

Warden's Charge:

Bible Readings:

- **Haggai 2:1-9**
- **Psalms 145**
- **1 Corinthians 1:4-9**

Introduction:

Helmut Thielicke was one of the great German preachers of last century.

He opposed Hitler and as a result

- lost his university positions
- endured humiliating interrogations by the SS
- faced the constant threat of imprisonment.

One day as the war drew to a close he walked to his church in Stuttgart

and found that it had been bombed to rubble -

He walked home again and found his house destroyed.

His heart nearly broke when he came across his famished children licking pictures of food in recipe books.

Yet in the midst of all this he tried to bring a message of hope to a demoralised congregation standing in the rubble of their church.

He declared to his congregation:

‘The one fixed pole in all the bewildering confusion is the faithfulness and dependability of God.’

Remarkable words in such a situation.

He assured them that God's faithfulness can never falter, and that throughout the labyrinth of history and the disorder of personal lives there runs the constant thread of God's purpose.

The faithfulness of God - that is my topic this morning.

I was ordained in February 1968 - over 40 years ago -

and it seems to me that ever since that time the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ has been going downhill - with diminishing numbers and churches closing.

It's been like that for all my ministry.

I was converted at the Billy Graham Crusade at Athletic Park in the late 1950's - joined the church then.

It was a time of great optimism

- numbers were increasing
- new parishes were being formed.

A D Horwell - the PCANZ Ministry Director had a saying –
‘The Church is going like a train.’

Unfortunately by the late 1960's

- change began to take place
- the downward trend started.

I found this very disheartening

- I was a young and enthusiastic minister
- keen to see the church grow -
- instead Sunday School numbers were dropping -
- Bible Classes fading away
- People drifting away - some to other churches
- many just stopped coming - resigned from committees and other responsibilities.

Of course it was not only the PCANZ - but other mainline churches too where this was happening.

So why did I hang in there -

for over 35 years and 4 parishes -
none of them immune from what was happening in the wider church.
Why did I hang in there?

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As I stand back and think about these things now -

I guess the main reason I see is that in spite of all the negative things that were happening -

there were still many positive things happening:-

- there were still people coming to faith
- others having their faith deepened - Charismatic movement - later Alpha
- many continued to serve faithfully
- then others were finding a new focus in the healing ministry

Again and again I was aware of the faithfulness of God.

It is the same with OSL -

I guess there are a good few of us here who can remember the days of

- bigger chapters -
- bigger conferences -
- when the OSL membership reached 1000

But now we are having to live with diminishing numbers - chapters going into recess and membership declining to something like just under 700.

But let me remind you of the positive things:

- New chapters are being formed
- New members are joining
- Members who had resigned are returning
- Deepening of understanding of healing ministry
- Groups that are meeting to explore the meaning of healing
- Healing groups being formed
- Churches seeking help to run a healing service

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It is easy to look back to the past with longing

- when numbers were greater
- but it is difficult to move forward if we are looking back all the time.

In the book of Haggai there is a passage which underlines this.

Haggai was written about 520BC

- some 60 years after the destruction of the Temple and the exile.

People were now returning - the Temple was in ruins

- a start had been made on rebuilding

- but there was not much progress.

Imagine the old timers who remember the splendour of the old temple - shaking their heads and saying:

“It’s not going to be a patch on the old temple.”

Haggai urges the people not to be despondent

- not to keep looking back

- but look to the future - to what God is planning to do

- he calls them to a new trust in the faithfulness of God.

He doesn’t deny that things are not looking good

- but he was able to urge them not to be discouraged

- to keep working on the temple

- trusting that God was with them and about to do a new thing.

We must not be in a state of denial of what has happened

and is happening in the Church - or in OSL

- neither must we be discouraged or in despair.

Rather it is time to seek new ways forward

trusting that God is faithful.

Psalm 145 which we shared this morning

helps us understand something of God’s faithfulness

and how we can reflect that as his followers.

This is a psalm of praise

- praising God for who God is and what he has done
- and verses 8 and 9 really spell out the central the elements of God's faithfulness:-

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all he has made.

Three key thoughts:

- grace and mercy
- abounding in steadfast love
- compassion

- **Grace (and mercy)**

- one definition of grace is receiving what we do not deserve.
A Bishop told the story of a man tipping a waiter generously even though the service had been less than adequate.

He went on to say: God offers us that kind of generosity.

