

Collins Street Baptist Church  
July 8, 2018  
10.30am

**OWNING OUR PAST**  
**The People Who Have Made Us**

Hebrews 11.1 – 12.2

**Introduction**

This past week I celebrated a birthday. I can now look back on 56 years of life complete. Birthdays are a mixed bag. At one moment we are glad to celebrate what is good about the years we have lived: the gifts we have known; the grace we have experienced; the beauty we've shared with others. In the next moment we cringe at what is less than good, where we have failed, where we have been failed, and what we have lost along the way. To truly celebrate a birthday, we have to own the whole shebang: the beauty and tragedy; the successes and failings; the accomplishments and the disappointments. It's all part and parcel of the life we have lived and who we are today.

This year we celebrate the 175<sup>th</sup> birthday of this church. Two weeks from now we will gather for our anniversary service. A significant part of our celebrating is in owning the story of this church as our story. We may have come to it late, but it is ours no less. It is a glorious story, and a not-so-glorious one. It has moments of great faith and courage and others of foolishness, even shame. Most notably it is a story of people, all sorts of people, some of them we are honoured to know and others we might prefer to forget. You see, the story of our church is a family story. As the old saying goes, you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your relatives. They just are. Even more, they are part of who we are, for better and for worse.

As I look back on the story of Collins Street, I am especially taken with those who have led this church. For obvious reasons, these men and women intrigue me. I do not suggest that those who have pastored this church are more important than anyone else in its story.

They're not. In fact, they are often less interesting than many others. And the fact that most of them are blokes is not something about which we are endlessly proud. But I want this morning to tell you a little about just four of these people, the first four pastors of this church. Their portraits are here for us to see, bar one but we'll come back to that. They are interesting characters, and each one a part of who we are.

### **John Ham (1843-1847)**

The founding pastor of Collins Street was a bloke from Birmingham in the UK, John Ham. Truth be told, he never wanted the job. He had a crook set of lungs. His doctor told him his only reprieve would be to resettle in a place like Sydney, so he and his family set sail from England in 1842. When his ship docked in Melbourne there were two local men waiting for him. On behalf of the Baptists in the settlement, they had come to nab his services for a month before he continued north. Ham was not interested, his wife and family even less so. But after some vigorous arm-twisting, he relented. Ham's one month turned into four years.

There was no church for him to lead, just an odd collection of "strong men with strong opinions." Ham may have been reluctant but he put his shoulder to the wheel from the beginning. The first thing he did was organize a public lecture in the Mechanics Hall, now the Athenaeum Theatre. With the riveting title *The Constitution of the Christian Church*, he drew a crowd. In fact, he concluded his address with an altar call and sixteen people responded: the founding members of the Collins Street Baptist Church.

While reluctant, Ham was also stubborn. Clearly these strong men with their opinions were a force to be reckoned with, but in Ham they met their match. Firstly, he was deeply committed to an open communion table, that is a table to which all are welcome without question or qualification. This fact put him in conflict with more traditional Baptists and many of them left in a doctrinal huff. Indeed, they headed off in all directions, beginning five different churches in the same neighbourhood, none of which survived. Secondly Ham accepted a grant of land from the Governor. That got him into hot water too. Before he arrived the Baptists had already rejected such a grant, believing passionately that Baptists

should not be dependent upon the state. Ham thought that in this case such sentiments were nonsense. He got his way. The church's first chapel was built on this land in 1845. Thirdly, Ham stirred up a hornet's nest when he led the congregation in establishing a school for indigenous children on Merri Creek. The initiative drew savage criticism, but to his credit, Ham persisted. He was stubborn to the end. Ham's lungs never did improve and in 1847 he bid farewell to his infant congregation and continued on to Sydney.

### **James Taylor (1860-1868)**

After a decade of struggling on without a leader, the deacons sent a desperate letter to the Baptists in Great Britain pleading for their help. Their answer came in the form of second bloke from Birmingham, the Reverend James Taylor, a charismatic man who arrived in Melbourne in 1857. Taylor was a whirlwind, a visionary with his missionary sites set far beyond just one congregation. In fact, he was so distracted by opportunity once he arrived, Taylor didn't have the time to be officially installed at Collins Street until 1860. He was just too busy!

Under Taylor's leadership Collins Street boomed. In 1858 the chapel was enlarged to seat 700 and could accommodate 250 for Sunday School. The numbers grew so fast a new building scheme was hatched and a new sanctuary opened in 1862. In a relatively short period of time, Taylor had added multiple and regional Sunday Schools, commenced mid-week bible classes attracting hundreds each week, opened the Gospel Hall to serve the poor, and established classes of theology for those wishing to become preachers. The historian Mervyn Himbury says that it was during Taylor's tenure that Collins Street became one of the nation's great city churches. By 1866 the membership of Collins Street had reached 583, with 77 baptisms in the previous year. But there Taylor's ride peaked. His subsequent descent was breath-taking.

In 1868, it was discovered that Taylor has been in a long-term sexual liaison with Emily Gibb, the wife of one of the deacons. Taylor's demise was catastrophic. Given his notoriety far beyond the church, the excruciating details of the scandal were headlined day after day

in *The Age* and *The Argus*. The blow to the church was severe; more than 200 members resigned and left immediately.

Taylor was larger than life and what he achieved with Collins Street was extraordinary. Like all of us, though, he harboured within as much darkness as he did light. And as they say, the higher they fly the harder they fall. What is especially difficult to comprehend is that just two years before the exposure of his own indiscretion, Taylor had been ruthless in his excommunication of a church deacon for the very same sin. It's likely his own affair was already underway at the time. It's little wonder that there is no portrait of Taylor to be found anywhere in the church.

