



Dunedin Methodist Parish

Finding Good in everyone Finding God in everyone

www.dunedinmethodist.org.nz

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PARISH BULLETIN

22nd July 2012

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY 29th JULY 2012

9.30am	Mornington	Combined Service at Wesley
9.30 am	Mosgiel	Combined Service at Wesley
11.00 am	Glenaven	Combined Service at Wesley
10.00 am	Wesley	S Pole
1.00pm	St Kilda	Combined Service at Wesley
4.00pm	Broad Bay	Combined Service at Wesley

MORNINGTON METHODIST WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP

The July Meeting will take place on the 25th July at 2 p.m. - in the Church Lounge. Our Guest Speaker will be Major Margaret Hay & her subject is "Life as a Salvation Army Officer in Different Countries".

All Welcome.

COMBINED PARISH SERVICE

Combined Parish Service conducted by Rev. S. Pole will be held on 29th July 2012 at 10.00am in Wesley Methodist Church, Hillside Road, Dunedin.

Morning tea will be served at the conclusion of the service. Contributions of food towards this would be much appreciated.

Thank you.

EXPLORERS GROUP

Meets on Sunday July 29th, in the Mornington Church Lounge at 4-30pm. All interested people welcome to join us.

OTAGO/SOUTHLAND DISTRICT SYNOD MEETING

The synod will be meeting in Invercargill on Friday 3 August 7-9pm and Saturday 4 August 9.30am – 2.30pm. Transport and accommodation can be shared.

For more information please contact either Rachael Masterton rmasterton@actrix.co.nz phone 476 4867 or Jenny Winter mcleanwinter@clear.net.nz phone 478 0491.

CALLING ALL CONGREGATIONS' TREASURERS

There is to be a special training session for all treasurers at the synod meeting in Invercargill on Saturday 4 August – every treasurer is requested to attend if at all possible. The workshop is to update everyone with the changes to financial reporting required by the Connexion, so it is very important that you attend. Peter van Hout will go through these changes with us. The workshop will be held at the Lindisfarne Methodist Community Centre, 22 Lindisfarne St, Invercargill (corner of Lindisfarne and Miller St's) beginning at 10am. Contacts as above.



OUR PARISH WEBSITE

– it's at <http://www.dunedinmethodist.org.nz>

Have you had a look at the website lately? Check it out for reminders of meetings and other events under 'Events'. The Parish Bulletin is posted in full under 'Recent News' so you don't need to worry if you miss out on a paper copy at church. There are lots of other exciting things to catch up on too, including all the Connections articles from the bulletin. Have an explore! The website is looked after by Jenny Winter mcleanwinter@clear.net.nz and Mary Thompson, who adds all the events to the site for you so let us know if you have ideas and suggestions to share.

BACK HOME - Sisters ANNABELLE & JASMINE WESTON (left to right) are back home after profoundly different overseas experiences.

JASMINE has returned from a 12 month EF (Education First) student programme that took her to Willmar, Minnesota. Jasmine says it was a broadening experience and she made particular friends with some of the other international students. Needless to say, she's pleased to be home, the moreso because in a very short time she has got herself a job in the city prior to attending Otago University next year.

ANNABELLE 's experience was only 3 weeks, and to Fiji with a group of young adults organised by the Word of Life evangelistic mission. For Annabelle it was a challenging period of her life, without any of her Dunedin support base. They spent most of the time based at the Coral Coast Christian Camp from where they worked with Fijian young people in squatter settlements. It was face to face with real poverty. The group also spent time in Suva and Nandi. The Mornington service on August 5 will feature an interview with both Jasmine and Annabelle.



Story from the Mission

Matariki – we held two open workshops, the first was on flax preparation and the second on weaving putiputi. We had teachers and children from Little Citizens, Flippers ELC, Play and Learn ELC, and teachers and students from the Special Needs unit at Queens High School. All came to both sessions and our celebration hangi. The feedback from all was that it was a terrific event and encouraged us to hold another. The Matariki celebration also included our student celebration of achievement where students, past and present with their whanau, join us for a celebration. As part of this event, the Carisbrook School Culture group performed for us and they were outstanding. The performers had a great time and all the audience had a brilliant time, truly appreciating the fun and skill these young performers showed. They also had several of the audience up and performing with them. The conclusion was a hangi where everyone was invited to partake.



I am not recommending this book, though you can borrow it, as I did, from the Dunedin Library. Were you brave enough to read further than the first chapter or two, I'm guessing you would be shocked and scandalised! And you would be in good company. The author has been damned from the heights of ecclesiastical power and authority.

But as I got into this book, increasingly I could not put it down, and after 5 nights of very late reading, I have since been trying to come to terms with what I read. Is it the cheapest form of blasphemy, as many have labelled it? Or is it, in fact, an honest attempt by a reputable contemporary novelist to answer the most hypothetical question asked by succeeding generations of Christians since Jesus of Nazareth lived and died two thousand years ago in what is now Palestine and Israel? *If Jesus were*

to reward the promise of the Gospels and the faith of the Church to return again as a human being, where, when, and in what manner would be the likely nature of his return?

