

Morning Message Clevedon School 150th Anniversary Service – 6th Sept 2009

By Gina Sanders

The topics of education, and schools, the institutions with which education is most closely associated have perhaps never before come under such intense scrutiny as in the last two decades. The polarizing, politicizing and polemic can cause one's head to spin. It is an area dear to my heart and when Mark invited me to present this morning message I began to ponder on the significance of the relationship between church and school – specifically, this church, and this school, the latter of which I am a 5th generation alumnus and, my son Ben, who read the poem this morning is one of the few 6th generation alumni.

What might have been the understanding of “education” of our forebears who founded this community, this church and this school? More importantly, what was their philosophy? From where did they inherit this drive to educate? On what did they base their curriculum and how did they choose the syllabus? What was important to them? How have we, 150 years later, benefited from this initiative and most crucially, has this vision been upheld by successive generations?

Let us look at the historical events that shaped the lives of these extraordinary men and women prior to their arrival in NZ. The Scottish Reformation of 1560 brought about the restructuring of the national Church of Scotland. Its proposed format was spelled out in the First Book of Discipline, a document that set about organising both the Church and national life in accordance with the Reformed understanding of Scripture. It envisaged the establishment of reformed ministers throughout Scotland, a national system of education, and poor-relief. Education was to be established at primary, secondary and university levels; it was to be examined and inspected.

In January 1561 John Knox and a small group of clergymen set out a national programme for spiritual reform, including the "virtuous education and godly upbringing of the youth of this Realm" with a schoolmaster to be appointed to every church. "For the poor, if need be, education may be given free; for the rich, it is only necessary to see that education is given under proper supervision." Reformation concepts such as the priesthood of all believers, the importance of the individual conscience, and the supremacy of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice, made widespread literacy very important.

By the end of the 17th century a considerable proportion of the population was literate and the education system had been developed to a point considerably in advance of anything known before, well ahead of England or most other European countries.

Clearly well schooled in and bound by these vital and noble beliefs, the Rev Thomas Norrie arrived in NZ in the mid 19thC from Scotland, and upon being posted to the Papakura/Drury/Waiuku/Wairoa district, travelled far and wide (eventually overseeing the construction of 19 Churches) and without delay began to fulfil an important part of what he perceived to be as God's purpose for his mission.

Before the Education Act 1877, children in NZ were lucky to get an education, as it was neither compulsory nor free, but by the 1840s overseas mission of the Free Church of Scotland had become an accepted part of Scottish Christian identity throughout NZ, and wherever these settlers abounded, the Scottish Church grew after awhile into a position of very marked respectability and usefulness. (And by the way, the free bit refers to the right

for all to participate, not that you could skip the offering as was so artfully demonstrated in yesterday's brilliant school production.)

According to the 75th Anniversary booklet of this church, Rev Norrie and several other local resident families by the names of Matheson, Coutts, Wilson, McNicol, Crawford, Miller, Dow, Bell, Henderson and Munro, and the first teacher, George Melrose "rendered faithful service in the interests of the congregation, and it was to their credit that the first school and the first library were established. These were men of zeal, sagacity and firm principle, fully awake to the religious and wider needs of the district and indefatigable in their efforts for the common weal." The Reverend himself was described as having "a soul aflame with zeal for the propagation of the Gospel, and a heart full of sympathy for the needs of men."

Every ounce of this zeal and faith would have been needed and at times, sorely tested as is evidenced by the writings of E.G. Wakefield in his 1849 document: A View of the Art of Colonization:

"The Free Church of Scotland has a profound and minute system of government, which comprehends the largest and takes care of the smallest objects of a church. It has zeal, talents, energy, funds, order and methods, a strict discipline, and a conspicuous success. In the colonies it goes before settlement; it leads colonization; it penetrates into settlements where there is no religion at all, and gathers into its fold many of those who are utterly neglected. It does this for its own people, who are nearly all of the middle or poorer classes; and, above all, it seeks, and picks up, and cherishes, and humanizes the basest and most brutish of the emigrant population. In the colonies generally, it is the antagonist, frequently the conqueror, of drunkenness, which is the chief bane of low colonial life. It makes war upon idleness, roguery, vice, obscenity, and debauchery."

Not easy times, indeed, but throughout the nation, from Otago to Northland, men and women, holding fast to their faith and ideals, ploughed and cultivated many fields – literally and figuratively, to ensure the vital concepts of the Reformation would be upheld.

In these great registration packs was a packet of seeds. Now for those of you over 5, cast you mind back to the first time you grew something – perhaps it was a vegetable, a carrot, or maybe a herb, or a flower. Do you recall dutifully following the instructions on the packet, perhaps supervised by an older sibling or parent, finding a container, collecting the dirt, adding some nutrients, some water and then ever so patiently waiting for that first sprout, that first shoot, that first sign of life. It needed adequate sunlight, water and often more plant food. Sometimes it seemed to take forever before the plant was mature enough either to harvest and eat or to transfer from a nursery to the big wide world of the outside garden. Taking responsibility for these fragile seedlings so full of potential brought both excitement and anxiety.

