

“Love, learn, leave” a sermon based on John 14:23-29 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 26 May 2019.

Three verbs – love, learn, leave. I begin and end with leave.

There are signs the world we have known is coming to an end. The world we imagined would last, is not lasting. Most obviously environmentally, as we enter the age of Anthropocene. But not just environmentally.

And at some level we are adapting to this ending, as a natural transition. No longer do we buy properties beside the sea at sea level, without thinking about the risk. No longer do we assume we can swim in rivers. No longer do we imagine strong long-standing buildings will stand through earthquakes. No longer do we worship without some sense of danger. No longer ... The world we imagined is not ending smoothly though.

When we leave what do we take with us? What guides us beyond messy endings? What do we hold on to, when our imagined worlds fall away? What resources can we tap into for living in a different world?

A large part of our gospels is given to Jesus preparing us for what is beyond a world that ends. His own world was ending. The words we heard today in John come after he predicts his imminent death. The risk is that all he stood for would end. The call he received and shared with his followers. The countless conversations that fired their imaginations. The courageous encounters with outsiders that redrew societal boundaries. Would Jesus be forgotten like many other self-claimed messiahs?

And the backdrop of the gospel of John is the ending of the imagined world of the first followers of Jesus. They had left their nets and counting tables to follow him. He had reconfigured the religious tradition that had formed them. He had predicted the end of their cherished icons, including the Temple. They no longer felt at home in their local faith communities. Their own leaders had turned on them. They were leaving their imagined world.

What resource did they have for their new world? They had seen in Jesus a peculiar truth. They must have wondered how long they would remember it.

When he goes, will they forget it and when they forget it, will it be lost?

That is the question Judas, not Iscariot, asks Jesus. How is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world? The question is asking – given that we alone have seen who you are, is the continuing existence of your movement up to us, alone?

And Jesus says, resoundingly, no. It is not up to us! The burden of keeping the life and mission of Jesus alive is not our burden. The resurrection proclaims that the life and ministry of Jesus will continue even when his followers forsake him. He is not done and dusted and filed away. His life continues.

And, says Jesus, we can be part of it without being burdened by the responsibility to continue it. The life of Jesus has a future independent of us, but our life can be entwined with that future. Entwined with God the father and mother, and with the Holy Spirit.

How? Jesus said “Those who love me will keep my word.” The disciples had come to love Jesus and his way. Its spirit and beauty and grittiness and humility and more. Integrity whiter than snow. Justice that rolled down like a river. Compassion that brought people in and lifted people high. Courage with the nous to undermine an empire, to transform the world. A vision of a world renewed.

He embodied it and they loved him for it. That love was the bridge to the new world he was bringing. The future God brings beyond the end of our imagined worlds. The verb is love ... not just respect or admire or value - love. Love speaks of passion, sacrifice, choice, a consuming fire, a galvanising conviction that orients us and carries us. Knox Church is a community that loves Jesus.

Love is communal and also it is also about us as individuals. Not in a self-absorbed or narrow way. Not in a way as if it is just Jesus and me. It is Jesus and me, and more ... Jesus says that in that love, God comes to us and make us the home of God.

“Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

In that love, the life of God is entwined around our life. In that love our living becomes the location of God, God’s address. Loving Jesus.

Learning from the Holy Spirit.

The love of Jesus gives us a thirst to learn from him, to learn what Jesus is saying and doing.

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

The Holy Spirit teaches us. So this is not just learning about faith, or Jesus, or God. It is learning from God, being taught by God’s own Spirit now.

One of my ministers years ago used to pray this prayer before the reading of the Bible. “Spirit of God, shine your light on the page we read that reading, we may see Jesus.”

All in the present tense. Jesus assumes that we are teachable, that we thirst for knowledge, that we will want to learn from God’s Spirit. And because Jesus is present, not past, because he is living, not dead, Jesus is always interacting with what is happening in our world. So the truth of Jesus is now. Even as the Spirit reminds us of what Jesus said, the Spirit helps us explore it now.

The week before last I attended a conference in Minneapolis. Under the theme moral imagination, speakers ranged across topics like race, environment, inclusion, economy, violence, democracy, guns ... Each speaker based what they said on scripture, but each speaker was asking - what does God have to say about this, now, here.

Thirsting to learn requires us to be prepared to be changed. The biggest threat to that is fear, which Jesus addresses.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

When the world we imagine, ends. When the way the church was, ends. When the values and perspectives we had cherished, end. It is tempting to be afraid.

Fear drives us back to where we felt more at home, where more was familiar and dependable.

Peace is the presence of God with us so we are open to the future of God, so we can leave the world we have known. It’s not easy.

Years ago a theologian ascribed particular temptations to each stage of life - childhood, young adulthood etc. The temptation of old age he said, was melancholy. And one of the causes of melancholy was when the world we had worked for, the cause we had given our lives to, the institution for which we had laboured, did not survive as we imagined it would. When people give

themselves to specific things they value, they can despair when they end, as if their whole life's work has been in vain.

The invitation, the writer suggested, is to be drawn into a wider vista, a deeper call, beyond the particular. We are being invited to broaden our imaginations to God's future, not narrow our imaginations to a particular expression of that future. We are invited to keep leaving the world as we imagined it, into the deeper, wider, higher, longer being of God.

Jesus said ... I am going away, that I may come to you in a new way.

This is leaving by choice formed by faith in God. I learned this year that a national menswear chain from which I had bought clothes received the lowest ranking for ethical buying. I am leaving them. Dunedin has the highest rate per capita of electric vehicles. People are leaving gas-guzzlers. I am reading a book at present about a very successful writer and speaker who is leaving, in steps, the materialistic, consumeristic, career-achieving values that drove him, for a life more integrated, more given to people, more given to the deeper realms of faith.

As people who love Jesus, taught by God's Spirit, we are invited to keep leaving accepted ways, to live into the world God brings in Jesus Christ.

Love, learn, leave.

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called to be a community following Jesus



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