

“Does possibility ever end?” a sermon based on John 11:1-45 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand at the evening service on 2 April 2017.

Before I came to Dunedin, for seven years about half my time each week was leading a development agency in Australia. A great deal has been written about what makes for good development.

One of the principles is that you try to act collaboratively. You try to avoid doing everything for the community or for the family.

People want to be helped up, not taken over.

People want their strengths affirmed, not their weaknesses highlighted.

It was called a strengths-based approach. You tried to develop economies, rather than undermine them. So, you did not send to countries what they were better producing for themselves.

We did not send bicycles to countries where people made bicycles, or school desks to countries where they made school desks. That would undermine the local bike makers or the local desk makers. The aim was to encourage the economy, not to undermine it. One of the worst things to do was to undermine the spirit of people.

The spirit of people was expressed in them doing what they could.

We had to be very careful because it was very easy to say or do things which demeaned the good things that people did. Most governments and agencies have done such things through thoughtless action which in retrospect they realised was wrong.

A classic is the story of the Australian government with aboriginal communities.

In the 1980s, the government had a project which helped train aboriginal workers in carpentry. Houses were needed by many communities and local people were trained to build houses. They did very well for many years. Then someone in Canberra decided to assess the speed at which these homes were built. They selected a group of carpenters to bench-mark the speed of building homes. Canberra decided it would be more efficient for an outside company to do the work. Immediately, a whole lot of people lost their work. More than that, the communities lost their spirit. When the carpenters were in the community, communication happened. People felt ownership. People interacted with the communities. The communities built the homes.

Now people were transported in, stayed outside the community, did the work, built the homes and left. The communities felt demeaned, overridden, undermined, irrelevant. They moved from collaborating to being patronised. In many communities, it added to the incredible challenges aboriginal communities faced. The story is a classic.

And it is a story too of what western governments and agencies can do to communities.

There is an agency, for example, extremely popular, that puts toys in boxes and sends them to developing countries. Could the toys be produced in the local countries, yes, but sending money does not seem as rewarding to the sender as does sending a box full of toys. These stories are regular.

You may wonder what this has to do with readings. Well, the question is what got Lazarus out of the tomb.

Because that is the question for every development agency, dealing with economies that produce poverty yet with billionaires nearby.

It is the question for every family where a member of the family seems trapped in a downward spiral, and the other members of the family are caught up in the same web.

It is a question where some churches seem in terminal decline, repeating behaviours that had them growing until the 1970s and declining ever since, while alongside them churches are flourishing.

It is question for organisations of all kinds where the culture keeps sucking people into destructive behaviours.

We often said, in our development agency, that it would be very hard to keep going unless we believe in the resurrection, the decisive dislocation that shook the whole system, that overturned the culture, that surprised people with newness, that so shifted the basics in an equation that there was the possibility of new life.

And that possibility had no end. It was once said that sin is where possibility is closed down. Resurrection is the ultimate overturning of sin.

Throughout his life, despite all temptation, despite all pressure, despite all enticement to compromise, Jesus refused to give in to the way the powers of the day operated. He refused to give in to the way the Empire operated, the way destructive systems worked. And he refused even when it cost him his life. His way was sealed in crucifixion.

Resurrection was God's affirmation of the way of Jesus Christ.

That absolute commitment to the way of God represented a decisive breakthrough for humankind. It released a power, a spirit, a presence, available for people throughout the world. It disclosed what was hidden underneath creation, a mosaic, a centre, a ground, a reality, a power, a spirit, to whom we give the name God.

And we hear that in today's gospel. As I said this morning, three instructions. Roll away the stone. Lazarus, come out. Unbind him and let him go.

The first and the last actions were to communities, communities that believed in possibility despite all evidence to the contrary, all temptation to compromise, all despair and grief and despondency – there is plenty of it in the story today.

The communities need to roll away the stone and unbind the funeral clothes. Amid those actions was a Christ who cried out ... Lazarus come out.

So it is for people working in development, families caught in destructive cycles, churches in apparent downward spirals – at our centre is a voice who calls us out, calls us out, and we need each other to act on that voice, believe in that presence, and put aside all other things other than faithfulness to the way of God embodied in Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life.

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growing in courage to live the Jesus way



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net