Wonderful proverbs from all over the world link gardening with life. The Chinese suggest that:

When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people.

From India and Indonesia we are told:

Whoever acquires knowledge but does not practice it, is as one who ploughs but does not sow.

Knowledge is like a garden: if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested.

There are many powerful scriptural metaphors of the processes and immense benefits of gardening and farming, providing us with clear and simple advice on how to lead noble, productive and useful lives. In Mark 4, Jesus uses a mustard seed to describe His Father's plan: "How can I show you what the kingdom of God is like? What story can I use to explain it? The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest seed you plant in the ground. But when planted, this seed grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants. It produces large branches, and the wild birds can make nests in its shade."

There is a beautiful mature oak tree on the North Rd boundary, planted by my apparently barefooted mother in 1953! The current extensive planting programme of the Native Tree trail continues this tradition of caring for the future through conservation, succinctly symbolizing the proof that seed planted in fertile ground will flourish.

As teachers, parents and members of the community, what a tremendous legacy of responsibility we have inherited as we continue to nurture the precious and fragile sprouts and seedlings of the next generations.

Thus through scriptural guidance, carefully chosen words, and accompanying deeds that reflect those words, generations have striven to uphold the noble intentions of the pioneers to create this fertile ground. We know that much of the early syllabus for reading texts was based on "moral tales" and humans constantly seek aphorisms, succinct phrases, parables and the like to pass on important information. At the unveiling of the memorial cairn by the river in 1952, Mr CC Munro, read a message intended for the children, in the hope that they would "keep in mind for future". It was a verse he had found in an old pocket book belonging to his pioneer father and reads:

Help the weak if you are strong, respect the old if you are young; own your faults when you are wrong, and when you're angry, hold your tongue!

We heard in our readings today that if we earnestly seek a good education, if we value knowledge and wisdom, if we guard them, embrace them, nothing will stand in our way and we will not stumble when we run. It is no coincidence that the very same words that inspired the Reformation Church, have continued to inspire generation after generation in this community to bring it to its current enviable standing as one of the finest rural schools in this extraordinary country.

But wait, I hear someone say, didn't the Education Act of 1877 make schools, compulsory, free and secular and isn't the fact that Clevedon school is such great place due to its relatively affluent socioeconomic base? Yes, it was the government's intention to remove potential ideological conflict and indeed, the general wealth of the area undoubtedly assists to provide physical resources and other possibilities, but there is something more, something almost intangible about the soul of Clevedon and its school.

I don't know about others, but at yesterday's fantastic musical production I was profoundly moved, several times to the point of tears. And given my background, that is no easy task! Certainly, knowing that many of these characters were my forebears was part of the reason. The fact that it was a polished and well-executed production allowed for a seamless transition into the world of imagination and drama. But there was a spiritual depth and this is a dimension peculiar to schools that have a close relationship with their communities, of which the church has, until recent years, always formed a powerful part. Somewhere in the 60s and 70s all this changed, and Clevedon was not immune. But, throughout this

tumultuous time, this school has maintained a very close link to the all the congregations of the district – Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic. Wonderful people have continued in the traditions of the very early settlers. They include: those involved in Bible in Schools, which been presented for several decades; the Anglican Church, which runs an exceptional after school and holiday programme; the Clevedon Crèche, at this Church; the huge Youth Groups and the various Sunday Schools. Our ministers wife, Heather, has taught at Clevedon for 20 years, quietly living her faith through her professional teaching skills and as a musician. The brilliant and infinitely appropriate Clevedon School song text was penned by Heather and this inspiring text was sung with vitality and sincerity by the entire school. Equally inspiring were the thoughtful and encompassing summary comments made by the School Council at the conclusion of the show. One of these lines was: "Whether we are very young or very old, we all realise that there is something very special about Clevedon."

Identifying this "special" character and seeking to maintain it becomes the biggest challenge of the current and future generations.

The American economist, E.F. Schumacher maintained that, "Our ordinary mind always tries to persuade us that we are nothing but acorns and that our greatest happiness will be to become bigger, fatter, shinier acorns; but that is of interest only to pigs. Our faith gives us knowledge of something better: that we can become oak trees."

Have we descendents continued to sow and cultivate to produce a worthy harvest, are the oak trees thriving? Or have we been eaten by the birds? Are we the stony ground, or the thorns, or, are we the healthy soil that nourishes the seed so it may grow to be strong and good?

By all accounts, it would seem clear that there has been a genuine desire to maintain that vision of the Rev Norrie and all the pioneering families, for from earliest times, right up to the present day there is ample evidence that the school has produced in these 150 yrs, crop after crop of fine senior students. Some have gone on to be school leaders at state and independent secondary schools, many have become experts in a wide variety of disciplines and vocations, but most significantly, the vast majority have actively acknowledged their excellent early years to become citizens with a conscience who attempt to uphold the school's motto: "Enter to learn, go forth to serve."

In Matthew 20, Christ says, "If one of you wishes to become great, you must be the servant of the rest... like the son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life to redeem many people."

Let us give thanks for those who have gone before us and have taken these words so literally, and let us pray that current and future generations will find the strength and courage to continue this noble path.