

Ordinary Sunday 18 - 5th August 2018

Reading: John 6: 24-35

Reflection: A Place at the Table / The 'Brand' we Bear

Last Friday, I had the privilege of attending the reopening and 110th birthday celebrations of Linwood North School – a primary school I had a great deal to do with in my time as vicar of Linwood. After the earthquakes, when the school's hall was red-stickered, I offered our church buildings for school assemblies, prize-givings and other functions. (Just as Rose Chapel, Mary Potter and Knox church have opened their doors to St. Luke's in their time of need).

The Linwood parish delighted in being able to share their facilities and Linwood North school enjoyed congregating in the church – a special venue for their whole-of-school activities. (Even though on one occasion, the classes had to negotiate an armed offenders squad call out on their walk back to school!).

The long-awaited celebrations last Friday were grand, with the Governor General, our mayor, councillors, local MP and other dignitaries present as well as a 101-year old past pupil! One aspect of the celebration was a *re-branding* of the school. It has been gifted a new name by Ngai Tahu – the name Whītau School – by which it will be known from 2019. This requires some explanation. The word whītau is used to describe flax fibre which is prepared and ready to *be repurposed* as rope, kīte (flax baskets) or other items. In the school context, whītau symbolises the preparing of students for the next stage of their life journey. Linwood North – a geographic school description – is *rebranding* to reflect its purpose and mission.

'Branding is an opportunity to shape your message and ultimately use the power of that message, its meaning and its delivery to win adherents' 'If you decline to brand yourself, you leave an opening for other people – including enemies – to brand you instead.' *'If you craft your message for your intended audience, they will want to know more.'* ... *'Branding really just means the set of expectations, memories,*

stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a person' or group's decision to engage.'

These paraphrased statements come out of a chapter entitled 'Brand or be Branded' in the book "Beautiful Trouble – A Toolbox for Revolution"ⁱ

Jesus said to them *'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'* John 6:35

Jesus of Nazareth didn't need a bicultural partner, nor a twenty-first century revolutionary book (described as an invaluable activist resource) to know and make use of branding. In his counter-cultural revolution of agape – God's unconditional love and social justice - Jesus creatively branded himself. He understood his disenfranchised, oppressed Jewish people and made use of their ancient narratives, expectations, memories and relationships as he conveyed his message (as did the gospel-writers). Jesus called the Galilean crowds - those he had fed with loaves and fishes, those who hungered for healing, wholeness and life – he called them to himself, *the bread of life*. Jesus spoke of the bread from heaven that endures for eternal life. Unlike the manna from heaven that fed their ancestors, this true bread from God was to give life to the world. (We know, of course, that Jesus used other 'I am' brands: vine, gate, shepherd, light of the world – engaging sets of expectations, memories, stories and relationships – to contextually express his mission and purpose, appealing to those he sought to love and redeem).

Immediately those gathered asked what work of God they needed to perform. Jesus' response was to call them not to action but to belief – belief in him, but still, the crowd sought a divine sign. They had listened to the rabbi's teachings, many had been healed, their bellies had all been filled but.....Belief is a big step.

What *is* belief?

Confidence, trust, certainty, acceptance, credence, conviction, faith? (No doubt a good deal of ground work, relationship-building and communication was involved, even in rebranding a local primary school – they need to understand, accept and believe in their new name.)

How do we respond to Jesus, the living bread? What hunger do we bring to Him?

Yesterday, our Church calendar celebrated Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, an eighteenth century priest, who *inspired* belief and Christian commitment in thousands of people. He was born into a peasant family at Dardilly near Lyons and as a young adult was conscripted into the Napoleonic army from which he later deserted. In post-revolutionary France, at a time when church-going was discouraged, Jean-Marie felt called to the priesthood and was ordained, becoming village priest of Ars where he was known simply as the Cure d’Ars. A man of great spiritual discipline and moral vigour, he had a deep love of people and placed great stress on the love and mercy of God. He spent many hours in the confessional, counselling his flock and in latter years, thousands of pilgrims. Jean-Marie offered them the bread of life. In 1929 he was designated the patron saint of parish priests.

Jesus said *‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst’* ...and yet, when we do come to Him, a new hunger and thirst arises in us. Jesus, the bread of life, our lover and redeemer, fires us with love for our neighbour and a thirst for justice. *‘The teachings of Jesus are not soothing words for a service club. His message is sharp and incisive, one of identity with and liberation for the poor. Too often, Christians have extracted the sharp teeth from the Word of God and left a gummy substitute’* So writes Jim Consedine in the latest Catholic Worker newspaper.ⁱⁱ

So what ‘branding’ helps describe us? The word ‘Christian’ has many connotations and evokes various responses from others, often dependent on their observations and experiences of those who bear the name. How do others experience us?

One branding that I delight in experiencing is that of the new Nazareth Community of Care. As I drive along Brougham Street, I can read the words of *their* ethos and values on the hospital building: Love, Compassion, Respect, Justice, Patience and Hospitality. It warms my heart every time I drive past. On their website, the Nazareth complex is described as an interdenominational boutique development, but the Sisters

of Nazareth describe it as a “Community with Heart.” And that has been my personal experience when visiting.

When we come to Jesus the bread of life, our hunger for unconditional love and acceptance is met. We, in turn, are called to offer that unconditional love and acceptance to others. Sharing in the bread of life is not ‘crumbs from under the table’ but ‘a place at the table.’ As a Celtic hymn states:

*‘Then show your face and take your place, and share your time and treasure,
Where no one less than Christ the king takes refuge and brings pleasure’*

As you come to the table today, bring your hunger – whatever it may be – come with confidence to the table where *all* have a place, where *all* are fed.

Then, may we all leave the table bearing the brand of Christ, fed and equipped to lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.ⁱⁱⁱ

Amen.

Rev’d. Helen Roud

ⁱ Boyd, Andrew, *Beautiful Trouble - A Toolbox for Revolution*, OR Books, (2017) pp104,105

ⁱⁱ Jim Consedine, ‘*Challenging the principalities and powers*’ in *The Common Good*, No.86, Spring 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Eph.4:1-3