### **James Martin (1869-1877)**

Decimated by Taylor's departure, Collins Street was a broken church, but one bearing an extraordinary array of ministries: an on-site Sunday School of 400 along with five branch Sunday Schools, missions in Bouverie Street and West Melbourne, an 'outstation' in Bacchus Marsh, and the Gospel Hall flourishing in Little Bourke Street. The deacons were determined to find a replacement for Taylor who could both lead and heal. And did they score!

The 48-year-old James Martin, graduate of London and Bonn Universities, was already established as one of Britain's leading scholar-pastors. His reputation for fine preaching, scholarship and leadership was well known. In contrast to Taylor, Martin was a quiet, bookish, unassuming man. That said, his wise and measured leadership played a significant role in the church's healing. By the end of his eight-year tenure, the membership was back up to 417 with 20 or 30 being baptised every year.

Martin and his wife Hannah — a woman of equal ability and influence — were an extraordinary team. Hannah led the church into ministry with the most marginalized people in the town. Hannah had little interest in the role of a traditional pastor's wife. Her vision and calling were much broader. Though her efforts came under increasing public criticism, the church in her time redoubled its efforts and become one of the most active

communities in Melbourne in service to the imprisoned, the disabled and the poor. All the while, James Martin was publishing scholarly works in New Testament and exercising leadership for the wider Baptist cause. He played a key role in the establishment of the Baptist Association, known today as the Baptist Union of Victoria.

Of course, Martin didn't have everything go his way. In 1872 he tried very hard to persuade the church to adopt open membership, but the deacons would have none of it. What's more, out of his commitment to worship he attempted to introduce a new hymn book. Though ultimately successful, this move met with strong resistance and caused resentment from some quarters that lasted through his entire ministry. Tragically, at age 56, while on a hiking vacation in Tasmania, Martin died suddenly from a heart attack. His loss was felt deeply throughout Victoria but most keenly by his own church. James and Hannah Martin were much loved and his death left a gaping hole. Movingly, Martin's great granddaughter and our dear friend Val Green was laid to rest earlier this year just metres from his own grave at the Melbourne Cemetery. Thankfully, his other great granddaughter, Dr Barbara Martin, continues to embody the Martin spirit with us today. And we are thankful.

### **Samuel Chapman (1877-1899)**

In the same year as Martin's death, Collins Street welcomed the Reverend Samuel Chapman, a big Scotsman who made a big impression and would lead the church into what is known today as its 'golden age.' He stayed until his death more than two decades later. On his appointment, *The Southern Baptist* described him as a 'rugged' and 'manly' Scot: *"He looks like a strong warehouseman, a master of a hundred forges, or a keen-eyed shipowner. Imagination is taxed to realize this man is a clergyman."*

Born in Sheffield, Chapman was well-educated and erudite, a natural and wise leader, and a dad. When he arrived in Melbourne he did so with his wife and eight children. Established in the UK as a very successful minister, it's unlikely Chapman would have come to Melbourne at all were not for his wife's ill-health and her prolonged grief upon the death of their son Arnold, an event from which she never recovered. Unlike Hannah Martin,

Chapman's wife was rarely sighted in the church. Indeed, Chapman rarely spoke publically of her. His family was, to some degree, kept hidden for his twenty-two years of service, as was any hint of his own grief.

Chapman was man of many strengths, but most of all he was a compelling preacher. In 1885, the church agreed to install a new organ. It was a major undertaking as the instrument was to be built slap bang at the front of the sanctuary. Chapman used the opportunity to move Sunday services to the Theatre Royal where on Sunday nights he attracted an audience of some 2,000 people for months at a time. Due in large part to his willingness to tackle the hot issues of the day, Chapman's popularity as a preacher grew rapidly, not only in the city but throughout the state. This was confirmed by a poll conducted by the *Daily Telegraph* in which Chapman was voted "the most original preacher in Victoria" and the most popular. During Chapman's tenure, church membership passed all previous records.

Chapman was also a denominational leader of significant influence. He became known affectionately as "the Archbishop." He played key roles in the Baptist Association, in the establishment of the Baptist College, and in the growth of the Home and Foreign Mission work. Inevitably, with the weight of a growing church and his involvement in so many other spheres, Chapman's health began to deteriorate. Though the deacons appointed competent associates to assist him in his work, Chapman never fully recovered. He died in 1899. What became of his wife and children we do not know.

## **Conclusion**

These are just four stories that come from a particular stage in the church's life. These are men with portraits, but there are so many more whose faces we do not know: deacons and caretakers, educators and activists, teachers and writers, homemakers and politicians, civic leaders and tradespeople, women, men and children. It is people like these who have made us, who have written the early stories of our church and upon whose shoulders we stand. None have been perfect, their shoulders often lopsided, yet all have endeavoured to live the Christian faith and, each in their own way and time, to follow the call of Jesus.

No doubt, they have all had their moments, some their spectacular failures and others their modest victories. Some have been cads more than heroes. Some have done us proud and others less so. But all of them, together, form the great cloud of witnesses that today surrounds us.

Hebrews 11 speaks of such a cloud, women and men of faith and frailty. None perfect, each with a litany of highs and lows all of their own. And yet, the text tells us, by faith ... by faith ... by faith. Today, surrounded by these ordinary witnesses, we are called to cast our eyes not upon them but upon the one in whom their faith and ours is placed: Jesus. Through their stories we are reminded that it is Jesus who is the author and perfecter of faith. It is Jesus who is Lord of this church and the reason for its existence. Apart from Jesus our piddling efforts are at best well-intentioned but of no great consequence. However, gathered up in the story of Jesus — the one who endured the cross, disregarded the shame and is now seated at the right hand of God — our collection of stories, yours and mine, has more consequence than we can possibly imagine.

Amen.