

**Pentecost 22**  
**Sesquicentary**  
**31/10/2004**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 2:2-5**  
**Psalm 48**  
**Revelation 21:1-6a**  
**Matthew 5:3-16**

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**A city not forsaken: a city with a heart of life**

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In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

This neighbourhood was once the outskirts of the city. Two years after the first allotments were sold our forebears commenced to worship here. How does a city grow? From nomadic beginnings humans appear to have gathered in settled groups for reasons of trade or security. A shrine was sometimes at centre of these sites, which were therefore places of ritual and feasting. City style communal living was possible only when supplies of food and water were plentiful enough to support larger populations. In Australia there were no indigenous cities. Cities were introduced, founded as administrative centres, chosen for their access to the sea.

Melbourne was declared the capital of a new colony, created in 1851. The town grew on the site of a trading post, established in 1835 by pastoralists from Van Diemens's Land. Independent status was probably granted because Melbournians wanted to depart from the convict stain, and those Sydney types realized nothing could quell the independent spirit manifest in this rough and illegal settlement. But by 1854 the new city was struggling to cope with the overwhelming influx of gold seekers. Many of these were young, educated and Nonconformist - alive to the questions of the day. Such as these came to live in this rapidly developing district, situated as it was on the route to the goldfields. Today we celebrate, not the opening of a building, but the formation of a congregation. One that expressed impulses towards worship and service in a growing community and an original and continuing inclination towards union.

At that time the Crimean war was under way, while in South Africa the Boers had set up the Orange Free State. The Vatican promulgated the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, while nearer home the third volume of Major Mitchell's diaries was proving popular. In October 1854 the Ballarat miner's rebellion began, culminating in the Eureka Stockade, which has given Australia the experience, philosophy and symbols of popular protest. Just before Christmas the good ship James McHenry arrived in port, captained by John Hood. Samuel Smith disembarked, and that is how I come to be here today, part of a mighty tribe of Smiths!!

The congregation that was formed grew, and in 1859 the first church was opened on this site. That same year Charles Darwin published The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection. It became the foundation for modern biology, and helped set the scene for Scientific Materialism to dominate the thinking of the next century, leading many to a crisis between faith and science.

Cities are places of community, ideas, variety, difference, invention and decay. For the Greeks the city was the creation of human genius; a place of excellence; the sum of human culture and invention. The city achieved dominance because its rational

organisation of social relationships provided a context in which humans could realize their potential as complete, free and responsible beings. The city signified civilization and was a sign of human history.

A different set of expectations applied in Israel. Jerusalem was the city of utmost significance, beautiful and holy, because it contained the Temple, the place of worship, the strongest tangible sign that God accompanies us in history. The first reading pictures the mountain on which the Temple stands as being raised aloft, a beacon of Peace towards which the war weary tribes of earth journey, seeking God's will for their life. This journey is pictured as a saving pilgrimage. On returning home a transformed life developed because Jerusalem was the source from which others would learn the way to life.

Although the Bible knows cities that fall into the ever-present trap of being consumed with self-seeking - Babel and Babylon for example - God does not annul the city. God does not prefer country life. However, neither the raising of Zion nor the descent of the New Jerusalem results from human effort. The action comes from God, but the creative works of human effort are not destroyed. God pursues holy designs in and with human genius. That which we have created in freedom and life is gathered up into the raising of Zion, [as in the Resurrection of Jesus] and in the descent of the new [as in his coming again]. For us, all that is symbolized by Zion and Jerusalem is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He becomes the place of God's habitation. He is the one in whom God accompanies us in our life.

John's lofty vision gives full expression to God's promise to dwell with us as the centre of our praise. This vision illuminates our life in the present and the challenge, as we journey towards God's gift, is to live now as transparencies for God's light - shining with a power not our own. This may seem personal, but it is also communal. The church is also a city, one that is called to be a sign that contradicts the darkness of the world presenting, for all to see, a glimmer of what God intends for all human life. Worship is primary, and efforts towards peace and justice, though frail and transitory, must be undertaken. This is what it means to be light - and also salt; a purifying, savoury presence in the world. The church can only do that if it is willing to live in the knowledge of the immeasurable triumph of life that has been shown to us in Jesus Christ.

As we commemorate 150 years of faithfulness in this locality it is good to remember that we are not here to keep alive the memory of the pioneers, important as they have been for us. We are here to keep alive the flame of faith and worship they lit. In faith, and material support, we have plenty of resources. This church is a central part of this neighbourhood. Its spire is one of two that can be seen in the Docklands the place, on our doorstep, where the city is being renewed. And this spire has around it a Hall, a Child Care Centre, five terrace houses, three flats, several Offices, a Manse and significant open space. What I have come to call the Curzon St Campus is a city in itself. If it is to be a place that is to shine with the light of faith, and bring to life qualities that are purifying and preserving, we have to ask what is essential for that to happen. This church must itself have a heart of life. There is no other way it can bear some of the pain of the world and enable others to see and know for themselves that God's purpose for this and all cities is that they should not be forsaken.

Recently Timothy Radcliffe, a leading Dominican Friar, was in town. While Provincial of that order he visited Dominican communities all over the world, and was in Burundi when the Tutsis and Hutus were engaged in destructive conflict. The country he

travelled through was dangerous, blackened and ruined, but suddenly a green hill came in view. On that hill lived a religious community of twelve women, 6 Tutsis and 6 Hutus, themselves a living sign of reconciliation. He asked how they managed to be such a sign. They prayed together, and they listened to the news together, to accompany each other in their grief. The community had become a place of peace in a sea of darkness, a sacramental sign of hope in a dead environment. Their life together had literally greened the countryside as others, finding it a place of peace, came to live there and plant their gardens.

I dream of a Master Plan for the Curzon St Campus, that it might become the Curzon St Community, and be such a source of life for this city. And there is only one way that it can happen. By there being enough people who see that our resources are to be used for only one thing, to express in word and deed the hope of the promises in which we live. We don't know if there will be a church on this corner 150 years from now. But the generations of the faithful who went before us gave us something that still lives: faith in God who accompanies us in our life, and continually makes all things new. On this basis, even though at times we find it hard to imagine, ongoing renewal of life is truly possible.