

## Sermon

10.3.2024

Treasure in Clay Pots – reflections on 40 years of Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia

Psalm 84:1-12; John 3: 14-21; 2 Corinthians 4:5-18

Message “Treasure in Clay pots”

I first gave my life to Jesus when I was about 11 years old – when my sisters and I attended a Vacation Bible School at the Wombye Methodist Church. The next year we moved to Brisbane and we lived at Moggill.

Moggill Methodist Church was just down the road and friends from school invited us to join the girls group called RAYS and to go to Sunday school. It was rather unusual for the times but we had a “lady Minister” Rev Norma Spear. Just a few months prior, October 1971, Norma became the first woman ordained by the Methodist Church in Queensland. She had been a deaconess for many years and was very experienced in Christian Education, preaching, pastoral care, and producing musicals as a way of presenting the Christian faith. We thrived under her ministry and by being in a congregation with people like John and Val Braithwaite, Lay preachers, and leaders of youth camps and Sunday School and youth programs.

When I was fourteen years of age I felt a call to ministry – and so my path in life was set.

After school I spent a couple of years working in the public service and studying at University of Queensland in the evenings. The Church had identified five subjects that candidates for ministry must complete before being admitted to Theological studies – Introduction to Old Testament, Introduction to New Testament, the History of Christian Thought to Wycliffe and the History of Christian Thought After Wycliffe, and a new subject called Aboriginal Studies (in the sociology and anthropology Department). We were encouraged to study one of the Biblical languages. I struggled through Greek but learned enough to enable use of commentaries for preaching and assignments.

I arrived at Trinity Theological College to meet some people who would become life-long friends, to learn from Professors. Each year of our college course we were sent to a different congregation to learn from local ministers – and to see different models of Church life. It gave us a good grounding for congregational ministry. Rev’d Professor Rollie Busch was President of the national Church when we were at College so our timetable was adjusted so that he could fulfil his duties and attend international conferences. He was also a Principal Chaplain in the Australian Army.

Rollie Busch was the preacher at our Ordination. He chose this passage from 2 Corinthians about holding the treasure of the Gospel in clay pots.

He spoke to the whole gathered congregation, but especially to the ordinands. For some people who emerge from Theological studies there is a sense of pride about how much we have learned. We have dismantled our Sunday School faith and re-constructed our faith with some robust learning and a breadth of understanding of what the wisdom of the ages has to offer. Rollie reminded us that we only had the a small knowledge base and that really our Theological studies were designed to give us the tools for analysing Scripture,

for discovering that some things in Church History can instruct our experience in the present day and that we were not yet experts in the field of Theology and Church history.

Rollie, had “been around the bouy a few times” as the saying goes. He knew that for some ministers the ego needs to be kept in check.

Rollie also understood that there would be challenges that arise out of our own insecurities and personalities. He sometimes told stories from his own experience of dealing with difficult people, and people who would like to hold power over others. I remember that he often referred to the conversation between Jesus and James and John about who would have the seats of power. Jesus reminded his friends that in the kingdom of God leaders do not “Lord it over others” but offer servant leadership.

We sought to model that style of leadership in the ministry to which the Church entrusted us.

None of us are perfect and sometimes the clay jars crack and we are more like cracked pots than servants of God.

The Church has its processes for dealing with complaints and that has been a heavy burden for those of us who have ventured into Church leadership.

As I look back on 40 years of ministry I can say that there have been many high points. Mostly it has involved the people from congregation and my colleagues along the way.

In my first congregation I was met at the door by one of the members on the first day. She looked me up and down and said, “You are much younger than I expected.” I was a little offended until I found out that Stella was over 80 years of age. Of course I seemed young. I was 23 years old, but I felt well prepared for the ministry in congregational life.

Some of the congregation members from Rockhampton days turned up later on when I worked at Yeppoon and Emu Park. One lady from Rockhampton days was Dot. Dot taught year 2 and on Thursday afternoons I taught Religious Education in her classroom. When I arrived she had the children settled and ready to learn about Jesus and eth Bible stories. By then they had retired to the Coast and that meant I arrived with some friends and some people that I trusted from our previous encounters. Dot was one of them. I made many new friends in Yeppoon.

Those of you who have put up with my sermons over many years know that sometimes people who have been in my congregations become illustrations for Christian life in my sermons. I have learned much from the people who have been companions on the way – prayer partners, musicians, worship leaders.

I can remember some very long days when I was Presbytery Minister. For five years I was away from home for more than 100 nights per year. It was exhausting but it was very important to come alongside ministers in times of crises and in times of celebration and to sit with congregations in times of transition – when seasons of ministry are concluding and new seasons are emerging. As our own Presbytery visitors are doing today.

I am deeply grateful for the support of Owen and for the gift of colleagues over the years.

May we continue to serve and to hold the treasure in clay pots and pour out our lives in service.

Amen