

He Kauwhau/ Sermon

Sunday, 4 October 2015

Genesis 2: 18-24; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10: 2-16

A sermon preached by The Most Reverend John Paterson.

4th October 2015 - Sermon for Te Mihana Māori o Tamaki Makarau, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Auckland. Some material adapted from 'Environmental Sabbath: WJ Bausch Storytelling the Word; 23rd Publications.

Our three readings this morning do not easily combine to provide the preacher with a common theme.



The reading from Genesis continues the accounts in that book of the various ways in which God's creation came into being. The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews opens with those marvellous words which articulate all the fullness of God in the person of Jesus. The Christian claim that Jesus embodies and discloses God is grandly asserted. It is the God present in the life of Jesus whom the church serves and trusts, and upon whom the world depends.

Then we come to the Gospel and listen to both the hardness and the softness of those words from our Lord. The hardness of his strict teaching on the sanctity of marriage, followed by the softness of his blessing of the little children. Inscribed around the lip of the stone font in Aperahama Church are those immortal words: "Tukua nga tamariki nonohi kia haere mai ki ahau". Let the little children come to me, for of such is the Kingdom of God.

Last Friday and again tomorrow, our Calendar provides two days in which we are asked to focus on a Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, and for that reason I shall focus on the truth behind the first of our readings, with its particular focus on God active in creation. Moreover, today is actually the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi, so what better occasion could there be for a consideration of God's creation?

One day many years ago I was fortunate to be accompanied by a wise man in making my first ascent of Manaia on the shores of the Whangarei Harbour. Tetahi o nga maunga teitei o te Whare o Ngapuhi. We rested when we finally got to the summit and gazed around at the glorious views of the Hauraki Gulf, the Whangarei Harbour and much of Tai Tokerau. After a while I foolishly said: " I wonder what's happening in the real world – perhaps it's time to go back." Ka mea mai te kaumatua, tera tangata rongonui: "E tama, e noho. Koia tenei." 'This surely is the real world.'

In about two months time our attention will be riveted on the next of the large international summit meetings, I think to be held in Paris, for the nations of the world and its leaders to consider and hopefully act upon what needs to be done to save God's world from the effects of climate change and environmental disaster.

The Diocese of Auckland, in partnership with Tai Tokerau, maintains a very helpful website entitled Cherished Earth – Papatuanuku, He Taonga, He Tapu. It has to be good because they asked me to provide a Maori language equivalent to the term 'Cherished Earth' and I recalled a speech by the late Ta Himi Henare using those words.

The website makes the point that there is compelling scientific evidence that recent changes in the global climate are due to human activity and that catastrophic consequences will ensue if atmospheric carbon levels continue to rise. The burning of fossil fuels and deforestation are the main causes of this.

The United nations "Global Climate 2001 to 2010" report states that the 21st Century's first decade was the hottest on record, with weather extremes claiming more than 370,000 human lives. Closer to home, the recent pledge to divest from fossil fuel investments made by our General Synod, drew impassioned support from Tikanga Pasefika speakers, most notably from Bishop Api Qiliho, who made it very clear that the 'survival of Pacific Island people was at stake'. Just last week the New Zealand authorities sent back to Kiripati an overstayer, who claimed to be the world's first climate change refugee. His nation will be one of the first to be subsumed by the Pacific Ocean because of climate change.

The litany of woes could continue on and on. It is truly alarming and can so easily become depressing. It is almost too late, but not quite, to do something about it, to ensure that what we bequeath to our mokopuna is not an uninhabitable planet. I want to share two insights that underpin what we as the Christian community have to offer in this global issue.

The first is that we are ourselves not apart from Nature, but are a part of Nature. The late Rewiti Kohere used to remind his hearers: Ko Papatuanuku te matua o te tangata. Papatuanuku is the parent of the human race. Rangi and Papa are the mythological forbears. Kohere noted that Maori loved their land as they would love their own mothers. In the throes of death they were consoled by a bit of soil brought from the Earth-Mother to the bedside.

Another scholar has reminded us that we are Earth's consciousness. After all, Earth is a living organism. It has its bloodstream in our rivers. It maintains its life through our forests, our bush, our ngahere, through our air, our oxygen. We are part of all that, the brains of Mother Nature, of Mother-Earth. We are not separate from Nature. We are one part of it. We live and breathe and move in its rhythms. We share identical chemicals, molecules, and genes. Maori are not alone in thinking like that. Back in 1854 the Indian Chief Seattle purportedly wrote a letter to President Franklin Pierce that expresses the same insight. Among the many things he wrote in that famous letter is this sentence: "Whatever befalls Earth befalls the sons of Earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

The second insight is that we of the faith community have in fact a number of religious roots for a different view of nature and our relationship to it. We can for instance return to the Benedictine tradition of reverence for the Earth. St Benedict in the fourth century farmed Earth with great respect and taught his monks to do the same. "To labour and to pray" remains the motto of the Benedictines. Prayer and work went together. A sense of being God's stewards was the ideal. One did not dominate Earth, one worked with it. And there is also the Franciscan tradition dating from the twelfth century. St Francis, for whom we give thanks today, is the patron saint of ecology and we all know of his communion with nature. His "Brother Sun and Sister Moon" is more than poetry; it is a truth we need to recapture.

