

Bishop Steve Lowe Homily Notes – Holy Trinity Cathedral, Ash Wednesday, 2025

*When the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, we read in the Book of Genesis that even then the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. Much more does the same Spirit move upon the face of sea and land now that the earth is stamped with the glorious form of its Maker's handiwork; replenished with a countless family of God's children; and enlightened by the Day-spring from on high which shineth in the midst of the darkness.*

So preached Bishop George Selwyn, the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand in his thanksgiving sermon on Psalm 139 upon his arrival in his Diocese at Paihia in 1842. He paints a beautiful image of the handiwork of God on land and seas and how humanity is given a share in the creative shaping of our common home the earth...

Sadly, however, we have to admit that we have scarred the earth, with exploitation, destruction and our indifferent polluting and modifying.

We acknowledge that at times we have tarnished our relationship with the creation, of which we are a part, and in doing so we tarnish our relationship with the Creator, the God who is love and who creates us in his image and calls us into his likeness.

We acknowledge that at times we have tarnished our relationship with our brothers and sisters, who are called to share the beauty and bounty of the creation. We see in our world the growing ugliness of war, the rapidly expanding gap between rich and poor and the intolerant rhetoric of those in leadership or power. Perhaps we also recognise echoes of this in our communities, families and hearts. And in doing so we often tarnish our relationship with the Son, the Redeemer, who identifies with the poor and marginalised and who calls us to love one another as he has loved us.

And we acknowledge at times we have tarnished our relationship with our very selves, putting ourselves down, not treasuring the life that has been entrusted to us, distorting our vision of our bodies or self and condemning ourselves for not being good enough. In doing so we fail to recognise the taonga, the treasure that each of us is. And in doing so we tarnish our relationship with the Spirit who dwells within the temple that us, becoming blind and deaf to the Spirit's movement within us.

God said to Isaiah in the first reading, *Announce to my people their rebellion to the house of Jacob their sins*. This is what we acknowledge tonight in ashes as we begin our Lenten journey to Easter joy and the blessing of the new waters of baptism and new birth, where death gives way to life and we are restored again in the rising of the Christ so we might lose the bonds of injustice and undo the thongs of the yoke, share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our houses.

We take not this Lenten journey alone, for Christ walks with us... as Bishop Selwyn writes, *This then is the comfort of every believer in Christ, that wherever he or she may be, there is the spirit of God; and where the spirit of God is, there may grow all the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance.*

As we begin this 40 day journey Bishop Selwyn's 1842 sermon helps us to understand the spiritual disciplines of Lent that Jesus offers us in tonight's Gospel ...

*We know, to our great and endless comfort, that wherever the Christian may be his or her heart is the Temple of the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in them, and by that power the Christian may worship the Father, at all times and in all places, in spirit and in truth. But the spiritual comfort applies more strongly to that body of believers, which is called the Church of Christ. For the Holy Spirit combines together the whole communion of saints, the fellowship of holy men and women of every age and every country, and builds them up into a holy temple in the Lord. By the same spirit, we are united with all true believers throughout the whole world, and with all the branches of the universal Church of Christ, so that our prayers and praises meet together with theirs in one united offering before the Mercy-seat of God. This is the glorious Temple in which the Spirit of God dwells, the universal Church of Christ, the Temple which has the whole Earth for its Pavement, the mountains for its pillars, Heaven for its roof, the host of angels for its ministers, and all people of every nation for its worshipers.*

I would like to think that Bishop Selwyn would be amazed that tonight we, Anglicans and Catholics, sing with one voice, the voice of the whole Church, singing its praises to God.

On fasting Bishop Selwyn invites us to reflect on our nature as human beings. *Let me be understood to speak of our spiritual life as our true life. Our natural life, with its attendant cares, of meat and drink and raiment and dwelling, is no more our real and true life, than our body alone is our whole being and substance. The spirit of a person, and not our body, is the real and true person and the spiritual life of a person is our real and true life*

It's so true, isn't it? Yet food or drink, what we wear or where we live so often dominate our being. Being invited to fast then is a reminder to restore ourselves our true dignity, As Jesus says, *'That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing!'*

Finally Bishop Selwyn, says to us, *It is no common work which God has given into the hands of the clergy and laity of this country. It is a work full of Promise, but one so vast is to prove itself to be a work requiring prayer and Faith and perseverance. Those visible signs of the influence of the spirit and of the presence of Christ, which we see around us, proves that a great door and effectual is opened unto us, but we know also there are many adversaries. We may expect that a spirit of covetness, an eager desire to be rich, a contentious and quarrelsome disposition, and narrowness and perversion of mind, a relaxation of habits of self denial, and a recklessness of duty both towards God and people, will spring up and multiply, before the remedy for such evils can be provided.* This is where the Lenten spiritual discipline of almsgiving comes in, not looking to self-satisfaction but giving to our neighbour that which is their due so that they may be restored.

Lent is a time of restoral - of restoring to God, to neighbour, self, and to the creation that which is their due. It is a time of being reconciled to God and to another.

And in this spirit Bishop Ross - I wish to restore to you – the successor of Bishop Selwyn, the original handwritten sermon he preached as his first as Bishop of New Zealand.

The Catholic Diocese of Auckland received this homily as part of the estate of the late Neville Hogg. One of his nephews, Brendan Lane, is the last executor of Neville's will and he wrote that *on behalf of our whānau we are wholly supportive of the sermon being returned as a gift to the Anglican Church.*

As Bishop Selwyn's very words have echoed through the years to this night and as we restore this taonga home to you and your faith community let us all pray that our engagement in this season of Lent will restore the relationships each of us have with God, each other, with self and the creation so that God will be all in all.