



## JESUS – ALL ABOUT HOME

(address to the AGM of Churches Community Housing Ltd, 16 October 2009)

Good morning!

Let me begin by doing two things.

First of all, let me I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather, the Darug people; their elders past and present and any other elders who are present with us. Secondly, may I also dedicate what I have to say to two remarkable people who have died during the last year: to John Kenny and to Anne McPherson, both of whom contributed in past years to the work of Churches Community Housing. This was above all the case with John Kenny, whose insight, experience, kindness and compassion so enriched, not only the work of this company, but so many of us as individuals as friends and colleagues. As with Anne, a particularly special personal inspiration to me, John was motivated by something so very special and much bigger than all of us, namely contributing to the outworking of the vision of the Kingdom (or, if you prefer, the reign, or environment) of God.

John and Anne are part of the reason I have agreed to speak this morning. For, to be honest, I was a little surprised to be asked. For I am not an expert on housing and what I do know is mainly what I have learned from others through CCHL over the last few years. Yet it seems to me that there is something else we often need to remind ourselves, especially at a time of such encouraging but demanding change as Churches Community Housing is experiencing. That something is our core vision and our essential calling. Without these we lose our bearing in steady times, never mind those of change. So what *are* our core vision and essential calling?

Well, the core vision of CCHL is grounded in the oecumenical vision of our churches together as a whole. CCHL has always been, and remains, a visible sign, through the grace of God, of the commitment of churches together in New South Wales to unity and healing for all. That is why the member Churches of the NSW Ecumenical Council continue to be the members of CCHL and why CCHL continues to be a part of the life and prayer of the NSW Ecumenical Council. For CCHL is a very powerful expression of the oecumenical vision which gave it birth: an expression of our shared vision of healing and reconciliation for the *oikumene*, that sometimes ecclesiastically esoteric word which is not really esoteric or exclusive at all, but a word which means the whole inhabited earth – not the *Church*, note well, but the whole world, both the material and spiritual, everything. So CCHL does not exist on its own but as part of something much bigger – THE Big Picture – of all things brought into unity in God's reconciling love. Or, to put it another way, as is stated in CCHL values, '*Our belief is in a loving God who came to earth in Jesus Christ to share our humanity and give an example of the potential for a full human life. Churches Community Housing Ltd constantly seeks new ways of engagement in realising this belief through practical expressions of concern for others.*'

So what about the *specific* calling of the work of churches together through CCHL? Let me briefly offer two key biblical texts for our guidance, one undergirding theme and three important aspects for consideration. The two texts are related to the call of Jesus to his disciples in the New Testament. Let me begin with the call of Jesus in John's Gospel, and touch upon that in Synoptic Gospels in a moment.

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in John's Gospel we are told the following:  
*The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. (John 1.35 ff)*

Note the key words 'stay' and 'remain' which appear again and again in John's Gospel. The disciples here ask Jesus, 'where are you staying/dwelling/abiding?', i.e where do you live? Jesus answers 'come and see' and they come to see that Jesus dwells in God and God in Jesus. His home therefore, and ultimately ours, is the Kingdom, the reign, the environment, of God. Is this purely a spiritual home however, or only a location beyond this world? By no means, for the New Testament is also replete with what theologians call 'realised eschatology': namely the knowledge and experience of God, and the things of God, as present now, as gift and calling. In which sense, whilst looking always beyond, we are called to seek God's dwelling places here on earth as well as in heaven. Indeed, I would add, although there is the famous phrase that 'the Son of Man has no place to lay his head', Jesus for example seems himself to have had significant dwelling places, such as his base in Bethany: a location near to Jerusalem, accessible as we might say to the CBD but outside of it - perhaps more like Parramatta rather than the North Shore or eastern Suburbs of the time?

