

“Cultural stewardship and identity – the church catholic as the international nation”, a sermon preached by Rev Dr Doug Gay at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on Sunday 25 February 2018.

Kia ora, Kia orana - It's a privilege to be with you tonight - an honour to follow the wonderful John Barclay and also to preach in a church where the preaching ministry is graced by the love and wisdom of Kerry Enright.

The season of Lent is a time to examine ourselves - if Epiphany is a more extrovert season oriented towards mission, where we explore how recognition of who Jesus is ripples out across the world - if Epiphany is more extrovert, perhaps we can say that Lent is more introverted. It's a time when we as the church are called to do some work on ourselves - not to save ourselves, or to earn our salvation - that has already been done for us on the cross. I love what the Taizé worship book says about Lent - these 40 days are a celebration of God's forgiveness.

But there is a kind of work on ourselves which comes from grace - which comes after grace - which is impelled by grace -

Another way of speaking about this work is to speak of our discipleship - a work of learning to follow where Christ leads, a work of listening to the world God loves, a work of looking at the world God loves, a work of learning to love what God loves.

Lent is a time for us to be renewed in our discipleship - if we take up our cross and follow Christ - if we live lives marked by the sign of the cross - then as John said last Sunday - from our baptism onwards, we are dying to all that deals death and rising to all that gives life.

Which means that these 40 days of Lent - which begin with this powerful reminder that one day we will die - these are also a celebration of life - and a summons to life.

As we prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's Supper tonight - I want to share with you some thoughts about discipleship which have been shaped by my own learning - both my learning over many years, since I was a teenager - and the fresh learning I have been involved in on this trip - and during our time in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

What I have to bring tonight is shaped by my own experience - its both enabled and limited by my experience and by my learning. I bring it with humility - not least because I am a guest and a stranger - a foreigner speaking in a foreign accent - my knowledge of this country and this context is very limited...

In particular, I want us to think tonight about the journey of discipleship we are called to make in relation to culture and identity and ethnicity - and I want to do that as we engage with this text from Revelation 7.

Some of us find the Book of Revelation a difficult text - the English writer Will Self wrote - 'I read the Book of Revelation once - I never read it again - I found it a sick text'. I grew up with a headful of crazy, dangerous and reactionary interpretations of this text - and one of the things which helped me to get beyond that - which changed the way I read it, was realising how, down through the centuries, Revelation had often been in Christopher Rowland's words: "a favoured text of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the rebellious + the revolutionary"

There's a phrase I love which comes from the biblical scholar Richard Bauckham - he says 'the purpose of the book of Revelation is to purge and refurbish the Christian imagination'. What's going on, in Revelation, Bauckham suggests, is a bold and remarkable attempt by a church under persecution, a church which still exists largely on the margins - an attempt from within that church - to out imagine the power of the Roman Empire - to imagine something greater and better, something free-er and fairer, to see beyond the visual power, the visual rhetoric, the symbolic power of the empire - its

overwhelming architecture - to see it from God's side, to see it in the light of heaven - to see into heaven itself, through an open door and catch a glimpse of an alternative to the power-structures of this world and the claims made by the powerful in this world.

I think there is something very Lenten here - the purging and refurbishing of the Christian imagination. My time in Aotearoa/New Zealand was always going to be a time of learning about and reflecting on culture - the peg on which this visit was hung was an invitation to teach with Steve Taylor a course called 'Church In Mission - Theology in Changing Cultures'. For me at least, teaching is always also about learning - my own learning. About confronting my own ignorance - my own struggles to understand...

I want to focus with you tonight on a phrase which is used in slightly different forms seven times in the Book of Revelation - I am only going to look at one passage and even within that I am only going to focus quite narrowly on this phrase.

The book is set up with John of Patmos - in the Spirit on the Lord's Day - speaking in the first person about a series of visions - after the letters to the angels of the seven churches - I notice your own liturgy here at Knox draws on that - hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches - to the angel of Knox Church, to the angel of PCANZ - after that - in Revelation Chapter 4 a door is opened into heaven and John is enabled to look in, to go in and to say what he sees.

In a season when we are thinking deeply about the cross, and walking towards Good Friday - Revelation chapter 5 offers a profound and prophetic meditation on the Cross - we meet there the scroll which is sealed with the seven seals - which seems to represent something like the meaning of history - the shape of the story we are living through - we meet it as a closed book - no-one in heaven or on earth is found worthy to open it or look into it. And John weeps over this. I think we should always be attentive in scripture when we hear the sound of weeping, when we see faces wet with tears - John wept bitterly - surely these are tears we have all wept - in the face of human cruelty and human suffering - of global crisis or personal tragedy - how can we ever make sense or find meaning?

But one of the elders says 'Don't weep - the Lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome - he can open the scroll and its seals - John lifts up his tear stained face and as he looks for the conquering Lion - he sees the slain Lamb.

The world is not redeemed, the scroll of history is not made readable by apocalyptic violence or imperial power, but by the word of the Cross - which calls us to peace.

And all the choirs of heaven and earth sing with full voice - Worthy is the Lamb.

When Revelation teaches us to sing a song against Caesar, a song against Empire - it teaches us to sing a song in praise of the one who was stripped and crucified and humiliated - a song for the victim who is now recognised as the Victor.

Already in Chapter 5 the song of the victory of the Lamb has been taken up by every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea - there is a cosmic comprehensiveness about this mythical, mystical vision - but when we come to chapter 7 - we get a closer look at the company of heaven - at the heavenly choirs - at those who are with the Lamb - and they come, we are told "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages".

