

## Consecrated to tear down barriers that divide

Sunday 24th January 2016

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, to mark the 125th Anniversary of the Consecration of St Paul's Cathedral, on the Feast of the Conversion of Paul 2016:



G.R. ASHTON, ILLUSTRATED  
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'On the morning of Thursday, January 22', reported the *Illustrated Sydney News*, 'the whole width of Flinders and Swanston streets ... was packed with a crowd watching a long, white-robed procession ... Even the tram-cars were stopped, and passers-by mounted on them... Melbourne's new Anglican Cathedral ... has at last been made ready for consecration'. The great public interest marked not only the opening of a new landmark building. Nor did it simply honour the many dignitaries who had travelled here. The consecration of St Paul's Cathedral was a sign of hope: a sign of hope for the unity of the Anglican Church; a sign of hope for future unity of the five independent colonies that would, a decade later, form the Commonwealth of Australia; and a sign of hope for the unity of all Christians. Press reports pointed out that the presence of the Primate of Australia and Bishop of Sydney, Dr William Saumarez Smith, 'was a witness to the fact that the federation of the Anglican Church has long preceded the federation of the colonies' (*Yea Chronicle*, Vic, Thursday 29 January 1891, p. 2). The fact that leaders of all Christian denominations shared in prayer was seen as an important symbol of 'the time, let us hope, when all the walls of partition will be broken down'. Above all, the consecration of our Cathedral was a symbol of the hope that 'this new Cathedral may be a centre of spiritual energy for the whole Colony'.

125 years on, our Cathedral still stands as a symbol of that hope in our city. Our vision to be a place of prayer for the people of Melbourne and Victoria reflects the hope expressed at our consecration. Crowds still line the streets to make their way into our Cathedral on days of great celebration and joy, such as at our recent Christmas celebrations, as well as on days of mourning and grief. Our vision to be a home for all Anglicans in the Diocese of Melbourne actively underpins the hope that our Cathedral would become a symbol of the unity of Anglicans throughout our land, and is given expression whenever our diocesan family comes together to set apart for service deacons, priests and bishops, when our province comes together to share in the ministry of word and music at our annual Provincial Evensongs, or at national gatherings and occasions. In the same way, our purposeful engagement in sharing in worship, dialogue and acts of shared service alongside other Christians and people of other faiths, is again an expression of a hope voiced made when this building was first set apart for worship. The hope that our Cathedral may not only be a symbol, but play an active part in the work of breaking down 'the walls of partitions' between people of different faiths, gender, race or sexuality; of seeking to provide ways in which many can share in the life of God. The hope that we might be a place where people experience something of the holiness of God, and so come to share in the vision that God holds for this world: to be a place where all people may know about his reconciling love and share that love with others.

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Tonight's readings ([Jeremiah 1.4-18](#) and [Acts 26.1-23](#)) reflect on the hope expressed at the consecration of St Paul's, and expressed in our Cathedral Vision, that through the worship and acts of service offered in this Cathedral many might come to know the reconciling love of God in Christ Jesus. They take us to the commissioning of one of the greatest of all prophets, Jeremiah, and into the audience chamber of King Herod's grandson, King Agrippa, asking our patron Saint to give an account of himself and of his hope.

Our first lesson, from the opening chapter of the prophecy of Jeremiah, tells the story of a reluctant messenger. Jeremiah receives God's word; hears God testify how he had set him apart for a ministry of proclamation long before he was born: God had known Jeremiah even in gestation, had shaped him like a

potter in the womb, and set him apart before he made his first breath. His task: to be a prophet of God's love to all people. 'I have set you apart to be a prophet to the nations', God tells Jeremiah. 'I have put my words into your mouth', God declares, and appoints him speak words of razing down all that hinders, and of building up all that makes holy. Words to 'pluck up and to pull down, and to build and to plant'. There is a timelessness to Jeremiah's message. Even though his prophecy was directed to a specific context, our own world still shares many of the hallmarks of Jeremiah's age: many share the same fear of terror, war and destruction; the distinct sense of lost hope of Jeremiah's generation has echoes in our own. Jeremiah's message that the structures of society of his age would be overturned was rejected by those who heard it. Yet the hope he shared prevails to this day: that God would forge for himself a new people from all those who sought his friendship, regardless of their race or gender, previous beliefs, background or actions. It is that very hope, that

God would break down the barriers that divide peoples and nations, that motivated the work that led to the consecration of this Cathedral 125 years ago. And today you and I are invited to make that same hope our own, are invited to enter into God's work of 'breaking down and overthrowing, in order to build up and plant', our first lesson concludes.



Our second lesson, depicted in the stained glass window immediately to my right, gives shape to the hope for the world's unity under God expressed by Jeremiah. Our patron, St Paul, stands accused of spreading dissent, of breaking down the established religious order in his preaching of the good news to those who do not belong to the people of Israel. Paul is granted a hearing by the ruler of Israel and Judah, King Agrippa II, the grandson of King Herod the Great. In his defence, Paul speaks eloquently of his conversion – how he was turned from persecutor of the risen Jesus Christ and his followers to preacher of the resurrection. At his own conversion, Paul was set apart to become God's 'instrument chosen to bring God's name before Gentiles and kings, and before the people of Israel'. And so, Paul does not only

recount and defend his actions before the king. He invites the king to consider the claims of Christianity in order to make them the basis of his own faith. In an astonishing defence for any court of law, Paul commends his faith to Agrippa and invites the king to follow Christ. A few verses after the conclusion of our second lesson the king asks Paul, 'are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?' (Acts 26.27), to which Paul responds: 'whether quickly or not, I pray that to God that not only you, but also all who are listening to me today should become such as I am, except for these chains'.