The focus of the call of the disciples at the beginning of John's Gospel is thus upon the place to stay and dwell - and this, I believe, is highly significant. For, to adapt a current contemporary slogan as our undergirding theme, we might well say that '*Jesus All About Home*' sums up the calling of churches together in New South Wales, made particularly manifest in Churches Community Housing. For, to a very powerful extent, the whole of the Bible might be summed up as 'All About Home' (or Coming Home). Two of the greatest theological trajectories in the Bible are those of Exodus and Exile, which are both about Home - seeking a home or returning home. The Bible therefore is full of stories about home, its loss, its recovery, its vital importance. As Jesus says elsewhere, in words which are given flesh in the daily work of the preparation of dwelling places by Churches Community Housing:

*In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14.2 ff)*

So the stated calling of Churches Community Housing to provide '*safe, secure and affordable housing for all*' is not merely about a practical good but also about embodying

a theological good, the Gospel vision of Home. CCHL is, thank God – and thanks to some remarkable staff and other contributors! – highly successful in addressing the practical, legal, financial and structural aspects of its calling. Yet it is also informed by more than welfare or service provider considerations. Let me suggest three important aspects of this calling to embody ‘Jesus All About Home’.

Firstly, there is the aspect of Liberation. This relates to the calling of the disciples in the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus says to the fishermen *‘follow me and I will make you fishers for people.’* (Mark 1.16) Now, for too long most of us have understood this in far too narrowly evangelistic terms. Behind this passage however, is the powerful text from Jeremiah, in which the prophet speaks of a new movement which will restore land and homes to the people:

*Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, ‘As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt’, but ‘As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.’ For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors. I am now sending for many fishermen, says the LORD, and they shall catch them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.* (Jeremiah 16.16 ff)

I am not going to belabour this point, not least for time considerations, but I simply seek to illustrate that, again, the calling of God to her people is to share in bringing salvation, which means fulfilling the promise of a return home. To ‘fish for people’ therefore is not about evangelism as narrowly understood, but about catching the rich and powerful and rounding up all the oppressed and deprived and bringing them to their homes. As the CCHL values statement in consequence has it, Churches Community Housing Ltd is committed not only to *‘Improving the living standards of those on the margin of society’* but, more broadly, to the cause of Liberation, to *‘Calling their members and the wider society to advocacy for justice.’*

How does this manifest itself? Well, the values of CCHL, also commit us to *‘Working in partnership with governments and the community to meet agreed social objectives and improve the fabric of society’*. Partnership – that is the second aspect of ‘Jesus All About Home’. Jesus of course was himself keen on partnerships, not least unlikely ones – just look at his choice of disciples! - Pharisees like Nicomedus, Zealots like Simon, tax collectors and other despised characters like Matthew/Levi. CCHL and churches together by their very nature need to follow suit. We cannot but work in partnership and must always be seeking out new and deeper forms. In Jesus’ day, the fishing industry was very oppressed and cooperation was the only way to survive, and the most successful form of cooperation were strongly bonded family groups. Not surprisingly, as we see in his choice of fishermen, Jesus therefore chose to make alliances with these very such groups. Which existing groups do we, should we, then ally ourselves to in the work of churches together in the future?

Let me conclude with a final word about a third aspect of ‘Jesus All About Home’, namely Hope. Hope is a difficult thing to pin down, let alone put into a strategic plan, but it is the very lifeblood of our calling, the source of liberation and the reason for

partnership. Of the three great Pauline virtues of ‘faith, hope and charity’, it is the least talked about. Yet without it, faith becomes hard and charity (or love) impossible. We can build as many structures as we like, secular or religious houses, but they will not be true dwelling places unless hope is present. And how is hope made present? It is made present by people, people in community: people like John Kenny and Anne McPherson who offered hope to others and, in doing so, discovered fresh sources of hope and compassion for themselves: hope for this world and the next, bringing divine quality as well as human quantity of provision.

You know, Jesus All About Home – JAAH – can be a great prophetic word for Australia. For we are, are we not, a nation made up of so many different peoples, all of whom have lost our original ancestral homes (whether here or overseas). In such a context, Jesus All About Home is a great cry of liberation, of partnership and of hope for exiles and refugees. A home for all – what a promise and what a challenge! Perhaps it not surprising in consequence that the two greatest practical works of our churches together in New South Wales are home related – CCHL and the House of Welcome – for all those in the caves and hard places. And so, in the midst of a time of change, let us go be fishers and hunters, and home-makers – in the power of the Liberating One.

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