

CATHEDRAL AND CHRISTENDOM *11 October 2017*

Much of what we do assumes Christendom is alive. It isn't."

Succinct words from a responder to the question about the adequacy of the former paradigm in addressing mission, in Bishop Richard's study "Engagement 21".

Or as Dickens might have put it "Christendom was dead".

1967! The year of this Cathedral's consecration and Bishop Richard's marriage to Jackie, as I understand it – your golden wedding year!

I guess I can ask most of you where you were in 1967, and that speaks volumes in itself. But it's worth thinking about who and where we were 50 years ago – what was formative for us at the time.

That was the year I started secondary school at Nelson College. I have a huge nostalgia for those carefree days when you could leave your bike outside of the pictures without a chain, or ride it to the beach for a happy afternoon without your parents worrying.

And I had my record player and beloved collection of 45s that started with the immortal "Downtown" when I was 10. What a great year for pop music! The Beatles sang All You Need Is Love, and Scott McKenzie invited us to wear some flowers in our hair if we were going to San Francisco. I finally made it to San Francisco for a church conference in 2000, but alas by then most of my hair was consigned to history.

The zeitgeist of 1967 was the emergence of alternative youth culture, hippies, free love, rejection of the Establishment, the era of protest. It filtered down-under via songs like “Flowers in the rain” and “Something in the air”. What a massive jolt to the “make do and mend” generation who had lived through World War 2.

And this Cathedral was consecrated while this unexpected social revolution was taking place. What a fascinating collision!

A determinedly modernist building to the point where the window salvaged from the former cathedral was consigned to a lowly place behind the foyer stairs – but despite modernity it is a Cathedral at the end of Christendom. A triumphalist structure for a church which would shortly be surprised to find it was no longer triumphant.

Since then the social consensus has broken down and faith is a matter of private spirituality at best. The people who pour into this building for a funeral or special event are almost entirely disconnected from the Christian narrative, like the lady who supposedly said *Christmas is such a lovely time for the children – I don't know why they have to drag religion into it.*

Tonight we are here to celebrate the vision and commitment which saw this Cathedral built, and all the many splendoured occasions which have happened here over 50 years. In 1967 there were few post-modernist prophets around to draw our attention to the tsunami of secularism which was coming upon the church and is

now, of course, a grey tsunami now evidenced in photos from any parish in the Diocese.

And curiously enough the builders of this Cathedral had reason to be confident at the time: Anglican numbers in Aotearoa actually peaked and then stabilised for the decade beginning 1966! And that's rather curious, because the "The Cathedral Churchman" (that esteemed organ) stated in August 1970 that "*The plain truth is that less and less people (their grammar, not mine) - less and less people are going to church at all, and more and more, even among so-called church people, are going less and less.*" But adherence has tumbled since 1976. And in society the combined number people of "no religion" or similar in 1966 was 10% of the population, but shot up to over 45% by 2006 - and is over 50% now in some parts of New Zealand. Certainly the majority of people under 35 years declare themselves to be of No Religion. (I'm grateful to Bishop Richard for compiling this data for us).

But I don't believe we should look at the future with despair. It is true that a lot of what we have done in the past will not work in the future, and that you can't put new wine into old wineskins.

When we look at the cultural landscape today, the uncertain future of the planet caused by global warming and nuclear posturing, the rise of terrorism and the plight of the poor, surely people of goodwill must still be seeking meaning and purpose for their lives. There must be those who are seeking an intelligent, questing faith which will equip them and their children to navigate a complex and challenging world.

There are words in our reading from 2nd Chronicles today that may hurt, or may help – or maybe a bit of both: *For now I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.*

These words must hurt to read if your parish is closing down. Having been involved with David Van Oeveren in the review of Hastings Parishes recently it was sad and painful to be present at the closing of the Mahora parish, particularly because it was relatively recently established, and we listened to stories of fundraising to build the church and listened with open hearts to the pain of letting go. And Mahora will not be the last to close in Hawkes Bay. A number of other parishes in the Diocese are now in the position of not being able to afford a fully stipended position.

For this Cathedral of St. John, we can hope and pray that God's eyes and God's heart will continue to be manifest here: God's way of love in Jesus Christ reaching out to our world, and God's eyes, God's way of seeing how the world might be, with our co-operation and obedience, motivating our mission into the future.