

“Clearing away” a sermon based on John 2:13-25 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 8 March 2015, Lent 3, by Kerry Enright, Knox Minister.

Twenty seven years ago, I held in my arms a new born baby. He fitted between my hand and my elbow and he was the most precious thing I had held in my life. As I looked at him and saw how fragile he was, how small he was, how precious he was, all other things fell away. They were at most of secondary significance. And Mavis shared the feeling – we have a little boy, she said, again and again. We had a little boy. All around was the noise of the hospital, the coming and going of doctors and nurses, the clanging of dishes, the sound of implements. All that I hardly heard, because nothing mattered at that moment except the little boy I held in my arms and the woman who had borne him.

Many years ago, I stood with a family around the bed of their wife and mother and mother-in-law, in an Intensive Care Unit, within the hospital curtain. We knew each other and had been with each other over time and now, we were told, it was her last journey. After perhaps a few minutes, ever so gently, ever so quietly, the chest stopped moving, and she stopped breathing, and we took each other’s hands, and eventually I mumbled a prayer. The thin thread of life was severed. She passed from this life. The noise of ICU, the coming and going were all of little significance. They faded away. What mattered was the woman lying on the bed. It was a holy moment, a precious moment.

About forty three years ago, I knelt beside my bed in a university hostel in Auckland. With uncertainty and with anxiety, I held out my open hands on the bed in front of me. And I said something like this – “God, I do not know what it means, I do not know what it will involve. I do not fully understand what I am doing. I want to be your person. I want to follow your Son. I want to have what I see in the people I have come to know. I give you myself.” Here I was in a university hostel, the noise of students all around, the sound of traffic of two nearby major highways, and much else. But at that moment, all other things were of secondary significance. All other things faded away. All other things melted into insignificance.

It has been easy for those moments to be buried. The boy grows and my experiences of him in later years crowd out that first precious moment. In relation to the family at the bedside, I leave the bedside, help them organise the funeral, continue to visit, and gradually we become absorbed in our daily living. And the commitment I made 43 years ago becomes complicated by my struggle to work out how to honour it, how to live it out, what it means.

Those moments are affected by the clutter of living.

And yet, and yet, and yet, in prayer, in silence, in worship, at times, I am reminded of those precious moments, and one holy moment seems to connect me to others, so they remain formative and pivotal and transforming. I am reminded who I am. I am reminded what is most precious.

I wonder if there was a time when the Temple enabled that sense of encounter. I wonder if there was a time when the people knew they encountered God there. They felt it, and when they did not feel it, they believed it because they felt it often enough.

And they drew others into that experience, that experience of encounter. In the ritual, in the praying, in the acting out of their story, in the dramatic bloody sacrifice of the lamb. Here was their story, their identity, their being. Here was reality.

But not everyone could afford what was needed, so the means were provided for them to acquire what was needed. They bought doves and cattle and sheep and they acquired Temple money. And so people sold doves and cattle and sheep and exchanged money. Many people came to the Temple so the market expanded. And the prices became competitive. And the sellers jostled with each other to find the best spot. And the noise grew, and an economy developed, around the Temple

And ever so gradually, what was ultimate, what was core, what told them who they were, was crowded out.

At the moment all of this here, all of this around us here, this building, these vestments, this way of doing things, at the moment all of this gets in the way of people encountering God, let's throw it away, let's pull it down, let's toss it out, let's bulldoze it. When stuff gets in the way of us encountering God, knowing God, and living with God forever – let's get rid of it.

How easy it is to turn religion into a business. How easy it is to complicate what is pivotal. How easily ritual and words and images and buildings and meetings, all developed with the purpose of helping us encounter God, become ends in themselves, and distract us from why we exist – to encounter God, to know God and to live with God for ever.

Ours is a Church that believes in clearing stuff out, in paring stuff back, in removing clutter, to uncover what is central, to keep the focus on what is ultimate. Our movement is - "Reformed and always being reformed."

That does require care for we can be tricked by the spirit of our age to toss out too much.

In the middle of Geneva is the Cathedral of St Pierre. John Calvin preached there from 1536 to 1564 and it became a guiding centre of the Protestant movement. Like reformers all over Europe, Calvin's followers stripped Geneva's cathedral of its altars, statues, paintings and furniture. They had little tolerance for religious images and any kind of excess, so they destroyed nearly everything but the bare architecture and they whitewashed over the murals. Only the stained glass windows remained.

Today the Reformed movement recognises you can pare back too far. It affirms that our full humanity needs to encounter the fullness of God. We encounter God not just through the word read and spoken, but through the word revealed in beauty and sacrament; not just through psalms, but through rhythm and dance; not just in quiet meditation, but through conversation and interaction.

Yet the same question remains - in our personal lives, and in our corporate life – is this leading us and others into an encounter with God; in the words of last Sunday's preacher, into being transformed and transforming.

In a moment we are joining in the meal. At the centre of this meal is encounter, with each other and with God. This meal is to enable you to encounter God, the reality and presence of Jesus Christ. God comes to us, so that we experience what is core, what is ultimate, what is fundamental, the body of Christ himself.

What is secondary will pass away. All of us will pass away. All of this will pass away. What remains is the core, the ultimate - the life and love of God, the living presence of Christ - for he has been raised.