

“In Border Territory” a sermon based on Acts 16:9-15 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 1 May 2016.

We are in the Easter season, the time between Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

Readings have included sections from the Book of Acts, describing the Holy Spirit forming the Church.

Last Sunday the identity of the Church was as a border crossing movement.

We saw how Christianity moved from within the Jewish faith, starting as a Jewish sect, to engaging a Samaritan – half-Jew, to including an outsider, a eunuch, and then more outsiders, Gentiles. Each time the circle was painted wider, and each time the composition of the church changed.

Each step was dramatic and revolutionary.

I quoted Stephen Bevans, the Chicago scholar who is speaking in Dunedin this week, to say that the church is most the church when it is at the edge, going outside itself, being turned inside out, when it is learning how to follow Jesus at the border.

The concern of the church is not itself, but the reign or rule of God, infiltrating all creation. In creation we see signs of the Spirit, signs of the presence of Christ, signs of the love of God.

“This is the essence of the church: to give itself in service to God’s reign, just as Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, gave himself. The church ... continues Jesus’ mission ... boldly yet humbly witnessing to the Gospel with which it is entrusted.”

Bevans says the church first became church in Antioch when it stepped beyond the circle of Judaism.

The church is most the church when we, the Church, stand at the intersection of the Christian movement and new territory.

Today, I want to explore that border territory, and what happens to us at the border.

The book of Acts is a book of borders, of how the Holy Spirit encounters us at the border.

Today’s story in Acts describes how Paul encounters God in a new place, finding there the presence of God among women who had gathered.

Among them, Lydia, a worshipper of God. The legend is that Lydia was the one who took the gospel to Europe for the first time.

So through this sermon is the question -

Where are the boundaries and borders and edges for you?

Where is the space, the border of unexplored territory, you are experiencing?

Let me try to earth that question in everyday life.

Some people here have become grandparents for the first time ... a new stage of evolution ... a border, beyond is unexplored space.

Some people here have an illness which is affecting how they use their bodies, and how they think about themselves. Beyond is new territory ... they are at a border.

Some people have survived a life-threatening illness, and each new day brings life they thought they would not have. Each morning they stand on the border of a country they thought had been closed to them. They are at a border.

Some people here have applied for work and been unsuccessful, or they have received advice of a new job or they are wondering what vocationally they can do. Its fresh territory, an open space. They are at a border.

Some people at work have been given new responsibility, and they need to learn a different set of skills. They are at a border.

Each Anzac Day brings together memories of war and fresh circumstances. Anzac Day asks again and again the fresh question - why people are still being drawn to authoritarian rulers, to demonising strangers, to excluding people who are seen as different.

Students frequently stand at the border, as they encounter new information, new approaches, new ways of seeing.

It happens so often we don't notice it – this is how it is for us.

So we look across the border.

In New Zealand the space beyond is inhabited by God, but few people bring the perspective of faith.

How then do we negotiate the space?

Let me give an example from my own experience.

Last Sunday afternoon I spoke at the Knox College Anzac Service. What was the space?

Students, few of whom know the Christian story in any depth. Anzac Day, arguably New Zealand's most religious day. World events with echoes of the language and thinking of war.

So where were the signs of the spirit in their world?

Political scientists have been discussing why people are being drawn to authoritarian rulers. In the context of the US Presidential nominations. People seem afraid of the loss of power. There is talk of border walls, of excluding Muslims. The kind of talk that has led to war in the past. Its space for faith.

I had seen on *youtube* a conversation between Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, and Miroslav Volf, a Yale University Professor of Theology and former soldier in the Croatian Army. They discussed, among other things, the source of our identities, and of how sources of identities that rely on differentiating ourselves from others contributes to violence – and how that was evidenced in the twentieth century. Space for faith.

So we look across the border and see there evidence of God. And we bring together, the resources of our faith, the resources we tap into in reading, praying, thinking, conversing, meditating, and we bring those to the border, the boundary, the edge.

Every person seeking to follow Jesus has this experience again and again.

And in the process of encounter, our faith grows and develops, and the church itself evolves.

Bevans calls this prophetic dialogue.

It is dialogue first. It involves listening and watching and noticing. We are looking into the new space to see what is there, to listen to what is there, to notice what is there.

We start with what is happening with the people around us, in the context of the space they inhabit.

It is prophetic second.

In other words, we are pointing to something more or deeper. We don't just go with the flow. We are not just using what is already known there. The gospel offers a distinct vision. We offer the perspective of faith that helps people see what is happening.

Back to the everyday.

As grandparents, we seek to support our children – that is our instinct – perhaps the prophetic part is the non-anxious nature of our support.

As people with a new illness, we listen to our bodies – the prophetic part may be helping us be realistic about what we can do, and fresh understanding of others having the experience.

As people who have survived illness, we live gratefully. The prophetic part may be the opportunity to review what we give ourselves to.

People who are unsuccessful in getting a job, face great disappointment and the limitations of life. If they share their vulnerability, they contribute to building community, to enabling others to offer support and prayer.

A few Sunday nights ago, we interviewed Jessica Palmer who is Associate Professor of Law. Her area is trust law. She could teach law in matter of fact way, being the best law teacher she can. She could help populate Panamanian law firms that help people evade tax. But she stands at the border of law and faith. Her faith asked her questions. How is trust law being used? Is it enabling equality or helping the rich to be richer? She experiences prophetic dialogue.

We stand at borders and boundaries of many kinds, at the edge. That is where we belong. That is where the Spirit encounters us. That is where the church is most church. That is where God sends us, again and again. We do not need to be afraid, even though we are may be uncertain, unclear.

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