**Ashburton Baptist Church November 24, 2024**

**90th Anniversary**

**Ephesians 2. 13 – 22; Psalm 90. 1-2, 9 – 17.**

**‘Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets’**

Thank you for your welcome and the opportunity to share with you on this wonderful day: 90th Anniversary.

Merilyn would love to have been here too, but today is receiving her fellowship in the Chapter of Perioperative Medicine, at a national conference of that group.

It is just short of 30 years since I stood about here, chairing a church meeting which made a momentous decision.

Before the church was the final proposal to build the WellSpring Centre, create the café area joining up two buildings, extend the sanctuary area here, and create the much-needed offices, all to serve the vibrant life of the church.

At the same time, the church was in a deeply difficult period, as our pastor, Peter Walker, had suffered horrific injury in a car accident, five months earlier, and we were all just managing to hold it all together.

As I chaired that meeting, I was deeply aware of the interaction of these two factors: the loss of our pastor and the challenge of a project that was costed around three quarters of a million dollars—so I wanted the church body to have all the time needed to process this.

The presentations and explanations were all excellent, and then after a few questions and comments the meeting more or less fell silent—until someone said: *Frank: we’re ready to vote*.

People said: We have lived towards all this—and we all know we are doing this because of Peter Walker, and how he led us into a new vision of ministry. But we are not doing it *for* him, we are doing it because of who he helped us to be.

And with that insight, and courage, the decision was made, unanimously, and here we have it all.

Since then, so many wonderful things have happened here, built upon that vision and all that went into the design, planning, and creation of these buildings.

All of which has led me to this text we read from Ephesians chapter 2. The writer, most likely the Apostle Paul, originally, with some help from later editors, sets forward a vision of the Christian community: one we desperately need to reclaim. It speaks of those near and those who were ‘afar’, separated by culture, history, and ways of knowing God. They even used this confronting language about circumcisions, to identify who was in or out.

But now these ‘strangers’ have become branches of the family, parts of a rich tapestry of faith and community. At the heart of this is the affirmation of peace: not a lowest common denominator peace, but a radically inclusive community. The ‘old’ idea of the people of God is now stretched wide open, and all of this is the work of Christ—not just in the past, but now: He ***is*** our peace, Paul says.

And that brings me to the text I’d like to invite you to reflect upon, with me, for a few minutes now: verses 19 and 20:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

‘Members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.’

But this foundation may not be what you’d think. It is very easy to imagine that those ancient figures, such as Peter and Paul, John and Mark, were somehow superhuman, at least in their faith and commitment.

Many years ago, when I was the pastor at East Doncaster, I did a series of sermon studies on them, drawing upon ancient sources, church legends and so forth—and one deacon of the church admired my work, told me how much he was getting out of the series, and then he said: ‘You make them seem almost human.’

It’s true, we so easily make these figures more like something other than our own human reality. Plaster saints.

But they were not in fact given to the habit of self-congratulation that we see in so many churches.

I am sure that if you and I were writing the Gospels, there would be a few sections we’d leave out, such as how often they misunderstood Jesus, or simply failed to listen, and pushed away the very people he wanted to reach; and there’d be other bits we’d try to explain with some more worthy motive, rather than betrayal, desertion, and outright denial, or rank ambition and favouritism.

But no, this category, ‘the apostles’, these apostles are simply struggling human beings, who try to do it right, but sometimes get is horribly wrong. And that’s the foundation of this community.

But not only they: for from the beginning new members were added to the group: in fact Paul spent considerable time explaining that it was not a closed group, limited to the past. He confessed that Jesus had met him one day when he, Paul, was on mission to capture and imprison Christians. And he, Paul, went on to have a notorious career, imprisoned, exiled, and often disputing with those who were sure they had superior knowledge.

No way would he get a gig as a Pastor in our churches, not even on the short list. But he too is part of this foundation.

And from very early in the church others were part of this group: including women such as Martha, who is represented as a bishop, in some ancient works of art.

So it is not a cohesive, well defined and successful group, but really quite dynamic, reaching out to those were afar off, finding a new and creative life, with all the tensions and learning that brings.

