

Ordinary 26 September 30th 2018

Gospel Mark 9:38-50

Reflection

Have you ever heard a Tongan choir and brass band praising God? If not, I can assure you it is a most wonderful, uplifting experience. Yesterday I had the privilege of attending a multicultural service as part of the National Methodist Conference currently in session at St. Andrews College. The college chapel has a capacity of 805 I'm told and it was packed to overflowing.

The purpose of the service was the induction of a new National President and Vice President – most closely relating to a bishop's role in our Anglican tradition. For the first time ever, a Tongan woman – Rev Setaita Veikune – was elected President and the new Vice President is a Palagi (or Pakeha) lay woman – Nicola Grundy: another first for the Methodist church – *two* women taking the national leadership roles for the next two years.

The service was full of joy, with powerful sermons from both women. Their theme was 'Weaving Us Together to Proclaim Life'. They each acknowledged the many differences between them as individuals as well as collectively across their denomination. But they claimed their differences in a positive way – the importance of every thread – the weft and the warp – in their weaving together.

They prayed the following:

'As the rivers in our eastern plains flow down from the mountains, dividing and re-joining, surging in flood, or disappearing beneath the stony surface, but all moving towards the same sea, so we, your people O Lord, move on different courses and at different speeds towards the goal of building your commonwealth of love and peace in this place.'

"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" Jesus told his disciples at the end of today's gospel text. Is this what Jesus was talking about?

The Gospel context is Jesus on the road with his disciples, when John – one of the three closest to Jesus – complains: “*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*” Note that John says ‘he was not following *‘us’*, not: he was not following *‘you’*. Is there a sense that John and others are slipping into a ‘cosy club’ mentality? Drawing a circle of exclusion? A similar incident took place centuries earlier when Moses appointed seventy elders, whom God then gave the gift of prophecy. Eldad and Medad were not among the seventy, but also prophesied. Joshua called Moses to stop Eldad and Medad, but Moses responded, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his Spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:29).

Likewise, Jesus calls the disciples to a more inclusive vision:

“But Jesus said, *‘Don’t forbid him, for there is no one who will do a mighty work in my name, and be able quickly to speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us is on our side.’*” So often, peace is threatened by those who insist on imposing their own agenda rather than working peaceably with others. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, who have been against Jesus from the beginning, the one casting out demons is not an enemy. The exorcist’s work is in keeping with Jesus’ concerns. The disciples drew a circle to keep the exorcist out, but Jesus re-draws the circle to include him in. Earlier in Mark’s gospel, the disciples had not been able to cast out a demon....I wonder, were they simply jealous? Did they think that they, as the chosen twelve, ought to have all the power and recognition?

The one who touched lepers, ate with tax collectors and sinners, and took little children into his arms, draws a wide circle. In the gospel story, the disciples will soon be reminded of this when they try to prevent children from coming to Jesus.

Christ calls us to put aside petty jealousies and to respect the gifts of those who work in his name.

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” Jesus said.

At yesterday’s induction service, I saw this in action. There was a great deal of Te Reo in the Methodist liturgy, honouring our treaty partners - the tangata whenua - but what really moved me was the singing of a good Wesley hymn – Love Divine, all loves excelling – in four languages: English, Tongan, Fijian & Samoan – a verse of each (it reminded me of the Taize experience of singing in many different tongues – the joy of being united in praising God through music and honouring each others’ languages). Yesterday, each verse was sung by us all, with power, passion and joy. And the icing on the cake? – the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel’s Messiah, offered by the Tongan choir and brass band as the Recessional. It really did raise the roof!

Salt can raise us up! My experience of floating in the salt-laden Dead Sea proved that! When we gather together in worshipping God or in community service or peaceful protest over issues of justice, we raise each other up – the opposite of stumbling block mentality. We heard this in our Prime Minister’s speech to United Nations leaders last week.

Salt can season, adding richness and fullness of flavour. How do we season our lives and the lives of others, bringing out the fullness and richness of following Jesus? With the seasoning of prayer & study, repentance and gratitude, acceptance, praise and loving action?

Salt can preserve. What is it that we can preserve?... the dignity and worth of others? Loving, truthful relationships?Peace in our homes and communities? LIFE itself?

Salt can purify and disinfect. Can we help purify God's creation?..... seeking to care for our environment, supporting the clearing of polluted waterways, and the creation of marine reserves, keeping our neighbourhood rubbish-free.

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another”

No need for inferiority complexes or power struggles, anxieties or fruitless comparisons. No need to build walls or fences. Welcome difference. Weave the diverse threads of God's people to proclaim life!

What might God be saying to us as some of our diocesan clergy and their parishioners prepare to separate from our diocese and province? Are *we* being called to have salt in ourselves, support our soon to be diminished parishes with love and encouragement, welcome those who have felt unsafe or been excluded and trust in our covenant God who keeps expanding our circles?

May it be so...

Helen Roud