

## The 8<sup>th</sup> National Forum

### National Council of Churches in Australia

#### Mission Shaped Ecumenism

#### What is God's Call for the Church in Australia

#### A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah

#### Genesis 18

<sup>1</sup>The LORD appeared to Abraham<sup>2</sup> by the oaks<sup>3</sup> of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup>He said, "My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant.

<sup>9</sup>They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>10</sup>Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup>Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup>So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup>The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup>Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

You may think that this is a strange text for me to use as I begin this address. This text is well known to us and speaks of God's possibilities for the world when God will do things that the World thinks are impossible.

The NRSV translates the Hebrew *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?* The Hebrew is *palah* it can also be translated as difficult or impossible. Abraham and Sarah were of advanced age and laughed at the news of the visitors. They doubted God's ability to bring newness or to bring to birth life from one so old. They had long passed the springtime of their lives. One could say they were in the winter of life. This is a phrase that I sometimes hear said of the ecumenical movement today.

At times I think people would say that new life is impossible. *Palah*.

Karl Barth a 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian says that as people of faith we have to reason from what is real to what is possible. Where the modern world decides what is possible on a basis of reason to identify what is real. This limits newness to what is possible.

In our ecumenical journey I think that at times we focus on the latter and really need to remember "is anything too wonderful /impossible *palah* for God?"

As Michael mentioned earlier the basis of the NCCA says;

The NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those Churches and Christian communities which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and commit themselves

[i] to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his church, and

[ii] to work together towards the fulfilment of their mission of common witness, proclamation and service,

to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

One of the purposes of the Forum is to set directions for the Council, at times in the past that has seemed impossible palah however the Forum in Canberra gave the Council and the Executive four areas to focus the directions of the council.

1. Faith and Order / Unity and, in particular,
  - i. developments in national and international dialogues,
  - ii. obstacles to progress in dialogues and means to overcome them,
2. Mission and, in particular,
  - i. strengthening member Churches as they go about mission in Australian society and globally,
  - ii. facilitating cooperation in mission among the Churches,
3. Significant Public issues and the shape of Australian society in global context and, in particular,
  - i. promoting understanding of key issues through research, analysis and study,
  - ii. formulating joint statements to convey the views of member churches to the wider community,
  - iii. developing shared plans for advocacy and action,
4. Indigenous issues and concerns as guided by the NATSIEC

At this meeting I hope we will take these further identify areas to draw the churches into deeper conversations where we consider what at first thought we might consider impossible palah but which God can bring new life.

#### **From Canberra to Melbourne.**

God has brought new life in aspects of our fellowship together. A fellowship that has a diversity of views on many issues. The Executive had an interesting conversation that in the past I am sure many would have though impossible palah. Bishop Michael has repeatedly said we have differing views but if we don't talk about them here we wont talk about them anywhere. This brought to birth a process for conversation when diverse views are held with out the need to do anything more than talk and understand the position of each church. We did this successfully looking at the view of marriage and relationships from the perspective of many member churches. This model has been shared with my colleagues in other councils.

Last time we met in Canberra was 2001 when the churches first considered signing the Australian Covenanting Together. Unfortunately it was not signed until Adelaide in 2004. At times I fear that we think we have been there done that and now move on. But I believe God has more possibility for us as churches to take this covenanting together further. Let us take this more seriously and start to reflect the commitments agreed upon in the past to bring about new life that we may thing unimaginable.

Let's not limit the possibility to what we think can be real when our God brings life from one the world sees as barren. In the depth of winter we see no life but it is followed by spring when fields come to bloom. The world sees the dead are dead but God shows us that death is not the end. We know this in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

In Canberra we struggled to get any of our parliamentary representatives to meet with us, and we were close to believing that this was impossible palah. This year we have met with the Foreign Minister twice to raise concerns relating to Palestine/ Israel and issues faced by religious minorities in many parts of the world. I acknowledge Major Kelvin Alley for being one of the ways God has opened this door.

Three weeks ago I received a call from the office of Prime Minister and Cabinet to ask if I would consider accepting an invitation from the Prime Minister to be on the Australian Civil Society C20 steering group leading up to the G20 leaders meeting next year. My first question was what other church leaders are being asked. I

firmly believe that when the heads of church are on such groups then the NCCA does not act like an addition group rather we are the place where the churches are in fellowship and speak and act together. The response was oh only Tim Costello if you call him a church leader. Yes Tim is a church leader but he is there with other credentials.

This is a sign of new possibility as we have been well and truly recognised with 12 others for our significant place in civil society.

In Canberra the Forum recognised the urgency for a model to be developed on which to base our membership contributions so that the council may be adequately resourced. I am deeply disappointed that for three year we have made in my view little progress and almost looked at it through the lens of oh this is impossible palah to find a model. Friends one an all not just the religious Society of Friends, we have been saying this is urgent for too long. I could go on but I will refrain my self as there are other things I want to touch on.

Relationships are central to the Council and the Secretariat spends much time seeking to deepen the relationship between the office and the member churches not just the head of church or those we see at the Executive but with the people in each church.

Since Canberra there have been great times and sad time. Often other churches are invited to share these times. Sometimes the invitation is accepted and at other times it slips by.

I can't stress enough the importance of being together when it matters not just at meetings but in life and death as well. For the Orthodox the death of a Patriarch will see memorials held here in Australia It saddens those churches when their brothers and sisters in the western churches are unable to be with them in their grief,

Last September Our dear friend Archbishop Aghan died and it was amazing the calls that came through the council, both from the Armenian Church wanting to know how to contact the churches. Equally the other churches called the council to find out the arrangements. At that time it was clear that the council was being what it was most meant to be. The council assists in enabling the churches to be together when they need to but are not sure how to. That service was a tremendous tribute to his life but also a great gathering of the ecumenical expression of the body of Christ.

I dare say the times of transition and celebration in the churches are equally important. This is confirmed every time I attend one of these celebrations.

I will conclude with sharing the deep pain I regularly hear from some of our members. The churches in the Middle East are going through extremely difficult times and yet with in them rightly or wrongly they perceive that the other churches don't display actions that reflect their words.

I have been challenged by church leaders who say we need to know each other better than we do at present.

Finally I want to publically express my appreciation to Michael Putney for the dynamic leadership he has offered not only the council but has allowed me to share.

God who calls us together called light from the darkness, new life from unlikely situations, calls the dead to life is the one who calls us to unity.

<sup>14</sup>Is anything too wonderful / palah for the LORD?.

Thank you.

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