There have been many times when these dynamics have expressed themselves here, too.

Maybe some of you here know about, perhaps even remember, the deep tensions that arose when the church wanted to place that cross up there above the baptistry. Oh, they said, Baptists didn’t have things like that in their churches!

But then, a few decades later, one Good Friday, we had another wooden cross here in the church—and at the end of the service we carried it out onto the vacant land next door, and we put it into ground, with a torn fabric over it representing the body of the crucified Lord.

So moving.

But even more so on Easter Day, when that empty cross stood here in the building and people were invited to come before it, many kneeling to pray. And some who said how meaningful this was for them were those very ones who had opposed that cross even being here.

A dynamic and learning community, on the foundation of the apostles.

And prophets.

In the Gospels you will find the phrase, ‘the Law and the Prophets’, where Jesus refers back to the Hebrew traditions.

But this is different now: these prophets are not in the past: these are contemporaries, both women and men, who may preach, but mostly who live the way of faith and hope and love.

They too are the foundations of the new community, who have gifts to offer, for the ministry of the whole community, as chapter 4 affirms: teachers, pastors, prophets, evangelists—and in other places he mentions those who care, administer, and so on, and all of it to build up their life together, in mutual service and growth into maturity.

And I don’t think I need to explain this to you, but instead invite you today to think of some of these prophets, Elsie Salter, Jill Manton, Peter Walker, Colin Carter, Alma Widdicombe, Bethe Maarse—and you will know many more, for whom we now pause, to give thanks to God.

You see, this is not just an ancient text, about once upon a time.

This idea, ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets’, is a description of who we are and where we are.

I have always thought it a great danger if we limit our ideas of church to our buildings: but here we can learn a great deal from the life of these buildings as a parable of who we are.

This idea of building is in fact not limited to some past event. It’s an interesting verb: this idea of being built—it means something like ‘having been built upon and now being in that situation’. This foundation or founded-ness is continuous.

There is a continuing power and influence here—because of the next part: ‘Christ Jesus himself being the corner-stone’.

Paul characteristically uses this notion of ‘Christ Jesus’, because for him Jesus in the past is not the primary interest. He rarely quotes Jesus’ words or deeds: rather, he believes that Jesus is living and present, and the Spirit of Jesus, Christ Jesus, enables him to be an apostle and all of us to be saints and prophets or participants on the life of the new creation.

Christ Jesus is the life that brings this peace, builds this new community, and holds it all together, not as something static but as a dynamic and inviting life.

So here we are today, 90 years into our own little part of this story: and considering what it might mean to be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, a community in the Spirit, a dwelling place for God, it says.

What might it mean for us?

Well, I am not going it answer that for you, except to say that this is part of your very identity as a Baptist community: one where together we discern what God is calling us to be and do, in this place and time.

This builded-ness is not limiting us to the past, but offers us the courage, vision, and hope to reach out for the future.

So we may begin with thankfulness, for all that has been and all that those saints and prophets of the past did, and learned, and offered to us.

And we may recognise some things we have to learn, here and now, in this present time. There is a continuing challenge for us to allow our apostles and prophets to be genuinely human, and not pretend, not resort to self-congratulation, or the kind of editing that papers-over our differences and struggles.

We are called to be a community where differences do not divide, and where strangers are welcomed as parts of a new creation.

All of this we do against the background of politics and economics that are so profoundly contrary to the way of Jesus.

All of this calls us to consider who we are, and what we really hope for.

From where and from what do we derive our identity?

Who and what is central in our reality?

Don’t for a minute imagine that this is a new challenge. It was always so, in the times of the Roman Empire, and all the pretending Romes ever since.

We are invited to know who we are and where we truly belong:

You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

What exactly that means for you is the task for this next period of time, beyond these 90 years—as with your Pastors you reflect and study and pray, give thanks, maybe struggle, grow and discern that here is the life you are being given.

You will not create it or achieve it, but receive it and live into this new community, as you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

May it be so, to the glory of God.

Amen.