The book in question is one author's answer to that question. James Frey is an American author living in New York, and his book *The Final Testament of the Holy Bible* was first published by John Murray in the UK, 2011.

So what is the plot? It is the story of Ben Zion Avroham, otherwise known as Ben Jones, from a New York Jewish family. Having drifted away from his orthodox and God-fearing family, Ben miraculously survives an horrific industrial accident. Coming out of a near-fatal coma he is portrayed as being in possession of otherworldly powers, unmistakably like those attributed to the Jesus of the gospels. So is he the Messiah? The question is repeatedly asked by those who encounter him, and faithful to the Gospel script, Ben is evasive. "If you care to think so!" Yet an answer is there for those who can embrace it, for Ben brings a sense of peace and serenity to those whom he meets, and develops a small and faithful following.

Ben does not live in the highrises of Manhattan, but in the disused tunnels alongside the NY underground, fetid dank corridors where the marginalised of the great city exist as best they can, an underbelly living off the crumbs that fall from capitalism's over-laden tables. It is alongside and among this mottley lot, the drug addicts, prostitutes and petty criminals, that Ben Jones' followers make their home, sharing their meagre resources and practising unconditional love - and I really mean "unconditional."

Two characters stand out - a "villain," as in all good plots, Ben's older brother Jacob, the insider, who converts from the Judaism of his upbringing to become the worst kind of narrow-minded, born-again preacher: bigoted, self-righteous and homophobic. And a "heroine," Judith, the outsider, a self-described "fat, ugly failure" whose painfully barren existence is transformed by Ben's ability to love the unlovely and to include even the least desirable. Both these recognisable manifestations of gospel identities respond in startlingly different ways to Ben's unconditional love for them. Uncomfortable and unsettling stuff!

Needless to say, Frey attributes to Ben the same aversions of Jesus to religious and temporal authority. As one commentator puts it, Ben rejects the hierarchies of organized religion, as "the longest-running fraud

in human history.” And not for him such "worn-out and repressive" concepts as the afterlife, prayer, the soul, and sin. “Faith,” Ben says, “is the fool’s excuse... faith is what you use to oppress, to deny, to justify, to judge in the name of God.... if there were a Devil, faith would be his greatest invention.” Not surprisingly, the Ben Jones "messiah" rejects all religious dogma per se, the Bible and all. The Bible is "just a book," he says, and "books are for telling stories."

In the end the inevitable collision with the power of the city and of the church is terrible to behold, and New York's "crucifixion" of Ben Jones is no less sad and harrowing than that laid on in the city of Jerusalem two millennia ago.

As I implied in my intro, I cannot in all honesty imagine most of my parish friends getting far with this novel. Everything in our faith upbringing predisposes us to turn away, repulsed, from this James Frey creation. And so I have asked myself - what kept me so riveted? Was it the uncomfortable sense that were the same Jesus of Nazareth to be transplanted and become Jesus of New York, he would not be a tame pale replication of the amenable Jesus created by centuries of veneration, but a Jesus equally as offensive as the one "despised and rejected" for taking love so far and condemning hypocrisy too honestly? And, isn't James Frey at very least entitled to credit for insisting that a contemporary Jesus would simply not fit in to 21st century life as we moderns have made it to be, and that his call to discipleship today would not be any less radical than the one issued to Peter, John, Mary Magdalene & Co.

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, and like many other things in this life we share, the *Final Testament of the Holy Bible*" is just another work of fiction, and we can be thankful for the freedom in our little corner of the world to 'take it or leave it.'

Postscript You may well ask what it was that in the final analysis made this shocking book even worth a mention? Well in my case a recent flurry on the Methodist liberal online network over an article by Ross Douthat gleaned from the *N Y Times* citing evidence that churches that have gone helter skelter to embrace liberal attitudes and values are all in serious decline, and may be only a generation way from extinction. The reason given was that such churches (including ours?) don't seem to be offering anything that can't just as readily be got from purely secular liberalism. The article closed with words that I personally find disturbing

and challenging - liberal churches "should pause amid their frantic renovations, and consider not just what they would change about historic Christianity, but what they would defend and offer uncompromisingly to the world."

As if to defend themselves, the network was quick to find a rebuttal, and produced another from the American media (Diana Butler Bass) with her evidence that not all liberal churches are declining. Their regeneration is linked to a return to the core of the Jesus vision, his command to love God, and to love ones neighbour as oneself, a transformative personal faith that is warm, experiential, generous, and thoughtful. Evidence is there, the second article said, that churches totally committed to the unconditional love exemplified in Jesus, are showing clear signs of growth. Some good news at last.

It occurs to me that while James Frey has chosen a controversial, even outrageous medium for saying so, his 21st century "messiah" points the way to a plain and uncluttered expression of the Jesus way, simply to love one another. Perhaps, then, this book is more prophetic than outrageous, and the future of the Church is not about numbers, but authenticity.

Ken Russell

