

Australian Anglican Schools Conference
Opening Service
17 August 2007
'Wired for Belonging'

Joshua 24.1-13

John 21.1-19

On the first page of his autobiographical *Confessions*, St Augustine summed up the story of his life, saying to God: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

There is a natural yearning, longing and searching in human life for God. That is, we are wired for belonging to God.

That's the most fundamental mode of human belonging: belonging to God. It's borne of the truth that each and every human being is created by God, created in the image of God and created for relationship with God.

We recognize and celebrate this in every baptism when we say 'We welcome you as a child of the one heavenly Father.' This is the individual dimension of belonging.

It doesn't stop there, of course. The fact that there is 'one God and Father of all', with whom each of us is in relationship, means that we are also in relationship with each other. We are brothers and sisters. Or, to use another Pauline image, we are joint members of the body of Christ, as we also say at every baptism.

So not only do we belong to the one God and Father of us all, we also belong together and to each other in the body of Christ. This is a corporate dimension to belonging.

And there's a third dimension. At every baptism we also say: 'We receive and welcome you ... as an inheritor with us of the kingdom of God.'

This is the broadest possible anticipation of the end result of what God is at work in the world to bring about. It's a reference to the eschatological hope that in the end God will bring to completion what began with Jesus, and is now being worked out through the work of the Spirit and which will eventually culminate in a new heaven and a new earth in which all people are reconciled to God and to each other in Christ. We might call this the cosmic dimension of belonging in the fulfilled kingdom of God.

We are wired for belonging. We belong individually to God. We belong corporately together as brothers and sisters in Christ and as joint members of the body of Christ. And we belong eschatologically, cosmically as inheritors of the kingdom God is working to create.

Now in a sense this is basic stuff. As I say it's the stuff we proclaim and celebrate at every baptism. Basic stuff, but what a profound spiritual agenda it suggests for Anglican schools.

For each student in our schools to come to know, in the heart as well as in the head, that they bear the divine image and because of that are of infinite worth and value. More than that, for each student to come to know, in the heart as well as in the head, that their very being is the place where infinite love comes to rest. This is the kind of knowing that surpasses all other and will transform their lives.

Nearly twenty years ago Henri Nouwen (1989, 21) said in a brief reflection that beneath all the great accomplishments of our time, beneath the illusion of competence and technical mastery, there is deep despair. People might aim at efficiency and control, but despite all the progress in these directions what more and more people experience is 'loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness'. There is real 'spiritual poverty behind ... [a] façade' of competence, success, power and control.

The cry behind it all is 'Is there anybody who loves me; is there anybody who really cares?' (ibid.)

What people need today, including our students, is to 'know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal', wants to be with them; a heart in which 'there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, ... [no] hatred'; a heart which doesn't want to manipulate or use them for some purpose; 'a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response' (ibid, 24).

'Very few people know that they are loved without any condition or limits' and yet that is the truth (ibid, 25). That is the foundation.

But the agenda doesn't stop there. For each student in our schools to recognize that God has called them into the Church and made them, with us, brothers and sisters in Christ is a discovery more radical than we often realize.

The impact of individualism in our culture continues to raise up in every generation a whole lot of lone rangers. These are heroic individuals who ride into town on their white steed and rescue everyone in distress. It's spectacular and we're all left breathless in admiration. But the tragedy is that the lone ranger never truly belongs. The final scene is always the hero riding off into the sunset terribly, awfully alone. 'It is as if the myth says you can be a truly good person, worthy of admiration and love, only if you resist fully joining the group' (Bellah, 1985, 145).

I wonder if we recognise the degree to which we've imbibed this pattern of heroic individualism in our schools and indeed in the church.

Jesus' vision was quite different. He made available to others his own 'faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear' (Nouwen, 1989, 43). He opened his heart to them, and regarded them as friends not simply as objects to help. There was true mutuality.

Spectacular individualism is a distraction from our vocation. Our calling is rather to a true mutuality in the community of the Church. We belong together as brothers and sisters in Christ. For each of our students to come to know, in heart and mind, this mutuality, this is the kind of knowing that will transform the Church.

And thirdly, for each student to come to understand that God is at work in the world ushering in a new heaven and a new earth and that they are integral to this project, that they are sent by God as heralds and agents of this new era, this kind of knowing puts all their mastery of technical knowledge and skill into a new, broader context. It allows them to see the possibility of vocation in contrast to simply finding a job. It opens the possibility of discovering a profound sense of purpose and meaning for their lives.

The most common notion of maturity today is related to power. Maturity is seen as an increasing capacity 'to control your own destiny,' to influence and 'make your own decisions', to 'go your own way' (ibid, 62).

Jesus represented a different view. For him maturity was related to an 'ability and willingness to be led where ...[he] would rather not go'; to drink from a cup which he would rather have passed from him (ibid). Maturity for Jesus is an increasing capacity to relinquish power in favour of a humility which may be personally costly (ibid, 63).

For our students to come to know, with heart and mind, the reality that God sends them for a purpose, this is the kind of knowing that will transform the world.

As Jesus wrestled with his own vocation we know that he faced and overcame three temptations:

The temptation to turn stones into bread – the pull to relevance.

The temptation to throw himself down from the temple – the pull to spectacular individuality.

The temptation to have all the kingdoms of the world – the pull to power.

Jesus declined them, but do we? To what extent have we learned (and to what extent do we teach) that we're wired for belonging?

When the risen Christ appeared to Peter he asked him, 'Do you love me?' What's truly relevant is to stay in touch with the heart of God and the truth that we are loved (Nouwen 1989, 23-32). For our students to know, with heart and mind, that they belong to God will transform their lives.

When the risen Christ appeared to Peter he said, 'Tend my sheep.' What's truly spectacular is that mutual human community of justice, equity, peace and love of which the Church is a first taste. For our students to know, with heart and mind, that they belong to each other in Christ will transform the Church.

When the risen Christ appeared to Peter he said, 'When you were younger you used ... to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old ... someone else will take you where you do not wish to go.' What's truly powerful is that humility, which the world often calls weakness, by which God sends us to reconcile all people to each other and to himself in Christ. For our students to know, with heart and mind, that they are sent by God as co-creators of the new heaven and new earth, will transform the world.

May our students discover, and we with them, that we are wired for belonging – to God, to each other in Christ and to the new heaven and new earth God is creating.

Bellah, Robert, R. Madsen, W.M. Sullivan, A. Swidler & S.M. Tipton
1985 **Habits of the Heart: Middle America Observed**. London: Hutchison Education.

Nouwen, Henri J. M.
1989 In The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.