

- Our first reading this morning from The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, is entitled a "Hymn in Honour of our Ancestors".
- And in its first verses it acknowledges people in the history of Israel whose names are known for what they have done.
- These are people who loom large in the memory of the people.
  - And so the text goes on to name people like Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Aaron and Joshua and so on.
  
- You might notice that all these people are blokes,
  - perhaps not surprising, given the patriarchal social order of the time.
- So we might want to fill out that picture a bit by adding the names of Sarah and Hagar and Rebekah and Rachel and Leah and Miriam and Rahab and Deborah and Ruth and so on,
  - faithful women, through whom, also, God shaped the life of God's people.
  
- But the point that the author is making is that as we consider our history, and the people and events that have gone before us, there are some people who are known and remembered by name because they stood at pivotal moments in that history,
  - because the story of God's work among us was made particularly visible in and through their lives.
- Indeed, their lives become reference points for how we tell the story of God's work among us as a community and as individuals.
  
- So there are some people who will be remembered as part of everyone's story, the story of our faith that we all share.
  
- But, as our reading from Sirach goes on to say, just as there are those who,
  - "have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise"
- so there are also others of whom "there is no memory",
  - those who "have perished as though they never existed; they have become as though they had never been born".

- Yet, “these also”, says Sirach, were godly people, “whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten” and who have yet left a legacy.
- There seems to be a strange almost contradiction in those words of Sirach.
- He describes people of whom, “there is no memory”, yet their "righteous deeds have not been forgotten".
- And I guess we can understand that apparent contradiction in these terms:
  - It is not given to many of us to stride (or stumble(!)) across the stage of history in ways that mean our words and actions will become part of the collective story and memory of the whole world.
  - We may not make a splash in the history of our community, let alone that of our city or nation.
  - But, nonetheless, our "righteous deeds" will not be forgotten.
- We share our lives with people on a daily basis.
- And in all of those interactions there is the potential, the invitation even, for us to participate in God’s work in the world,
  - to be led by God into a “righteous deed” which will not be forgotten,
    - an act of love and grace,
    - an act of mercy or kindness,
    - an act of understanding and support,
      - an act that will live on in the memory of the person that experienced it because it spoke to them of God,
        - because God spoke to them in that moment,
        - because God became present to them in that moment,
          - perhaps in a way that they had not experienced before.
- Just by way of example, how many of you would have any more than a passing acquaintance with Ruth and Peter Coyle?
- They are not famous on the world stage, not even “world famous in New Zealand", but I know them quite well because they are my parents.
- And because of the constancy of their love for me and because of their faithfulness to God, I know something of what God is like.
  - Because of them I have experienced something of what God is like.

- Because of them, I have experienced God.
    - They are part of my story of what it means to be a person of faith, though I'm pretty sure they are not a part of yours.
- Similarly, in the parish in which I first served as a deacon and then a priest, All Saints, Ponsonby, the walls of the vestry were hung with photos of the previous vicars of the parish.
- They were all black and white photos which, of course, lent an added gravitas to the faces of these men who looked down upon us as we prepared for worship.
- We used to refer to them as "the rogues gallery" and wondered what we too might look like posed with pipe in hand in a similar attitude of benevolent piety.
- Now, I didn't know any of those previous vicars, but I did know Jim White, who was the vicar at the time and who is now our assistant bishop.
- His continuing faithfulness as a priest and colleague and as a mentor to young clergy made known to me something of the faithfulness of God.
- And his faithfulness was rooted in the same story as those other vicars who I did not know but whose photos adorned the wall of that vestry.
- My parents, Jim White, and many others are reference points for how I tell the story of God's work in my own life, and they and we continue to carry the same story of countless others who have gone before us,
  - whose names have not been remembered but whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.
- And I was reminded of this in conversation with Noel.
- I asked him what was one of the things that sustained him in his ministry and he replied quite simply,
  - "the example of others; the example of those who have gone before us".
- Noel, I'm not sure how many vestries or parish offices are adorned with pictures of you.
  - I don't know if you have ever smoked a pipe!

- But I'm sure your name will be written or engraved on a plaque somewhere in the parishes of Riverton, Mosgiel, Gore and Cambridge, as well as in the annals of both the wider church here in New Zealand and in Papua New Guinea!
- There will be some tangible reminder of your presence in those places.
- But I'm equally sure that there will be many many people over the course of 50 years in ordained ministry whose stories of faith contain you as a reference point,
  - Some will remember you for the sermons you preached,
  - some for what it was like to receive the Eucharist from you.
  - Some will remember you for your presence at a pivotal moment in their life: a baptism, a wedding, a funeral.
  - Few will likely remember the careful exercising of your administrative gifts,
    - nor the labour that was editing the lectionary.
- But in those moments both significant and taken for granted you have been living out your priestly vow to build up the Body of Christ.
  - There are many for whom you have been, continue to be, an example of faithfulness, care and support, such that they got to, we get to experience something of the love and grace of God.
- It seems that God often makes God's self known to us in our encounters with others.
- It seems that God often makes God's self known to us through the words and actions of those around us.
- Perhaps that should come as no surprise to us when we consider that our primary identity as the people of God is as a body,
  - the body of Christ,
    - and that the members of Christ's body make Christ known in the world.
- So on this feast day when we remember the Builders of the Church
  - and on this anniversary day when we give thanks for the ministry of the Reverend Dr Noel Derbyshire, let us also be encouraged to be people whose words and actions are shaped by the work of God's spirit in us and so are signs to others of God's love for the world.