

## HOME COMING

A sermon preached by Peter Matheson at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 6 March 2016

In this world of Putin and Donald Trump, of unspeakable brutality, cold ruthlessness, populist rant where do we find firm footing? Watched late at night by chance BBC Hard Talk. Nadia Murad describing the murder and rape of her Yazidi people by Isis. So brave this young woman till she collapsed in tears at the end. Where do **we** belong? Nearer home the debates raging in the papers about North Dunedin. Intimidation of women, a culture of uncouthness, security cameras touted as the solution. What is our safe place? Is it just nest warmth from the realities we're after.

Belonging. Coming home in a homeless world. We know, of course, only from a safe home can one sally out to face the mess.

*Here I belong, I breathe these hills, and they breathe me.*

I hope all of you felt at home coming in here this morning. For many of us in this congregation have travelled widely, have we not, and I don't just mean geographically, but emotionally, metaphysically, theologically; home lies in the language which speaks to us, the images, poetry, music which get us by the throat. The people. Te tangata. The face of the other. As Emanuel Levinas says: If you want to know who you are, look at your neighbour's face.

No one place, no one set of ideas, no one party manifesto can satisfy us any more. Is that right? No abiding city. We keep moving on. We have to leave home to find it, as the story of the prodigal son suggests

Home, homecoming, homeland, of course, is a dangerous concept. The family home can be stifling. Home can become an **ideology**. Think of the Blut und Boden romanticism of the National Socialists. Think of the far-right ethnocentrism sweeping once democratic countries today, Poland, Hungary, and yes, modern Israel. The appeal of a Donald Trump to a sort of inchoate anger at those who threaten **their** home. Build walls to keep them out. These randalising crowds in Saxony, Germany, mocking the fugitives from Syria, burning their hostels. And why? Because for them **their** earthly home is sacred, an absolute value; these refugees menace it. Heimat, homeland, dangerous if it become an ideology.

So there's the rub. There's this deep yearning we have for a safe place, an anchorage, where we can be ourselves, flourish, learn, grow. Be cherished. But how to prevent it become exclusive, hackneyed? So much church life in the past crushed dissent and creativity. Paul contrasts our earthly home with **one not made with hands**, eternal, but what does that mean? Huge, impossible questions.

And therefore the only interesting ones.

Paul with this glittering vision of a new humanity, a **new creation**. But how do we get there? I was at Aramoana last week, sky, surf, cliffs, ocean, stretching us up and out in wonder and awe and mystery and beauty. So often I come across secular people who think of themselves as open-minded, rational, down to earth, but in fact their receptivity has closed down. The door to their home is firmly shut. The door to the impossible questions. The only interesting ones.

And of course we religious people. Our stickit conservatism. *That's a' verry weil. But it wilnae work in Kerriemuir....* Not in my backyard thank you very much. I've had an advance glimpse into Yvonne Wilkie's new history of the Otago & Southland Synod. Full of stirring and imaginative and costly initiatives, but so many of them strangled at birth because good folk, stuck in the rut of tradition, don't get it.. My church, my God, my music, my way of doing things. Me, me, me.

We need tradition, says historian Peter Matheson, need to draw on our breathtakingly rich Judaeo-Christian heritage of insight, piety, music, courageous tupuna. Prophets and saints and martyrs.

But we sure don't need traditionalism. As I used to tell my students, every tradition began as a startling innovation.

Jaroslav Pellikan: *Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism the dead faith of the living.*

What is the biblical take on homecoming? So very mixed isn't it. Our covenant history, of course, begins with Abraham **leaving home**. Then the Exodus. **Wilderness** wandering, 40 years long; hunger, thirst, every tomorrow uncertain, replicated by John the Baptist, Jesus in his temptations, then at home on the dusty roads of Palestine, in other people's homes. No home of his own. Deep in our Kiwi psyche, too, this passion for the wilderness, we become ourselves when we're **away from ourselves**, in the bush, the mountains, the rivers, the beach, in the wilderness. Not **stuck** at home.

God only sends us manna for a while, our Joshua passage tells us, but then it's all over. gone. The soul food of one generation doesn't work for the next. We have to **move on**. We're painfully discovering this today. These recent debates between Ian Harris and Murray Rae in the ODT. Is God custom-built by us, or are we God's creation? How do we talk of God authentically, as Bonhoeffer asked? How **become as church the one thing needful** for a New Zealand which is beginning, in so many ways, to totally lose the map.

