

**Sermon for Jimbour Chapel, 7 April 2002**  
**By the Rev Canon John Steele**

*This sermon was delivered during the Holy Eucharist as part of a celebration to mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bell family's taking up residence in Jimbour House. The Bible readings were Ecclesiasticus 44 and Matthew 25.*

I hope that this service will be remembered as a "hearty service". That phrase was used by the Reverend Benjamin Glennie, the pioneer Anglican priest of the Downs, in his diary. I quote, "June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1851 - Jimbour. Found there Joshua ... Bell [and others]. Had a hearty service, 14 present."

The service today is much better attended, and it is a hearty one. The singing of the choir is hearty, and the hymn-singing is hearty.

This service commemorates the history of Jimbour, and in detailing some of the history I'll refer to both the Bible readings we've just heard.

The first Bible reading opened with the words "Let us now praise famous men." Today we honour a man who is justly famous - Sir Joshua Peter Bell, who was the driving force behind the Jimbour community and the building of the finest of the great houses on the Darling Downs, 125 years ago. Jimbour House is his memorial, but his lifetime of service to the community and the Colony of Queensland also made him worthy of remembrance.

I am reminded of another great builder, the famous English architect, Sir Christopher Wren. Wren designed some of England's finest buildings, including St Paul's Cathedral in London. When he died, his body was laid to rest in the vast crypt of the Cathedral. The Latin inscription over his burial place can be translated thus: "Reader, if you seek his monument, look around." If you look across the road from this chapel, you'll find a monument to Joshua Peter Bell, but Jimbour House is a monument to his vision.

The Bell family first obtained the pastoral licence for Jimbour in 1843, and in 1847 the young Joshua, aged 21, and his brother, began working as resident managers on the property. One of the earliest records of their presence here is the diary of Benjamin Glennie, which I quoted at the beginning.

The property prospered under Joshua's guidance, with sheep, cattle, horses and crops. Gradually Jimbour became a self-contained village.

Joshua was a man of many talents, and he was able to attract competent staff and workers and to encourage and inspire them to use their talents. The parable of the talents, the Gospel reading in this service, is relevant, and I'll return to that later.

By 1861 Joshua was able to go on a trip to England, and probably to his native Ireland. This experience would have helped him to form in his mind a plan for his own future at Jimbour, based on the romantic ideal of a benevolent English or Irish squire living in a great country house among his

loyal servants and tenant farmers. I say "romantic" advisedly, because the times were changing, and society was changing, even in the old country.

On his return to the new Colony of Queensland, Joshua married Margaret Dorsey, daughter of a well-known Ipswich doctor, and also became active in the Colonial Government. Margaret shared his vision for Jimbour, and by 1873 the amenities included a school.

Joshua built substantial stone buildings at Jimbour, culminating in the present Jimbour House. It was occupied by the Bell family in 1877 - the event we commemorate today.

Sadly, Joshua died suddenly, four years later. Perhaps it was well that he did not see his vision overturned. The Bell family suffered serious financial reversals. Jimbour House gradually fell into near-ruins, and the surrounding village was dispersed.

But in time, the tide turned. In the hands of the Russell family the house was repaired, and reopened in a large celebration in 1925. The Russells shared something of the vision of Joshua Peter Bell. Jimbour was destined to become a community centre and the owners were involved in local affairs and State politics.

This chapel is one example of the community involvement of the Bell and Russell families. It is a survivor of the early village, and when built by the Bells it probably doubled as a schoolhouse for all the children on the property and its out-stations. All denominations were welcome to hold services here. The Bells were members of the Church of England and Ireland (as it was called) and their eldest son was a member of the Synod of the Brisbane Diocese. The Scots Presbyterians were among the denominations that used the chapel.

During the Russell regime, although the social structure no longer resembled that of a squire and tenants, Jimbour became a social centre for the district, with parties in the grounds, and movies in the chapel as well as church services.

It seems to me that the Parable of the Talents, read as the Gospel in this service, must have been a guiding principle, both for the proprietors of Jimbour, and also for many others associated with the property. In the parable, Our Lord taught that God gives everybody talents - not all of the same kind or to the same degree - but God expects us to manage our talents in the best possible way as a duty to him, our Creator. When we do this, we find meaning and purpose in our lives, and we enrich the whole community.

Erecting a fine building like Jimbour House utilised the talents of about 200 people, and the result was a building that became the pride and joy of the district. And I'm delighted to know that this grand showpiece will continue to be a magnet for activities in the "Year of the Outback", and for fundraising to support Bush Ministry, something dear to the hearts of the pioneers.

Jesus in his Parable of the Talents likened us to tenant farmers, working to get a return for the landlord as well as for ourselves. I think Elizabeth the late Queen Mother had this in mind when she said, "Work is the rent we pay for living on this earth." She practised this herself, throughout her long life.

The feudal model of squire and tenants has passed away, but the principle, the work ethic, remains as a model for us all to follow.

May we continue to praise famous men like Joshua Peter Bell.

May each and every one of us develop and use our talents to the full.

And in so doing, may we pay our rent for living on this earth.