

A New Millennium, A New Mission

Revelation 3:8 *“I know your works. Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know you have little power and yet you have kept my word. Hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

St. John the Divine, author of the book of Revelation, undoubtedly was a very interesting person. He was a prophet, a poet, a dreamer, a future teller with a colourful imagination. He has been acclaimed as a saint. He often wrote in strange metaphors. He dreamed about the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, settling glistening white on the Judean hills, the centrepiece of a new world order. The coming of the new Jerusalem would usher in a thousand years of peace and tranquility under the reign of Christ. Less imaginative Christians sometimes have turned that poetic dream into a nightmare of theological mumbo jumbo. They have interpreted the symbols as specific times and dates and have given the names of places and people to imaginative images. They have asked questions like: Who will be worthy to live in the Holy City? Who is the anti-Christ? And will the second coming of Christ happen at the beginning or at the end of the thousand years of peace. But however badly the book of Revelation has been used, it remains a powerful argument for hope in times of danger, a wonderful affirmation of the saving power and love of God, and in the present time, an inspiration to us as we face the uncertainties of a new millennium.

A millennium is a period of a thousand years. On January first in the year two thousand, the church will enter the third millennium of the Christian era. There is something mysterious and intriguing about the concept of a new millennium. Indeed, the closer we get to the twenty-first century the louder, the more plentiful and, in some cases, the more obnoxious both secular and religious future tellers will become. On this September Sunday I feel a little privileged to be five years ahead of the pack. I appreciate the fact that Bruce Schnell and the Bard of Trustees have encouraged me to preach a sermon relating to the new millennium.

My first prediction is that on January first in the year two thousand many members of McClure United Church will have difficulty crawling out of bed because they will have been up very late on New Years Eve attending a wonderful party. Bruce, I hope I will be invited back to attend that mortgage burning party on December 31, 1999. We will have much to celebrate, much to reminisce about, much to dream about and much to do. I have every confidence that the mortgage will be paid off ahead of schedule and that the people of McClure will be continuing their task of being the church in many exciting and diverse ways.

The new millennium will bring with it intense challenges for the human race. In recent weeks we have been given a lot of information about population trends. When I began my ministry I used to talk with confirmation classes about the population of the world being 3 billion with approximately one third of that number Christian or nominally Christian. By the year 2000 the population of the world will be approaching 6 billion and by the year 2035, if the trends continue, the world's population will reach 9 billion with a much smaller fraction being nominally Christian than was the case in the 1950s.

Dr. Thomas Homer-Dixon on the University of Toronto foresees a new millennium in which overpopulation, unequal distribution of wealth, and environmental degradation combine to produce tribal warfare, mass migrations and the breakup of countries around the globe *‘with a speed, complexity and magnitude unprecedented in history’* (McLeans 5/9/94). Sadly, in some areas of the planet, that prediction is already coming true. At the same time, the disparity between the rich and the poor is growing at an alarming rate, not only in the so called third world countries, but on the North American

continent as well. Destabilization caused by widespread economic oppression, poverty, violence and pollution greatly increase the risk to all future generations, in all segments of society, in all nations.

Technologically advanced western societies may feel a certain amount of smugness. We may feel that our wealth of knowledge and resources we are well equipped to enter a new millennium. However, even if there is an improvement in western economies, even if we are able to maintain a semblance of political stability, there will still be a large question mark over our future. The prospects for a calm and tranquil new millennium may not be too bright.

I believe we are witnessing tremors in social structures along fault lines that lie deep within our European and North American culture. The institutional church is not immune from those tremors. Headlines in the press following a recent meeting of the General Council proclaimed that membership in The United Church falls again. There is a mood of uncertainty and confusion among many church members and a sense of dissatisfaction with the institutional Church. In the world the signs and symptoms of the disintegration of community and the destabilization of society are many. One that was brought home to me last week is that in the 1970's in the United States the average age at which young people began using illegal drugs was 17 or 18. In the 1980's it was 12 or 13 and in the 1990's it is 8 or 10. We may be a few years behind the Americans use illegal drugs on a regular basis, that is scary news.

The question before us this morning is how do the uncertainties of a new millennium affect the mission of the Church, specifically the mission of this congregation. A dangerous thing has happened to McClure United Church. In terms of resident membership and funds raised by congregational givings, McClure has become the largest United Church in Saskatchewan. This is dangerous from at least three points of view. First, there is a danger that with larger numbers there may be a breakdown in our sense of community. Second, an unseemly sense of pride may lead to complacency and third, a more complex congregation may result in confusion about our mission. In reevaluating and restating our congregational mission for the new millennium, it will be important that we are aware of these dangers and prepare to deal with them.

First of all, I believe our mission will need to include the nurturing of a strong, accepting, caring community. The fact is that in a changing world and in a volatile society there will be an increasing need for a place where people can experience acceptance and appreciation, where people can be valued, cared for and loved. Building this kind of community is a complicated challenge in a society where there are so many distractions, where there are so many pressures toward depersonalization and isolationism. I believe that in McClure we will accept the invitation to be a caring community. I believe that in McClure we will accept the invitation to be a caring community. We will welcome strangers and find ways of transforming them into friends. We will struggle with the meaning of acceptance and forgiveness, with meaning of good neighbourliness and friendship.

Secondly, we will need to deal with the ever present temptation in every congregation to become complacent, to be so satisfied with the way things are that we see no need for change. Being the largest church in a jurisdiction brings with it no reason for pride, only reason for being faithful in fulfilling our responsibilities as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught the disciples the need to be adventurous, to take up their cross every day and follow him. Following Jesus in our time will take us into new adventures in mission and will keep us open to the leading of the Spirit. When Jesus wanted to talk about greatness he embraced a little child suggesting that openness, teach-ability, vulnerability, and spontaneity are the true characteristics of greatness. And, furthermore, it seems to me that a Church that

lives by the name of Bob and Amy McClure will have within its very soul the twin gifts of humility and service.

Thirdly, we will need to be very focused, very clear about what it means to be a Christian community. In a pluralistic society there may be a tendency to say it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you try to be a good person. It is important that we learn to be tolerant and accepting of other religions and of other cultures. However, if we are to have any sense of mission, if we are to have a strong sense of community, it will be necessary for us to be informed about our own faith. Christianity is in large measure an experiential religion. Our faith will be strong and effective when it is based on an intimate knowledge of the Spirit of God at work in the world and at work in our own lives.

In a time not unlike our own, when the world and the church were caught up in rapid change and when prophetic voices were predicting devastation and destruction, St. John wrote to a struggling congregation: "Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one can shut". I believe the Spirit is inviting the church in our time, including McClure United Church, to be the church of the open door. A church building and a church community provide opportunities for us to be renewed in spirit, mind and mission. I'm glad we have this building – and I believe it is being well used – and, of course, barring an economic disaster we can pay down the mortgage, and then some, within five years. But we all know that the day the mission of the church becomes just an inward mission, the church will begin to die. The door must be an open door where we come in *and* go out.

The Church is never to be a ghetto that shuts out the world but a resource center where we can be equipped with information and experience so that we can survive and serve and celebrate in the world, and in the world of a new millennium, so that we can confront with energy and determination powers of evil that diminish the human spirit and threaten our earthly habitat. The future for a committed, faithful church glows with opportunity and promise.

Last week a visitor from New York offered some encouragement to the caregiving community of Saskatoon and here is a paraphrase of some of his words: *Brothers and sisters, as we face the uncertainties and the challenges of a new millennium and a new mission let us join hands for comfort, gain strength from one another, then perhaps we will be able to see and do together that which we are unable to see and do as individuals.*

Amen

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