Pope John Paul II reminded us in no uncertain terms that "the ecological crisis is a moral crisis." We have to assume moral responsibility for Earth. It is a matter of conscience, and therefore a matter of religious belief.

The final root – and the hardest of all to take on board – is that we have to change our lifestyles. Pervasive and consumerist advertising is so powerful and omnipresent that to change our habits of consumption and our throw-away mentality will border on the heroic. Our love affair with the car in Auckland, for example, has made a widow of public transportation, and one day its pollution will make widows of us all. Our stimulated need to over-build, over-eat, over-use has to be recognised for what it is: a deadly borrowing on our children's future. But change we must if there is to be a future. So on these days of prayer for the care of creation, as indeed mandated by the definition of mission in our own Church Constitution, we do well to recall these truths: we are a part of God's creation. We live in relationship with the mighty organism of which we are a part. We need to re-connect with those religious traditions of ours that held us accountable for our stewardship of Earth, and thereby confronted us with a moral responsibility. And surely, we owe a fertile and healthy Earth to our descendants.

The same web-site I referred to before also contains some helpful suggestions that Parishes and Pastorates can make use of, in order to come up to speed on these environmental issues.

This has been heavy stuff, serious stuff. So let me end with a light little story that helps I think to make the point. It is the story of a man in Taranaki who bought a bus ticket to go to Manukau. He waited and he waited and kept checking his watch. The bus should be arriving soon, he thought. He wandered about a bit, and his attention was diverted by a machine that looked like a large set of scales that promised to tell not only one's weight, but one's age and name and any other pertinent information. So, naturally curious, he stepped on the scale and put his fifty cent piece into the slot. Out came a slip of paper that read: "Your name is Hone Patihana. You live in Hawera. You weigh 95 kilos. You are 20 kilos overweight. You are on your way to visit your brother in Manukau. The bus to Auckland has been delayed. Have a nice day."

He was surprised and amused, and looked around for who was playing a joke on him. Seeing no-one he knew, he stepped on the scale again after a few minutes and paid another fifty cents. Another slip came out, and it read: "Your name is Hone Patihana. You live in Hawera. Your weight has not changed in the last ten minutes. You weigh 95 kilos, and you are still 20 kilos overweight. The bus to Auckland is still late. Have a nice day."

Well, certain that someone was having him on, he decided to try and fool the machine. He ran across the road to a general store and managed to buy a pair of Groucho Marx glasses with the nose and moustache and he bought a hat and a walking stick. Using the stick and walking with a limp, he went back to the machine and paid yet another fifty cents. When the slip came out he read the message eagerly: "You are still Hone Patihana from Hawera. Your weight is still 95 kilos. You are still seriously overweight. You are still on your way to visit your brother in Manukau, but while you have been fooling around across the road, you have missed your bus. Have a nice day anyway !"

That silly story might help to remind us that while we are busy fooling around with our machines and our expensive polluting toys and the excesses that we simply don't need, we are missing the moral bus. And missing that particular bus is dangerous indeed, life-threatening in fact.

We are co-creators with God. After every day's creation, the Book of Genesis reminds us that God looked at what had been created "and God saw that it was good." What God calls good we must not despise. What God calls good we must reverence. What God calls good that has been abused, we must reclaim.

A prayer to conclude:

E te Atua o te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, me enei motu, o te iwi Maori, te iwi Pakeha, me ratou katoa e noho nei i tenei wahi.

Ka whakamoemiti, ka whakawhetai ki a koe mo tenei whenua o matou; mo nga mea pai katoa kua whiwhi tahi nei matou.

Whakanuia to matou aroha tetahi ki tetahi, whakakahangia to matou whai i te tika kia kotahi ai matou i runga i te whakaaro kotahi;

Kua hanga matou e koe hei toto kotahi;
i raro i tenei whakaaro kotahi. Amine.

Bountiful God, you call us to labour with you in tending the earth:
Where we lack love, open our hearts to the world;
Where we waste, give us discipline to conserve;
Where we neglect, awaken our minds and wills to insight and care.
May we with all your creatures honour and serve you in all things,
For you live and reign with Christ, Redeemer of all,
And with your Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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