – to bring about the change that is needed, to ensure that the 'common weal' or 'common well-being' is properly served.

I think the election of Barack Obama in the United States is one very important sign that a 'yes we can' approach is now gaining ground. And we must do what we can here to 'make a difference'.

One practical step *today* might be to support the 'Walk For The Planet' marchers who have reached us here in Dunedin this weekend, and show our solidarity and concern by attending the service across the road at First Church later this afternoon, or joining them on the next stage of their march up to Waitati tomorrow. I'm sure some of us have already committed to do that.

If a sense of hope that things can change *is* now abroad, then we who are people of faith should share in it fully. Our Scripture readings today remind us both of God's concern for those who are downtrodden and denied their rights – a constant theme in Scripture – and the centrality of hope to the Christian faith.

Look again at that profound truth in our Hebrews reading, which some of us may know better in its Authorised Version form as 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'.

Because we know that what we anticipate – both in this world and the next – accords with God’s agenda, we can be *sure* of what we hope for, *certain* of what we do not see.

That is the biblical conception of hope – not a ‘blind optimism’ that things might get better one day or problems will disappear if we ignore them, but a certainty that when all seems dark and ‘beyond hope’ God can bring about a transformation. As we shall recall again at the end of this Lent season, Good Friday is not where the story ends – there is Easter Sunday, where it starts again with *resurrection*.

I like the paraphrase of that Hebrews verse used by the American writer and activist, Jim Wallis: ‘Hope is believing despite the evidence, and watching the evidence change.’

But by ‘watching the evidence change’ Jim doesn’t just mean sitting back and letting it happen, but getting involved, partnering with God, to make it change.

That is the essence of Christian hope, and I believe the calling of all of us who claim to be disciples of Christ, who look for and work for the coming of his ‘kingdom’. We are people who dare to have what President Obama has called ‘the audacity of hope’.

So, far from offering a counsel of despair this morning, I’m excited by the hope of which the Bible speaks and the motivation and energy it gives us to change the world.

And I’m grateful, too, for powerful vehicles for change and progress like the Commonwealth, for its work to promote freedom, respect, human rights and peace, and for the opportunities each of us have to play a part in seeing our hopes for the future realised.