

“Heaven shall not wait” a sermon based on Luke 6:17-26 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 19 February 2019.

Today we have Luke’s sermon on the plain, sounds like, but is different to Matthew’s sermon on the mount. Whereas in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus and his disciples go up the mountain, and Jesus teaches them there ...

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus spends a night praying on the mountain, he calls his disciples together and chooses 12 of them – we know them as the 12 apostles. Then he comes down the mountain with his disciples, and stands with them on level ground.

A level place with a great crowd of disciples and a multitude of other people wanting healing, teaching and power. Jesus addresses, specifically, the great crowd of disciples.

They were a mixed group. There were rich and poor, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, reviled and respected.

As they stood there, they might well have looked sideways at each other. That is what people did in a hierarchical society. And they would have put people into a hierarchy, because hierarchy mattered.

At the time society worked by relationships of reciprocal exchange that created mutual obligations. If I made a gift to you, you became obligated to me, and it was expected that you would give back to me. Naturally then, you only gave to people who could, one way or other, pay you back.

Now, distinct from that, in the Jewish faith, the poor had a special place, and people were expected to give to the poor. It was expected that money would be given to the beggar.

Jesus goes further. Here, there is no hierarchy, or if there is a hierarchy, it is turned upside down. Jesus is intent on creating a different kind of community, a level ground community.

How different?

In society, people would naturally think - woe to you who are poor. And ... blessed are you who are rich, because you can create all these obligations by giving to others, including the poor.

In the realm of Jesus though, the people who are rich have had their just desserts. They will get nothing more. The people who are poor are blessed.

In the society, woe to people who are hungry, blessing to people who are full – but not in the realm of God.

In the society, woe to people who weep, blessing to people who laugh – but not in the realm of God.

In the society, woe to people who are reviled, blessing to people of whom others speak well – but not in the realm of God.

The New Testament scholar John Barclay speaks of the generosity of the early church as hyper-generosity. And it was so noticeable, that the hostile outsiders of the time criticised the early Christians for it.

They spoke of the gullibility of Christians, that charlatans could come among Christians, pretending to be poor, and become wealthy because the Christians did not take enough care about who they gave to.

Christian generosity was un-calculating and unconditional. Unlike the surrounding society, there was no expectation of a response, no requirement of pay-back. Christians gave and gave and gave and gave, recklessly and lavishly.

If people were hungry and there was no spare food, those who could would fast for days, to gather enough food. So it was that in the Christian community, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

In the realm of God there is no top-down, no looking down, no treating needy people as lesser, no sense of benefactor and beneficiary, no more privilege and less privileged, no more important and less important. Level ground.

At this point, the sermon could go in many directions as we explore how to live this vision.

Let me tell a story of living this way of being, from of all places, the Auckland University Law School annual magazine. It arrived last week.

In 1978, in New Zealand, young brown men were being arrested in numbers. With unemployment rising and the economy faltering, blame found a home with immigrants. Not all immigrants. Mainly people from Samoa and Tonga.

People had temporary work visas and before the visas expired, they returned home. If they did not return home, they were arrested and deported.

The infamous dawn raids had begun in 1974, escalated in 1976 and continued. Dawn raids involved Police going into homes at dawn where it was suspected there were people who were “overstayers”. Random checks were conducted on those suspected of not having a valid work permit. People were stopped in the streets.

On a Tuesday night in March 1978, a 17 year old Niuean man Iki Toloa was heading home after a day at work at Consolidated Plastics in Symonds Street Auckland.

After working late he missed the last bus, so he was walking home when he was stopped by a police officer. The officer asked to see a work permit. Mr Toloa replied that he did not have one because he did not need one. He was Niuean and Niuean people are New Zealand citizens.

Then, the police officer asked about three identical combs protruding from his pocket. Mr Toloa handed them over and said one was his own and two were from his work.

The officer arrested him for theft from his employer. The combs were valued at 20 cents each. Following his apparent confession and subsequent arrest, Mr Toloa was convicted of theft from his employer and awaited sentencing.

The police had failed to contact the employer and when they eventually did, after his conviction, they were told that Mr Toloa had taken 2 combs from the reject bin at the factory. This was a common practice among employees and one that management allowed.

All of this was reported in the newspaper at the time. Most people would have seen nothing extraordinary here. Many Pacific Island young men were being arrested for some of the most minor offences. And many in society, including the Pacific Islands community, accepted this. It was normal. They were respectful.

Some challenged. Organisations like CARE, the Citizens Association for Racial Equality. In 1978, the secretary of CARE was a young law lecturer called David Williams. Williams read the article and decided to act.

The two combs were the equivalent in value of a University pen. He went to the Auckland police station and confessed that he had stolen a University pen.

The police officer resisted arresting him. You use this pen for your work, he said, this is not theft. No I don't said Williams. See, my son has been using it to poke into his chalk. See the chalk. You have to arrest me. You arrested Iki Toloa for less, and I am confessing the crime.

After a few exchanges the police officer phoned the Vice Chancellor of the University who phoned the Dean of the Law School, who said ... don't arrest him ... that's what he wants.

The point was made. There were two standards operating. The arrest of Mr Toloa had absolutely nothing to do with theft or criminal activity. It was a chance to arrest another brown person in a decade marked by racial inequality.

Following a front page article about Williams visit to the police station, the police commissioner referred the matter back to court, no evidence was offered and the conviction was vacated.

Now it happens that David Williams has just retired as Professor of Law at Auckland University and he happens also to be an Anglican priest.

The pen is now held in Auckland museum's Pacific collection. And the chalk mashed into the pen is still visible.

David Williams says – "Silence is a form of condoning. If you've got a chance to stand up, you should be willing to do so. It's important that people who are given a certain status by society, do try to speak truth to power ..."

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