

**“Wharenui - the Household of God” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 14 May 2017. The texts were John 14:1-14, Acts 7:55-60 and 1 Peter 2:2-10**

Last Sunday morning’s worship was a wonderful and significant service. Led for us by a Catholic bishop and Lutheran pastor with participants from three other churches.

Among other things, we were led by one of our Presbyterian/Catholic families in lighting five candles as a commitment to unity over division. From his place in the stained glass window at the back of the church, the first minister of this church, Donald Stuart, looked down and smiled. In his sermon, Bishop Huber referred to the gospel we heard read, from John 14.

“In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places.” Today we would also say “In my Mother’s house there are many dwelling places.”

Bishop Huber used it as an image for what we said to each other last Sunday; that in God’s house there are places for Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox to dwell. I want to explore the image of house and dwelling place. One of my favourite television programmes is about houses. How people make the most of location and often with stretched budgets go about building remarkable homes.

- Houses with wide windows that look out on expansive bays;
- Houses on tiny sections that make space by going underground;
- Many shapes and sizes of houses.

And for us there are homes of significance. In the middle of preparing this sermon I googled the address of the house in which I grew up and there it was. Classic north island weatherboard bungalow, looking just as I remember it. It was there I experienced love, security, protection, home.

There are people for whom home does not involve those qualities. There are people for whom mother, father, home have terrible associations. What though of our dwelling place within our Mother’s home? How do we imagine it?

“Throw open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the spirit blow through.” Pope John XXIII said of the Catholic church at the time of Vatican 2. He saw it as a big house.

In Kiribati the main building in a village has a thatched roof held up by strong poles on a coral floor - no walls – called a maneaba.

In Aotearoa, the wharenuī has a structure where each part has a meaning.

Wharenuī – big house – symbolising the life of an ancestor.

The house is the centre, the covering. The idea of covering takes us into the experience of the disciples. Today’s reading comes just before the story of crucifixion. The disciples were at home with Jesus but he was about to go away, to be taken away to die. There was fear, uncertainty, anxiety.

Well, he said, although I am going away, and although you are staying, there are many dwelling places within God. Within God you are at home with me; within God you will be at home with me. Being at home in God’s house encompasses our being together and our being apart.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes

“This "home," is not "a temporary place but a permanent one, an abode large enough to accommodate the love that binds Jesus to God on one hand and binds Jesus to us on the other, a giant heart of a place with room enough for everyone whom love unites. It is John's idea of heaven to move in with the God who has moved in with us...”

... A giant heart of a place ...

Some use John 14 to imagine a small house by emphasising Jesus saying: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

But I think that what we make of that verse, depends on the kind of Jesus we believe in. I too believe Jesus is the way, but my experience of Jesus is of one who includes, who reaches out. We see it in Jesus’ attitude to the Samaritans who Jesus does not condemn. We see it lived out in how the early Christian

movement embraced Gentiles. The house of God is a house with many dwelling places.

On Friday, at their invitation I met with five Buddhist monks and other Buddhists, in my study. They have bought a nearby property and wanted to introduce themselves as new neighbours.

Their leader for Australia and New Zealand was visiting. When we sat together, I didn't imagine we shared the same faith. I and they would have recognised that our differences are significant. I do not know what God makes of them or their faith. But as someone seeking to live out faith, I reach out towards people who are seeking to live out their faith.

And I do so, not to avoid Jesus, but because of who I believe him to be. His way leads me to embrace my neighbour in love. He prompts me to reach towards my neighbour with respect. And in so doing, we are able to find common cause. We shared a little of our stories. They asked me what Presbyterian meant. They asked about the history of Knox church. I talked about Thomas Merton who had reached towards Buddhism from Christianity. We laughed when one of the monks said that he takes short-cuts through Knox and one day he was asked by a passer-by whether this was his church. While our faith is very different, we can do much together.

Indeed, in UnitingWorld as Christians we helped Muslim groups in Indonesia who were in conflict with each other. None of this is to downplay the distinctiveness of Jesus for us, but rather to emphasise it, and to call us to live the way of Jesus Christ. To live out Jesus Christ as way, truth and life.

For faith says that when we see Jesus, we see God. I do not think God is a concept we apply to Jesus. We encounter Jesus, his story, his spirit, his people, and in so doing we are led to his God. The God we believe in has a Jesus shape. "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

It is not as if there is a box called "god" and we fit Jesus into it. I think it is more, this Jesus, he is one I want to follow.

And as I follow him, I encounter god. Jesus is the face of God for me. Now when I think Father's house, Jesus leads me to reflect on other houses.

The house - Aotearoa.

And in Aotearoa, there are people who do not have houses. There are people who live in cars, in parks.

In Cromwell, where I was last week, there has been a very significant shortage of accommodation during the harvest season so many people live in cars. The Salvation Army's latest report on the nation highlights the unaffordability of housing.

And in this house – earth. We continue to live beyond sustainable levels.

Last week several people from this church took part in the song protest in the ANZ, calling on the bank to disinvest from fossil fuels.

Thank you to those people.

We live in the father's house in which there are many dwelling places.  
Home ... covering, protection, security.

Leading us to look for others in other dwelling places.

Leading us to pray and work for people to have dwelling places in this country.

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