**Yes, Restlessness** has always been a hallmark of our Judaeo-Christian experience, ever reaching out for a **New** Jerusalem. The peregrini, the pilgrims of the Celtic tradition. Reformers, Covenanters. No abiding city. Home lies ahead of you, Paul says.

We need to belong. We need a safe place. A home. We are here today in Knox because it is our marae. Our hallowed place. Yet it's God's house, not ours. In its prayers, anthems, sermons, its outreach, it points beyond to the eternal home, not made with hands. When it stops doing that, junk it, the prophets would say.

Each time I read Paul's letters to the Corinthians I'm rocked back on my heels. We have two long letters from him, (not bad after 2000 years); we know he visited them on several occasions. We love to cherry-pick them:

*But the greatest of these is love.*

*You are the temple of the Spirit.*

*Where the Spirit of Christ is, there is **freedom**;*

*we are ambassadors for Christ;*

Yes we cherry pick Paul. But the Corinthians couldn't stand Paul; and the thought of facing them made him suicidal: "we despaired of life itself"; their gossiping, jealousy, quarreling, selfishness, arrogance, sexual abuse. Their sin.

People today don't like the word sin. It's been so abused. No wonder. Let's substitute **self-love**; in our self-love we are all Corinthians. We fly off the handle when **our** plans are stymied, our power games scuttled; when the home we have made for ourselves is, we feel, being **violated**. That ominous word.

And Paul sees this. He doesn't though – note this - he doesn't try to moralise the Corinthians into righteousness.

Paul has a quite different tack. You have a new more capacious home; in Christ you are a **new creation**, he tells the Corinthians. But what does this 'in Christ' stuff mean? Paul's Christ mysticism. Bit beyond us. Let's stick to moralizing.

I think not. We need to have a go at understanding it. One thing is sure: it means we can no longer stay in our old home. In the old self of Peter Matheson or whoever. We are not that new creation. To gossip, to quarrel, to abuse folk; well it's almost inborn in us. Yes? We are not naturally caring people. I'm not, anyway. I love gossiping!! But the good news, Paul says, is that the old shell we live in, drag around like a snail, is discarded. In Christ we are this new creation. From now on we regard no one, from a human point of view. We leave that old shell behind.

At Otago Boys High School we used to get exeat certificates if we needed to leave school for some sort of emergency. But how do we get exeat passes from ourselves. I attended a gathering 10 days ago of some of our most distinguished environmental scientists, Sir Alan Mark and others. Close to despair at the deaf ears of the political establishment and the corporate world. These environmental wreckers in high places. We live in this beautiful country and are **wrecking** it. And no one wants to know.

So, my friends, I get so sick of hearing people say they are not religious. As if religion were signing up to 100 unbelievable things before breakfast, wearing a pious face in church. I know I need religion. I need my exeat certificates. For we have this treasure of a new humanity in clay jars; and the extraordinary power, the transcending of self, belongs to God not to us, as Paul says. This for me is not the language of irrationality. Question, question everything to the end, my father used to say to me, and then **question your questions**. This Christ mysticism is the language of ultimate openness, mystery, reverence. Finding a home not made with hands.

All our words about the deepest things, about love, faith, hope, resurrection, exodus, God, wilderness, home, friendship are wonder words. Poetic, musical, **heart-wrenchingly real**, expressing this empowering by God; this call to be ministers of reconciliation, of a new covenant in an uncouth world. The gentle, but tough discipline of prayer is one way of putting our old self continually under scrutiny. Standing in God's presence, catching stray hints of it in my case.

We want to come home. We want to be real. We want Knox to be home for the homeless ones, the colourful ones, the seekers, the folk battered by life, the prodigals. We want our country to outflank the crudities of materialism, utilitarianism, the heartlessness of the market. We are not willing to stand by and watch the wrecking of this beautiful country of ours.

We are committed to eyeing up a more capacious home, one not made by hands.

**BELONGING.**

On this soft-shining radiant day  
Grey-silver seas beneath a massive sky,  
Light elbowing out the gloom.  
A flirting sun caresses distant hills  
And teases awkward trees.  
Precisely fashioned drops of rain  
Are measured one by one  
On tarmac road.

I walk - it's second-nature now -  
The rim of land and sea;  
Left to my hand the quietude of waves.  
A curious seal ups periscope  
Then dives again;  
Click-clacking starlings sigh,  
Acknowledging the crunching surge  
Of Aramoana's surf.

Here I belong;  
I swim this land  
And walk this sea,  
I breathe these hills  
As they breathe me;  
My weightless feet  
Touch covenanted soil,  
On this soft-shining, radiant autumn day.

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