The courage of Paul's testimony reflects the intensity of his conversion experience and the radical change to Paul's life brought about by the heavenly vision of Jesus Christ in the blinding brightness of resurrection light. Paul's desire 'for all to become such as I am', a believer in the God who tears down the walls that divides people and faiths, reflects the catholicity of his commission: his appointment to be the bearer of God's message of reconciliation, of relationships restored, to all nations and people. Just as his boldness reflects his zeal and conviction: that here was a hope worth trusting, a hope declared to the prophets of old, though often rejected; the 'promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain', the hope of sin subjugated and death destroyed. And it is the combination of this courage, desire, zeal and conviction, that led Paul to make disciples of his judges in Israel, king Agrippa and his court, and, later, in chains in Rome, of the Praetorian guard and imperial palace staff whom he encountered in imprisonment.

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The message that God tears down division to restore life reaching across the boundaries of faiths, gender and background is as pertinent today as it was in the days when God commissioned Jeremiah and Paul to be his emissaries. It is as acutely important today as it was 125 years ago, when at the consecration of this building for the proclamation of God's good news, many expressed that hope that in a future not too far off, the divisions between faiths and colonies, nations and people may be no more. God's vision of unity, that was set before us through the word of the prophets and apostles, and was so iconically expressed by the presence of people of all faiths from across our continent at the consecration of our Cathedral, still eludes our generation.



*We live with the continued desire for Anglicans to find unity as a worldwide communion and family of faith, and for Christians to be reconciled and recognise each other as members of one another in the body of Christ. We live with the continued longing for men and women, regardless of their gender, social background or sexuality, to be recognised as equal partners in the ministries of the Church. We live with the continued pain of the marginalisation of the very people on whose land this Cathedral proudly stands: the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and the desire to see their personal rights and their traditional ownership of this land recognised tangibly in law and symbolically through an acknowledgement of their ongoing contribution to our shared heritage. We live with the pain of brokenness and long for reconciliation, at home, in our church, across the peoples of faith, and the nations of this world.*

125 years ago, people expressed the hope that St Paul's Cathedral might become a centre of spiritual energy for this land. The vision expressed then has been lived out in faithful service and ministry: for the people of this city and state, we are a living symbol of faith, a place of encounter, a spiritual home. I give thanks for the energy and sacrifice of previous generations in helping to shape and fulfil this vision. But there remains much work still to be done to fulfil the hope that we might contribute to the breaking down of the many barriers that divide us:

- Yes, the separate colonies of our continent were united in federation ten years after our consecration; but the work of reconciliation with the traditional owners of this land still is in its infancy.

*This year, I commit myself and the Cathedral community to furthering the tangible recognition of the contribution of aboriginal people to the life of our nation by beginning the important conversations of how to commemorate appropriately the sacrifice of aboriginal service personnel in the AIF as well as the loss of so many innocent lives in the earlier frontier wars, and how to re-imagine our precinct so that people can easily see and recognise something of the traditional land on which we stand, and honour its traditional owners.*

- And yes, many of the barriers to recognise the ministry of women in our church have been removed, but by no means have 'all the walls of partition been broken down'.

*This year, I commit myself and the Cathedral community to create the same opportunities for women and girls in this Cathedral that have been open to men and boys for more than a 125 years. This year, let us complete the work of creating our Cathedral as a house of prayer where all may serve, by inaugurating the girls' voices of the Cathedral choir and the commissioning of women lay clerks to serve alongside our choir of boys and men.*

- And finally, yes, the Anglican church in Australia remains a national church and an important part of the families of Anglican Churches, but the fear of division and the hurt and pain of exclusion remains with us.

*This year, I commit myself and the Cathedral community to pray intentionally and daily for our Primate, Philip, in his important role to be a bridge-builder in our hurting Anglican Communion and the communion he serves, and for this Cathedral be a place of hospitality and welcome, conversation and teaching, where people from all backgrounds may feel accepted, included and equipped for ministry.*

Friends, just as God called and set part Jeremiah and Paul to be his emissaries, and gave us this wonderful building to be a place where his message spoken through them and many others would be heard, so God still calls women and men into his service to make known the good news that God seeks the friendship of all people. The task of making known that message, of actively reaching out to others, and removing the barriers that divide us from one another and from God, remains the same that it always has been. I am delighted that our Cathedral has already become that 'centre of spiritual energy' for our nation that our forebears prayed for, that we truly have been shaped into and daily are becoming a spiritual home for the people of this state. As I give thanks for their foresight and vision I pray God's rich blessing on us, the inheritors of their vision, as we address ourselves to the tasks that have been their and that now are ours: of being messengers of the good



news that God in Christ Jesus is a living body, valuing each member, and that he invites all people to be united to him in a lived relationship. As we give thanks for the past and all that has been, let us commit ourselves to this future: to be ambassadors of the work of reconciliation in our own generation, for our diocese, city, state and nation.

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Now to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.