

“Detox” a sermon based on Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 9 December 2018.

Life involves continual learning ... and unlearning. Unlearning patterns that served for a time ... but no longer. Unlearning habits that got us where we are ... and are no longer enough for now, or the time ahead.

Years ago, I was with some late twenty year olds at a leadership course near Melbourne. High achievers, they had risen through their organisations to be youthful leaders. At the course, experienced mentors told them bluntly that what had got them success in their twenties, would limit if not destroy their leadership before they were forty. Youthful energy and capacity for long working hours wasn't enough for the long haul. If they were going to be effective in the longer term, they would have to unlearn what had got them this far this soon.

Unlearning ...

Our planet is relying on us unlearning. My generation learned to live with bigger houses, affordable cars, packaged food, instant communication, ready-made clothes, planned obsolescence, personal convenience. We learned to live with plastic, to heat with coal, to fly around the world. If our planet is to survive, we are having to unlearn many parts of that way of living, perhaps the pattern itself.

Unlearning ...

Its more than being re-educated, isn't it?

Because there are deeper powers at work, insidious and encompassing - powers that have us in their grip and from which we struggle to be free. Information alone, education alone, will not help us live sustainably. Otherwise we would already be living that way. Our buses would be full.

An example of these deeper powers is how we live in a colonised country.

Through misunderstanding and cynical action, Pakeha marginalised Maori and took their land. We live now as a colonised nation, narratives and actions undermining the cultural wealth that was here before Pakeha

came. How hard it is to be free of that colonising. Even after more than 150 years of the Treaty, the decolonising steps seem small and fragile.

Is it too much to call toxic our damage of the planet and pakeha colonising of this nation? Surely the presence of plastic and polluted lakes and the extinction of species are symptoms of toxic living? Surely the struggles of systems of education and health and justice to value the first peoples are symptoms of toxic being?

Yes, of course, unlearning is a step on the way to a flourishing people, a flourishing planet, a flourishing church.

But is unlearning enough?

Well it depends on what we expect, what we hope for. Do we hope for the flourishing of our planet, the flourishing of all people, the flourishing of our living with God?

Malachi was written to Jewish exiles returning to Jerusalem in 538 BC. Those exiles expected a new and blessed beginning. They had high hopes of rebuilding the temple, of God triumphing in glory. But instead of rebuilding and triumph, they experienced a wretched economy, high taxation, fiscal corruption and savage inequalities.

The high hopes and glorious vision of a renewed Zion cooled into disappointment, drifted into carelessness, then sank into sullen resentment.

So Malachi speaks of unlearning, and more.

Of all the approaches he could have taken, why did Malachi take that tone? The people were already disappointed. Why did Malachi have to depress them more?

Why didn't he just say: "Buck up. It's not as bad as it seems. It will be all right. Keep your hopes high. We'll get through this."

He didn't say that because the people needed to unlearn in order to flourish.

They needed to unlearn empty worship, where the heart is not in the voice, the will not in the action.

They needed to unlearn a spiritually and morally reductive account of humanity.

They needed to unlearn cultural deflation, lost ideals and creeping cynicism.

The messenger named what needed unlearning so the people could see themselves not as who they had become but as who they were created and called to be.

God calls them to be a people who live justly, who lift and protect the lowly, whose laws speak a larger wisdom than self-interest.

But it was more than unlearning.

Notice the images Malachi uses - the refiners fire, fullers' soap - cleansing, purifying, detoxifying images.

Because we are dealing with a greater power - sin. Many don't like that word, which is entirely understandable. The language of sin can be manipulated to create a moralistic agenda where certain people are seen as worse than others.

The language of sin can paralyse people with guilt, fear and self-loathing.

The language of sin can be trivialised and moralised.

Yet Advent involves an honest reckoning with sin.

John the Baptist announces detoxification – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins:

- release from what kills and destroys.
- release from refusing to become fully human.
- release from what interferes with the opening of our hearts to God, to others, to creation, to ourselves.
- purifying from estrangement, disconnection, disharmony.
- cleansing from the slow accumulation of dust, choking the soul, until it becomes apathy and care-less-ness.

The messenger promises sin will be sucked of its power.

The messenger promises righteousness: right relating to the earth, to each other, to ourselves, to the poor and the widow, to God.

Baptism is immersion in the detoxifying life of Christ, immersion such that his passion for life flows in our veins, immersion such that his commitment to justice animates our wills, immersion such that his compassion turns our hearts to neighbour-love.

And the Lord's Supper offers detoxifying food, renewing the life of Christ in us, refreshing our habitual living with him.

As part of a global community, immersed in the same water, feeding on the same food, we share in Christ's work of detoxification, including care of creation and the process of decolonisation.

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