

Sermon 4 January 2026

Genesis 9:8-15 John 1:10-18

Some years ago, I was asked to visit a family in the country on a pastoral matter. I was given very good instructions on how to get there, instructions which I followed carefully. I drove along this country road until I came to this large, white gate, and sure enough, it had the name of the property clearly displayed on it. I drove through the gate and found myself travelling up a long driveway lined with beautiful old oak trees. On either side, I could see over the fence sheep, cattle and the occasional horse grazing.

The driveway wound up a long slope and then at the top of the slope I rounded a bend and I was confronted by this very large and quite lovely old home. The word 'colonial' springs to mind. It was a two-story house, built from native timber, with balconies on the upper level. The grounds were quite splendid, a very large lawn with a rose garden in full bloom and flower beds containing a variety of flowers. In one corner there was a swimming pool. At the far end of the garden was a persimmon tree, laden with fruit. Around one side of the house I could see a fig tree, covered in figs. I had definitely come at the right time of the year! The owners of the house came out and gave me a very warm welcome. It felt good to be there.

Why do I share this experience with you right now? What has this got to do with our gospel reading? John's gospel is quite different to the other gospels. John uses the incidents in Jesus' life to paint a picture of just who Jesus is; he makes a statement about Jesus – that he is the Messiah and that getting to know Jesus opens up for us a whole new way of looking at and experiencing life.

This passage is often used at carol services, which is interesting because John's gospel does not include the nativity story, but rather begins with that wonderful and well-known line, '*In the beginning was the Word.*' John 1:1. So this is not a story about Jesus' birth, but rather a statement about just who he is.

So John's gospel is rather like a journey, the purpose of which is to arrive at a revelation and understanding of just who Jesus is. As I made my way into the country, following directions, until this beautiful home was finally revealed to me and I felt good about being there, so do we embark on a journey of discovery, following directions, which can come in a variety of ways, until we come to a place, a place that is beautiful and where we feel good. I could spend a whole sermon on looking at just what those directions are, but that is for another day.

The analogy of a journey is relevant right now because we are all embarking on a new journey which actually began last Thursday – a whole new year. As we look ahead to a new year, I want to make a couple of points. Firstly, and this is in the context of a journey, last year was a big year for our church, arguably the biggest year since we opened on January 31st 1886. I want to repeat something I said in my sermon at our opening service on Sunday 17 August, and I quote directly from that sermon: 'It has been quite a journey getting to this point, and I am sure most of you are aware of this. So in one sense, this is the end of a journey and we celebrate that and all those who made this journey possible. However, in another sense it is just the beginning of a new journey. If we are to do justice to this wonderful complex, and most importantly, what takes place in this new place of worship, then this is the beginning of a journey that will call for commitment, endeavour and enthusiasm as we work towards growing God's kingdom here in Flat Bush.'

My friends, last year saw us arrive at a certain point in the development of our church, and there is no doubt that it was something of a journey arriving at that point, but I do hope that 2026 will see us continue on that journey; that our eyes, minds and hearts will be focussed on a slightly different destination. Now that we have a structure in place, our goal and dream must be to ensure that this structure is appropriated for the growth of our church.

A few days ago, the movie 'Conclave' was showing on TV. The boys and I watched it. Brilliant movie. There was a quote from a young cardinal which rang bells with me. He said, 'The church is not about the past. The church is not about tradition. The church is about what we do next.' Don't get me wrong, what has gone before is very important. But that becomes meaningless if our focus is on what has gone before, on what we might have achieved. Our focus must one hundred percent be on the task

ahead – the growing of our church. That is the challenge that lies ahead, that is the journey that lies ahead. And that brings me to the second point I want to make.

This challenge, this journey will inevitably be very similar to the challenge and journey we have experienced to this point in that there are going to be times when the going will get tough, when we will encounter obstacles. That's life. There is actually good news tucked away in this observation.

The first good news is that it is in the tackling of these obstacles that our character, our make-up is developed, shaped and moulded, and that applies to us as people bodies and also us as a church body.

The other good news is that no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter what obstacles and challenges we might be dealing with, God is there for us, if we want him to be. By that I mean God is actually there but we need to acknowledge that and connect with him. Sometimes, the situation might seem hopeless and God feels a million miles away, but he is there and will often pop up in the most unexpected way.

There is the story of a sole survivor of a shipwreck, who was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming.

Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived back to find his little hut in flames. The smoke was rolling up into the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger. 'God, how could you do this to me?' he cried.

Early next day, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. 'How did you know I was here?' asked the weary man of his rescuers. 'We saw your smoke signal,' they replied.

It is easy to get discouraged when things are going badly, but we shouldn't lose heart because God is at work in our lives, even in the midst of pain and suffering. '*And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*' Matthew 28:20.

Our first reading refers to the story of Noah and the flood. It is a story that most of us are reasonably familiar with. It is part of our culture. It is a story of the consequences of our erroneous behaviour, but it is also a story of God's promise that he will in the end always be there for us, no matter how dire our circumstance might appear to be, a promise as signified by the rainbow. All we have to do is to reach out in faith. All we have to do is to go on a journey, follow the directions and we will come to a beautiful place, a place where God dwells and is alive in the hearts and minds of people, a place to which he will give us a warm welcome.

Let me finish with two quotes: '*The world may drag you down a hundred times, but God will always be there to lift you up a thousand times.*' Natalie Christensen, American photographer. And a quote that I have drawn on frequently in the past few years, '*Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.*' Isaiah 41:10.