God offers his grace to us even when our service is less than adequate.

We like to think that we have to earn our way

- earn favour with God
- but God's grace is beyond that.

- **Love** - abounding in steadfast love.

God's love for us is unconditional

- he takes us as we are
- and is always there for us - not fickle and changeable.

Of course we have to accept it - like any gift

- no good to us if we don't

What is more there is no limit to it

- **God** has an overabundance of love for us.

We tend to be careful with love

- wary of who we give it to
- in case they abuse it or spurn it.

We also ration it out carefully in case we lose it.

But God is reckless in his love.

- **Compassion** - over all that he has made.

Throughout the Bible we see the compassion of God in action - God sees a need and acts to do something to alleviate the problem.

- Israelites in Egypt - he raises up Moses (Exodus)
- Israelites in Babylon - he raises up Cyrus the Persian
(Isaiah 44:21ff)
- Naaman the leper - he raises up a slave girl to tell Naaman of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-19)

'Compassion' can be translated 'a mother's love'.

Not just feeling sorry but a deep caring that results in action.
eg Good Samaritan had compassion on the wounded traveller.

God is like that

- not only compassionate to people
- but to all that he has made
- his creation.

So what is this saying to us as Christians

- as members of OSL in 2008?

I believe that the challenge for us as individuals
 - as members of OSL - as chapters
 - is to find ways of reflecting God's faithfulness in the way we live.

First we need to accept that God is faithful
 - accept his grace, love and compassion for ourselves
 - and let his Holy Spirit breathe new life into us.

Then in the power of his Spirit we need to go out
 and model that grace, love and compassion in our lives.

I would suggest that there are many people
 who need to know that they are accepted without
 having to earn acceptance.

This often goes counter to prevailing wisdom
 - user pays - you get what you pay for.

The grace of God is not user pays
 - as OSL we need to be able to model that
 in our dealings with people who are in need
 - physical or spiritual.

And this of course spills over into the unconditional love of God
 - a love that accepts people as they are
 - a love that sticks by them for the journey.

It is quite easy to help someone in quick
 short bursts of activity
 - but it is rather more difficult
 to keep that care up over any length of time
 - model steadfast love
 - a love that will not let go.

That is the challenge if we are to really model
 the abounding steadfast love of God.

And this flows into compassion
 - the mother love of God.

When we show compassion to people in their need we are certainly
 acting as Christ in the world.

I also suggested that compassion should extend to all of creation
 - 'God is good to all,
 his compassion is over all he has made.'

In this age when there is an increasing awareness of

- the effects of global warming
- wildlife under threat
- felling of rainforests
- limited oil supplies
- water scarcity

we cannot remain silent.

As members of a healing order
 what does it mean to show compassion
 for all that God has made?

So how do we as members and chapters of the OSL
 reflect God's faithfulness?

Grace, love and compassion?

I guess it will be different for each Chapter
 - depending on your situation - membership - needs in your area.

As I visit over the next few years as warden
 - I will be interested to hear what you are doing
 - and also together seek ways that you may do this.

I want to close with one more example of God's faithfulness:
Some of you may have read the story in Daystar a few months ago
 - the story of Sue Morris
 - a committed Christian
 - very active sports woman.
 Suddenly at the age of 42 in 2001
 she came down with an illness which was diagnosed as
 Guillain- Barre syndrome
 - a disease which attacks the myelin sheath around the nerves.

In a very short time she was completely paralysed
and on a breathing machine.

It took four people to move her every few hours.

After four months she was discharged from hospital
- but still needed a great deal of help.

She was a person of great faith
and had been prayed for many times.

Gradually she began to improve
and become involved in various activities again until
today Sue has no movement in three toes on each foot,

both ankles are weak and

she feels as if she is walking on broken glass.

She calls it “faulty wiring from the knees down”.

At Christmas she fell

and broke a couple of bones in her foot and ankle.

Nevertheless she plays the drums and base guitar

with the music team at Whangaparoa Baptist,

coaches basketball and umpires netball.

Her daughters are also keen sportswomen.....

“We all face challenges and trials,” Sue says.

“As I look back over the jigsaw of my life,

I can say things do work together for good.

God is faithful.” (Daystar May 2008)

As we join together in Holy Communion this morning

- let us be aware of the God who is faithful

and receive his grace, love and compassion.

Then let us go out from here to share these with others.

Amen.