

PARLOUR TO PUB

A Parable of Hope by Barry Chant

Saint Egbert's church was a fine building, standing proudly on the edge of the garden square, in the very centre of town. The parishioners were justly proud of it and tended it carefully. The paintwork was bright and fresh; the shrubs along the driveway were neatly trimmed; the furnishings were dusted and polished.

But one day the unthinkable happened: St Egbert's was burned to the ground. The people were devastated. Instead of their fine, imposing building, all that remained was a charred and blackened heap of large stones, burned timbers and ebony coals.

But the work had to go on. It was already Tuesday and arrangements had to be made for the next Sunday's services. Reverend Dusty Ash searched for an alternative venue. There was one other meeting hall in town but it was not available. The small country school had no assembly room. The other churches, of course, would all be in use. Desperately, Reverend Ash searched far and wide, pleading for help. The only response was from the funeral director. 'We don't usually do business on Sundays,' he said. 'So you're welcome to use our chapel if you like.'

Having no other choice, Mr Ash accepted the invitation and the next Sunday, the morning service was conducted in the funeral parlour chapel.

When the people entered the building, there was a tangible feeling of uncertainty. Some clearly thought it was a grave mistake to use such a place. Others believed it was a very down-to-earth solution to their problem and were prepared to dig in to make it a success.

Given the circumstances, Rev Ash only had time to prepare a skeleton outline for his message. After the people sang the second hymn ('Up from the grave he arose'), he began to speak. 'Dearly beloved,' he said, 'this morning, I want to get to the bare bones of the matter. Today we are doing something really innovative. In the past, some people have accused our church of being dead. Now they will probably feel vindicated!'

There was a polite murmur at this weak attempt at humour. 'But we are called to be a living body,' he continued, 'and I challenge you all to bring life to this place where we are meeting. So let's celebrate the hope we have in Christ.' And with that, he raised his right arm and shouted, 'Jesus Christ is alive today!'

Just then, not knowing a service was in progress, Dave, a somewhat inebriated middle-aged local resident, clad only in a grubby tee shirt, old shorts and brown, scuffed working boots, appeared at the door. A friend of his named Gustav Stanislau Grice, commonly known as 'old G.S.', had died just two days previously and he was hoping he might be able to pay his last respects. As he swayed uncertainly at the door, his eyes lit up and a great smile burst over his mottled face. Excited, he stumbled outside, shuffled back to the local pub and as soon as he entered, called out over the loud buzz of conversation to his drinking mate Andy, 'Hey, Andy! Old G.S. isn't dead after all!'

'Don't be a mug,' said Andy. 'Everyone knows he's been gone for days.'

'That's not what the Reverend says,' Dave replied. 'I heard him say so meself—as plain as day—G. S. is still alive.'

'Come on, Dave,' Andy answered, trying to be heard over the many voices around him. 'Try pullin' the other leg.'

'I'm not pullin' anyone's leg,' Dave replied, deeply offended, as he negotiated his way to the bar. 'That's what the Reverend said and he don't tell no lies.'

It was then that it dawned on Andy what had probably happened. 'You've got it wrong, mate,' he said, laughing. 'I'll bet you anything you like Dusty Ash didn't say "G.S.Grice." What I reckon he said was "Jesus Christ."'

'Eh?' asked Dave. 'Speak up. I can't hear you with all this noise.'

'What I'm trying to explain to you, mate,' said his friend, 'is that the preacher wasn't talkin' about old G.S. at all. What he probably said was'—and to make sure the befuddled inebriate could not get it wrong, he cried out at the top of his voice—'Jesus Christ is alive!'

Surprised by the sudden shout, the whole drinking crowd stopped talking at once. And the echo of Andy's words hung briefly in the air before dying wistfully away.

And so it came to pass that day that the gospel was preached not only in the local funeral parlour but also in the local pub.

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About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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