As a nursery school, kindergarten kid in Scotland - most of us learn the Christmas Carol - *Away In A Manger* - in the final line of which we pray: 'and fit us for heaven to live with thee there'.

There are plenty of escapist ways to understand that - but a more consistently biblical way to think about our visions of heaven, our visions of the end times, our visions of the Day of the Lord is that they are meant to have powerful purchase on our living in the here and now. You see if in Lent 2018 we were to be made more fit for heaven it would make us so much the more also fit for earth - your kingdom come - on earth as it is in heaven.

Heaven is a bad place to be a racist - it's a helluva place to be a white supremacist - heaven is a place of deep disillusionment for fascists and Nazis - heaven looks like tough going for those with a colonial mindset, heaven is devastating for imperialists - heaven is endlessly disappointing for polite, middle-class folk who claim they don't see colour

Because heaven is gloriously and beautifully and magnificently diverse - heaven is extravagantly tartan - heaven is lit by the uenuku - the rainbow - what we see in heaven is what we try to speak of and act out in communion - is the catholicity of the church - and that is a multi-coloured, multi-cultured, multi-voiced, multi-ethnic thing.

And to the extent that we fail to see that, fail to perceive that, fail to get that - that is a measure of our failure to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, that is a measure of the work of sanctification God is still busy with in our lives - that is a measure of the miles still to be walked in our discipleship, of how far we still are from being fit for heaven.

As Christians in the reformed tradition - one of our key doctrines historically has been a vision of human beings as stewards of creation - which means we are stewards of variety and diversity - we are called to love what God loves - the diversity of species, the bio-diversity of the planet, the infinite diversity of space - and yes, the cultural diversity of humanity - what does Peter say after seeing his vision in Acts - God has no favourites - the God of Pentecost is revealed as the multi-lingual God, the poly-lingual God - the God who speaks every language - who delights in the poetic and expressive potential of every dialect - the God who loves every eye-shape, every skin tone, every hair colour and texture, every accent - the God who became incarnate with a Galilean accent - the risen Christ who is equally at home hearing and speaking Icelandic and Twi and Cook Island Maori and Arabic and Hindi and Kiwi English. We believe in the Holy Spirit of translation - who delights in the play of meanings and holds all their dissonances and divergences peacefully as the Go-Between God.

What I think Revelation 7 is all about - is drawing us, attracting us towards the beauty of a vision of diversity in harmony - its about luring us to fall in love with a vision of heaven in which no-one culture gets to be the Lion - all of the tribes and tongues and nations are honoured and respected in the light of the Lamb. Which means a drastic humbling of the hubris of some groups, of their presumptions to cultural superiority and a glorious, gracious exaltation and re-honouring of other cultures which have been suppressed and demeaned and displaced.

Could that be part of our Lenten discipline this year - a sign of the life-long learning, the discipleship we are called to by the Spirit?

I remember very vividly as a 20 something Christian recently moved to multi-cultural Hackney in East London, having these prophetic words spoken to me - rather gently - by a wise minister called John Campbell - "We have to learn to cherish our identities as white people in ways which are not at the expense of people of colour". I have been trying to live into that vision for the last 30 years - because I believe it is part of how God is trying to fit me for heaven - to detoxify my whiteness - to turn my sense of myself as a white person into something that can be tolerated and even celebrated in the presence of the Lamb, because it has been purged of its racism, explicit and implicit, disempowered, disarmed, deprived and set free to be itself.

The 'we' there was for John and I as white Scots men - that is not a 'we' for everyone here - but perhaps the question is a Lenten question for us all - what does it mean for us to cherish our identities in ways which also free us to cherish and respect and honour the identities of others?

Tonight we have had the door of heaven flung open for us - and we have been given a vision of what Martin Luther King called - the beloved community. That vision clarifies our Lenten journey - in the light of the Cross, in the way of the Lamb - learn what it means to be yourself - to love your own identity as God loves it - to repent of everything in how you have learned to be yourself which makes you a bad steward of your own identity or a bad neighbour to someone else's identity. Learn what it means to be Kiwi, to be Maori, to be a Scot, to be English, to be Korean or Samoan or Tongan - in the light of

the Gospel - praying for the Holy Spirit to turn you away from the deep and pervasive sins of racism and cultural superiority.

Can I finish with a word to those for whom this country is home. A word from outside, from Scotland - it might be a rash word - I hope not. I think there is bad news and there is good news for you.

First the bad news - New Zealand society today is a long way off from being fit for heaven - it is disfigured by racism - it still has a huge amount of learning to do and repenting to do - and in the church we say this starts with the church, with us - a long, hard road to travel towards a society in which the dignity and rights of all people are respected. So you folks need your Lent.

But there is good news. I have seen things and heard things here which make me wonder if this is not also a society which has begun to do more positive work around a vision of bi-culturalism and multiculturalism than almost any other majority white country in the world. Certainly, I believe, Scotland and the UK has many things to learn from you - many ways in which you are modelling both repentance and celebration for us and for the rest of the world. You are a gift of God to me, to us - and we need our Lent.

The deepest good news of all - on this Second Sunday of Lent - is that God is with us in this journey of discipleship, this learning to love what God loves, this learning to be ourselves - and tonight God calls us to this table - where we are invited to be with the Lamb. Where we are called into communion through Christ - first with those around us in this building, here and now - in all of our difference and diversity - but beyond that, with all those who are in Christ - on earth and in heaven - sisters and brothers from every nation and tribe and people and language. It is with them - in living and holy communion with them, that we are invited tonight to this holy supper.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

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

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