A home for Melbourne – Homes for God

29th July 2018

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Reading: Ephesians 3.14-20

At the beginning of every service here, the officiant greets the congregation with the words, ‘Welcome to St Paul's Cathedral, the home church for Anglicans in Melbourne and throughout the province of Victoria’. Being a home, creating a home, and feeling at home are so central to this Cathedral’s identity that in 2016 the preamble of our Cathedral Act has formally enshrines this in law: we are to be a home and to provide a home for others. And this morning’s second reading, from the epistle to the Ephesians, enables us to reflect, through the writings of our Patron Saint, about what being a home might mean for us, and where (or what) our true homes might be.

For most people their home is defined by certain places. Home is where we were born, or grew up; where we live and feel we belong. For our first Australians ‘home’ is inextricably linked with this country: the landscape that we inhabit, the meeting places that have shaped Aboriginal culture for millennia, the watercourses that still delineate boundaries between Aboriginal nations. This church stands on the country of the Kulin nation, the first people to call this land home. And so for me, being and becoming a home church, means working for recognition and rights, reconciliation and reparation, and advocating with indigenous people for justice, equality and dignity.

Like many of you, I am a migrant to this country. At last count, the people of St Paul's have come from more than 25 nations. Many of us therefore had to learn what it means to leave one home behind and start anew in another place. For me, that experience has been a great encouragement to extend a welcome to others who, like us, have come from elsewhere. And I know that for those of you who were born here as grandchildren or children of migrants to this land, it is that memory of the challenges of having to make a new home elsewhere, that motivates many of you to help provide a welcoming home right here in the heart of Melbourne to those who are new to this city and community.

Our second lesson from the Epistle to the Ephesians reminds us that for Christians, there always is another dimension to the idea of home. Home is not necessarily a specific place, a land or nation, but a concept, an idea, our patron St Paul suggests. As Christians, we may be at home everywhere, because we are at the most fundament level citizens of a kingdom that ‘is not of this world’. Home, for us Christians, is more than the land on which we live, but rather a homeland that is ‘on earth as it is in heaven’.

Because for Christians home at the heart of our faith. It is shaped as much by the spiritual, the ideas, ideals and values of home and belonging, as by the material, the places and communities where that home is shaped. Home is as much marked by our relationships with one another and with God, as it is by the places we inhabit.

Home, then, is both something inside us, as well as something ‘out there’. For Christians, St Paul tells us in our second reading, home can be found deep within us, is rooted in our hearts, just as it can be found in our relationships. Our home is ‘in our hearts, through faith’, just as it is in ‘every family in heaven and earth’ that bears God’s name.

Home, for St Paul, is where the quality of our relationships is such that we are being transformed to be transformational ourselves, where together, in the power of God, we can accomplish ‘abundantly far more than they would ever be able to ask or imagine’. Home, therefore, is where by working
together in God’s strength, under a common vision and ambition, we can create a place where many can belong, where many are welcomed, where many can feel that they, indeed, are family, are named after God, the creator and Father of all.

Our epistle reading encourages us to move away from an understanding of home as a place, to a concept of home as a set of connections and relationships: a network of people gathered around common values and ideas. The home that our second reading talks about is a community like ours; which is why many of us call St Paul's Cathedral home. Not only St Paul's, the stunningly beautiful place, at the heart of this city and diocese. But St Paul's, the people: a specific congregation or Bible Study group, a group of volunteers and therefore a specific network of friends. And, of course, St Paul's, the idea: the shared values we own and live. In our second lesson, our true homeland is a place where, under God, we work together, and together can accomplish more than we ever had thought possible.

And just as we try to get our mind round this paradox that home might be more than a place, that it might in fact be a set of relationships, Paul turns everything on its head. For if we examine our epistle reading more closely, we find that home is not only about us as a group of people, but about God. It is not about where we can work together, we can dwell, we can take root. Rather, home is about where God can live, where Christ can take root.

The transcendent God who was from the beginning, establishing the heavens, the inapproachable creator, himself seeks a home. Our second lesson reminds us that God himself seeks a dwelling place, that he seeks to make his home with us. Which is why St Paul invites each one of us to be ‘filled with all the fullness of God’. You and I are invited to become a home for God, become a person open to God, welcoming God, allowing God into our life.

And this process of becoming a home for God, our reading tells us, begins by being ‘rooted and grounded in love’. It is the same with building a house. As we are shaped into dwelling places for God, first a foundation is laid. The foundation of God's dwelling place within us is love. And on this foundation stands not just your home or mine to welcome God, but many homes: a congregation of dwellings so large they cannot ever fully be conceived or comprehended.

For that reason Paul prays that we might know ourselves connected ‘with all the saints’, that endless chain of believers that links our own age with that of the first disciples and a future yet unknown. Earlier in the epistle, Paul reminded the Ephesians that they are ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone’. And on Christ, that solid foundation, ‘the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord’. That mighty dwelling is God’s home, ‘the home of God among mortals’.

A chapter before our epistle, Paul told the Ephesians: ‘you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’. Our true home is both a place at once deep inside us, the dwelling of God in our hearts, and at the same time is able to unite us with one another and with God, ‘so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God’, Paul tells. It is both a sanctuary where God may dwell in ourselves, as it is the living and growing temple that unites all those sacred dwellings, those homes for God. And the way in which the individuals for God – those dwellings in our hearts – are united into a magnificent home where God may dwell with all humanity is entirely a gift from God.

We become a dwelling place for God through God’s love, Paul had explained earlier in the epistle: ‘God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us … made us alive together with Christ’. And in our second lesson tells the Ephesians how we can come to know that love by the power of the Holy Spirit: ‘strengthened through God’s Spirit’ we are ‘rooted and grounded in love’. And, that by experiencing ‘the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge’, we can, in turn, come to love God, our creator. And, that by loving God who made us, we are enabled to become a home for him, may have ‘Christ dwelling in our heart’.
That is an incredible promise: we are promised that if we love God, we will be at home forever. God in us, and we in God. Knit together as a community that, in itself, is able to be home to others until the world has become God’s home. And the key to this being at home, and being made to be a home, is love, Paul writes: God’s Spirit teaches us to love, unites us together in love; Christ’s loving example invites us to love God and enables us to receive him into our very selves; and so we are ‘filled with all the fullness of God’. Through love, the God, who himself is Love, comes to dwell in us. Through love, we come to experience God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Through love, we can be built up in the Holy Spirit, can receive Christ in our lives, can be named after the Father, ‘from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name’, our second lesson assures us.

And so, in the end, we find not only that we have a home here at St Paul’s, or that we are a home for our diocesan family and the people of our city and Province, but that each of us may become a home for the God. Each one of us is invited to receive the fullness of God into our lives. You and I are invited to become a home: be places where God can truly be at home, where God himself can share in our lives, where God can set us free to become those people we are really called to be, where God can bestow on us immense value and dignity.

God himself calls us to be his home, so that together we know ourselves to be bound up in a love the ‘breath and length and height and depth’ of which we may never come to comprehend. God himself calls us to be his home, so that together might ‘accomplish far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine’. God himself calls us to be his home, so that together we may live in his presence forever. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.