**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 2 December 2018 First Sunday in Advent, Communion, Rainbow Room play, Ordaining of an elder and Commissioning of Parish Councillors.**

This particular branch of the church doesn’t have many sacraments. Baptism is one. Today we will later celebrate another – communion. Ordination of ministers and elders, though, is treated as being pretty important even not officially a sacraments in this branch of Christianity.

Sacraments depend on grace. Believing in grace depends on an acknowledgment that something is here, greater than us and beyond our imagining. It also depends on our ability as a group of people to discern when grace is present. This means we need to be alert, awake, conscious of everything that is going on.

In any organisation, discerning who will be best for any task is an ever present need. We seldom invite a tone deaf person to join the choir. If another person can’t play a note, they are unlikely to be named as organist. Clumsiness isn’t the best qualification for being on the morning tea roster. Sometimes it seems to me one of the qualifications for a minister is to have things in your house which act as props for the church nativity play!

It is the same when we select people for leadership. It is an inexact science so needs to be exercised carefully. In non-Episcopal churches this discernment is a collective exercise. Everyone is welcome here, but, at the same time, different people choose to belong at different levels and stages; ***and*** different people are gifted for different tasks. Those thought suitable are nominated for various roles including leadership where members of the organisation vote their approval or not. We choose those we think suitable, but no one is ever perfect. The process for selecting, forming and training ministers is a long drawn out process. Even then, some bad eggs get through or turn bad under the stress of the job. Often this is because someone at some stage of the process has not been brave enough to say ‘no’ or ‘not yet’. Sometime ‘no’ however much it hurts, is the right answer. I’ve experienced that. Twice in the church I have been majorly turned down. I hated it at the time, was angry and hurt, but looking back those rejections are two of the best things which ever happened to me - and to the church concerned!

It’s a two way process. The aspiring leader needs to carefully prepare themselves for the task, those selecting need to make sure they are not working from politeness or prejudice. It’s like the rosters – those on the roster need to remember to inform the office of their availability; the office needs to heed that information – when everyone does their job, it works, when either side slips up, it doesn’t.

However long the process, however suitable we think the person, they will not be perfect. Church people and leaders are often accused of being hypocritical because their behaviour seems unchristian or is abusive or inconsistent. Illegal activity must be tried in the civic courts and that is the attitude of this denomination, but in general terms, people do the best they can. None of us can fulfil the requirements of the spiritual journey unless we are graced – unless, as the church puts it in the traditional words of the ordination ceremony, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with us.” We all need help, from serving morning tea to celebrating communion. The work we do is not our work and in many ways it is not we who do it. It is grace working through us if we let it. (Some of you like to think of it more as you are helped to be a better person by the community here. Others might acknowledge divine assistance is at work.)

Traditionally, communion and the ordination of leaders are seen as outward signs of that hard-to-define grace. One formal description of the sacraments is that they are “efficacious signs of **grace**, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the **sacraments** are celebrated signify and make present the **graces** proper to each **sacrament**.”

Respect shown leaders in the church isn’t just given to the individual but to the office. The office of the US President deserves honour even if the individual present occupying that office is betraying it. I may fume at the attitude or theology or behaviour of the Moderator of the PCANZ because it doesn’t suit me personally, but the office still commands respect.

Today we experience two visible rites – the commissioning and ordination of leaders, and communion. They are not so much the point, rather it is about the grace which the Church believes is carried by them.

For that reason the words used are formal - what you could call ‘High Church’ because these two rituals are ‘High Church’. We have an iconoclastic approach to theology and church procedure here in this parish! I’ve trimmed where I feel I can, without misrepresenting the Church, but today we honour the fact that though our preferred language might have changed, presently the denomination’s discernment is that these words will be said on these occasions. They have altered since the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand formed in 1861, certainly since the Church of Scotland, the mother church, began in 1650; they are quite different from words that might have been used in the early church over 2000 years ago. But we belong to that long tradition. We would not be here today without it. People actually died to create and preserve the church governance and worship we use today. That doesn’t mean it can’t be reformed – in fact our unofficial motto is ‘reformed and always reforming.’ We need to keep remembering that second part of the phrase – ‘always reforming’. But this is the state of our denomination now.

Many then choose to stay or even join in this particular church, despite doubts and scepticism. Hopefully we stay because we find spiritual food which nourishes us for the spiritual journey. A side effect of our staying, being members, is that we can then speak up in the wider church courts and General Assembly when we disagree with how the denomination operates, with exclusionary attitudes and outdated theology. If all were to abdicate that responsibility then the Church will stagnate or worse, regress. I would love to leave the church! Maybe particularly this weekend! But if I do so, I abandon the fight to correct rules I consider wrong and I give up the right to do so. I haven’t left the church, so I respect as much as I can its governance and polity. On days like today the trickiness of that choice is front and centre.

In the mean time, this community of faith at St Andrew’s on The Terrace continues as much as we can make it, an oasis of acceptance here in an institution which is still, as institutions are, somewhat creaky and inconsistent, somewhat rigid and rule-bound and yet the institution within which we have chosen to remain or to join. Institutions are reluctant to change because they take seriously the conserving nature of their role – to maintain the tradition, to keep the institution going. (One major problem in 2018 is that the rate of change outside the church is rendering that very conservatism a suspect strategy.)

Because we remain, we are able to use this church, enjoy its location in the centre city, give thanks for wise stewardship of both parish and wider church leaders, and use it to welcome everyone who wants to come and learn and grow and celebrate; from this platform we can debate and argue and bring recommendations and protest. We stay, unless the dissonance becomes too great for our own sense of integrity. In the meantime we can put our faith into action with and for those who don’t give a damn what institution that action comes from as long as it does happen. We stay because this is the institution grew from an earnest desire by our forebears to follow the Jesus Way. Let us yearn and pray for this hard-to-define grace to so fill and overflow the church, that we are all transformed. Whether the words of this statement appeal to us or not, may “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all”

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