

“Good News” - a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on B Advent 2, 7 December 2014 based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8.

The life of Heni Te Kiri Karamu weaves its way through our nation’s history from the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi which she witnessed at the age of two until she died at the age of 96 in 1933. She is one of the great saints of Aotearoa. An active Christian and a person of education, as a young woman she helped Maori petition the government over land unjustly held by settlers. Then in 1863 war came to the Waikato. Tamihana, until then a restraining force, saw war as the only option and Heni supported the King movement against the government. She became a wahine toa, a front line woman fighter, but she was torn because of her Christian faith.

She was involved in the battle at Gate Pa in 1864. On the morning of the 29th of April 1864 both sides said their prayers. Both Maori and Pakeha had chaplains. The Maori chaplain reminded warriors not to strike those who were wounded and to show compassion on those who had fallen, this long before the Geneva Convention. One of his favourite verses was Romans 12:20 - “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

Then the British pounded the pa with cannon before storming it, imagining Maori had been decimated. But they hadn’t - there was intense fighting. And in the middle of the battle something occurred which continues to be told. This is what Heni said:

“Towards evening I heard a wounded man calling for water several times and his repeated call aroused my compassion. I slung my gun in front of me ... I said to my brother, “I am going to give that Pakeha water.” He wondered at me. I sprang from the trench, ran quickly in the direction of our hangi, where we had left water in small tins, but found them gone. I then crossed in another direction where I knew a larger vessel was, an old nail can, with the top knocked in and no handle. It was full of water; I seized it, poured out about half of the water and with a silent prayer as I turned, ran towards the wounded man, the bullets were coming thick and fast. I soon reached him. He was rolling on his back and then on his side ... I lifted his head on my knees and gave him drink .. This was Colonel Booth. I heard another wounded man and took the water to him and gave him drink .. and another. I sprang back to my brother, feeling thankful indeed at being again at his side.” She was 27 years old.

Her life continued to be tough yet striking. She joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and with others campaigned for women’s vote until it was attained. Of her, Rosemary Dewerse says - “Heni was ... a woman who invested deeply in and engaged fully with the people and causes she believed in - a gifted, dependable, faithful, honest and inspired woman of God ... Heni is particularly remembered and celebrated for her courage to act with kindness and integrity in the midst of strife.”

When I hear the phrase “good news”, I think of people like Heni. How easy it would have been to have killed those wounded soldiers in the midst of the battle or to have used them as hostages. Instead, these words meant something to her - “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

This Good News had taken root in her, and the Good News did its work, so that as Maori fought desperately for their land, to uphold their rights, their dignity, their place in this land of theirs; in the midst of great fear, of incredible pressure, of the intensity adrenalin produces, of bullets flying thick and fast; in the midst of that, she cradled the head of someone who had been trying to kill her, and she gave him water.

The story of Good News in this land is mixed. It is not hard to be embarrassed, ashamed, troubled, to disown it; mixed as it is with colonisation and invasion.

We bring ambiguous feelings to celebrating the arrival of the first group of missionaries on the 21st of December 1814 and the first sermon on Christmas Day in the Bay of Islands.

And yet, and yet, and yet, Heni and many other Henis ...

At our best the Good News has drawn out our best, the best of our culture, our humanity, our potential. At our best we have been like John the Baptist, uncovering the Good News, unwrapping it, unbinding it, letting it loose, pointing to it, so people have seen it in flesh, with clarity, with freshness, with power, as Colonel Booth received that good news cradled in Heni's lap.

In the three year cycle of readings, this is the year of the Gospel of Mark. Mark simply begins his Gospel - "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God". No whakapapa, no genealogy, no preamble, no lead-in - it's coming whether we are ready or not, whether we are prepared or not, whether we are open to it or not.

First century Jews knew about good news because they heard it from Rome.

Good news is about the emperor, the divine man, the ruler. It's news of victory in battle, the spread of Rome, of taking another town or city or realm, a shift in power, a change to structures, a change to every aspect of life because there is a new ruler.

"Glad tidings of great joy" - they knew that phrase as well. A new emperor is born. There is a new ruler. When they heard the words, they thought of Rome.

So Mark is no cautious man. Despite all the ambiguity of using the phrase, all its associations; despite all its challenge to the existing power, to Rome itself; despite all its potential for misunderstanding, he is determined to use their experience to describe how momentous this event is; an event that changes the world for people - good news.

As NT Wright says - it's not good advice; try this, do that, here are a few principles, here is a set of commandments, you might consider these ideas.

It's good **news**.

Mark wants us to sense the significance of an event - there is a new ruler and the world is now different - the framework has changed.

CS Lewis said - "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

"by it, I see everything else."

And not just a new ruler, a new Word from God.

Israel despaired at the death of the prophetic voice. It seemed prophecy had ended with Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi.

Now the word of Yahweh had come again. God spoke afresh. But not where they expected.

It was in the wilderness, the place where people fled authorities, the place where people fled religion, where people escaped rulers, where people lived the downside of the system, away from the centre.

Yahweh speaks from the edge, from the wilderness.

And so we come back to Heni.

In the heat of battle, she cradled the enemy and gave him water, he received good news.

It was in the wilderness, as Maori fought for their rights, experiencing the downside of government.

The word of Yahweh came.

Here is good news, in the giving of water to a parched enemy, in the coming of Jesus Christ.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”