

“Poetry and Piety” a sermon based on Matthew 5:1-12 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 2 February 2020. The sermon also remembers the life and music of Shirley Murray, New Zealand’s most honoured hymn-writer, who had died 25 January 2020.

How wondrous it is that we are able to make music, and that in company with creatures like whales! How wondrous it is, that there are people with skill to echo the rhythms of nature and to help us express what we most deeply experience! Would Christianity ever have flourished if no one sang it? Would Christianity ever have spread if it was not able to be sung in our languages and cultures? Every religion seems to find that words alone are inadequate. There needs to be rhythm and rhyme and movement. It needs to fill lungs as well as minds, to expand our bodies as well as our souls.

Piety needs poetry and poetry that is sung. Poetry and piety – I am using words used by Shirley Murray, New Zealand’s most honoured hymn writer who died just over a week ago. Singing was there in Judaism and found in the Hebrew scriptures. One of the earliest Christian hymns may be found in the book of Philippians – let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited ... Even the Beatitudes have the sound of song. Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are the meek. The repetition and the structure, pointing to the structure of the coming reign of God.

Matthew is telling how the life of Jesus shows us God’s way, God’s world. What is God’s world like? It is a world where the poor in Spirit are blessed, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled, the pure in heart see God, reviled people are glad. The Beatitudes are like the contents page for the gospel of Matthew. See how what is written here gets enacted later on - the person with leprosy who is healed ... O, so that is what it is like to be poor in Spirit. The one who breaks the sabbath and heals a person ... O so that is what it means to be reviled for the right reason ...

The Beatitudes are also a call to action. How do we participate in the coming reign of God now? How do we live into God’s realm now? Not by living the virtues of the Roman empire! How do we receive the kingdom of heaven? ...

not by being decorated and honoured and powerful. How will we be comforted? ... not by accumulating wealth. These experiences of loss and death and violence and war were real to the people Jesus addressed. In the eyes of the empire, the people Jesus addressed had much to mourn, were poor in spirit and longed for their society to be just.

It's a promise to them and we are eavesdropping. So to us Jesus is asking – who do you want to be like? Another way of translating the word blessed is “enviable”. Envidable are the poor in spirit, enviable are the meek. Envy these people. And in saying this, Jesus isn't speaking from some high and idealised spot. The mountain here is not Aoraki or even Cargill. The mountain here is a high point from which we can see clearly, from which we see the range of people's experiences, from which we can see how people are going about their everyday lives. It's like looking from the Knox Church bell-tower. It is a place of revelation, when we see more clearly how people are living. Looking out from the Knox bell tower, Jesus is noticing people who emerge from the hospital, or Rob Roy, or the Bog or Lone Star or the dentist. Of all these people, envy those you might easily miss, the poor in spirit, the merciful, the meek.

Which brings me to Shirley Murray's music. Shirley Murray was, as I said earlier, New Zealand's most internationally recognised hymn writer. Hundreds of hymns, 22 in the Church of Scotland hymnary, 10 or so in the US Presbyterian Church hymnary, an honorary doctorate from the University of Otago and much more. Grew up in Invercargill, Methodist, influenced by a thoughtful minister, her intermediate school principal, she was head prefect at Southland Girls' High, proficient in music and language, Otago University graduate. At the age of 16 she came to Dunedin to represent her school at a French speaking contest and beat – vanquished she said - a young man from Kings High School, John Murray, who years later she married. He became a Presbyterian minister and Shirley started writing hymns.

Hymns of this soil. The mountain from which Shirley observed life was not idealised and distant, but here and now. The other New Zealand hymn-writer Colin Gibson says of Shirley's hymns – “it was singing our faith in the present tense”. So she wrote of rights and racism, peace and war, climate and inclusion. Shirley's heartfelt love for our country keeps shining through - the clear skies, the mountains and lakes, this bird-rich land. Faith has set us on a

journey past the landmarks that we know, to quote one of Shirley's hymns. And they were songs of faith – there's never a time to stop believing, we will shortly sing. It sought to tell all our story and uphold the meek. Colin Gibson calls Shirley's hymn "honour the dead" the greatest war hymn of our age, chosen by the Government to be sung at the Gallipoli commemorations, and now even the defence force including the verse that honours conscientious objectors.

Shirley wrote of what prompted her: "It seemed to me that the hymns we sang had no resonance with the world I lived in... there was no imagery that evoked a particular environment, no landscape of thought to accommodate the southern hemisphere (think of 'In the bleak midwinter' in high summer, for example), no connection with the Maori culture of our society, which is officially bicultural, nothing to articulate our own hopes and visions." "Because I live in a highly secular society in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I am conscious of how the stereotypes of Christianity can be cynically dismissed. I long to say that there is so much to understand and embrace in the wisdom, spiritual treasury and survival skills that Jesus has given the world." "I have wanted to move to where Christ consciousness as well as Christian conscience meshes with the world I experience in my own life and time. Almost everything I have written revolves, ultimately, round the concept of 'peace' in all its manifestations."

Using plain language – "I like language that gives a jolt of reality." "Many of the hymns we have traditionally sung were meant for the Biblically literate and larded with references, incomprehensible without some Bible teaching. ... I write hopefully, however, because people will never stop singing about what they believe ..." Shirley wrote the words and others wrote the music. The hymn, Loving Spirit, for example, has 17 different musical settings to which it can be sung. This music came from a woman with a warm humanity and lively faith and a ready smile. Shirley and John were wonderfully encouraging friends and colleagues. I had the privilege of following John as chair of the Hymn Book Trust that published much of Shirley's work.

One of our challenges was how to help churches sing of the here and now. That challenge remains evident. When I go to regional and national church gatherings, overwhelmingly the music is focused on the otherness of God, the transcendent, and on personal experience. Little is about the here and now,

the outer, the structures and systems with which we struggle. Perhaps this looking away from ourselves is also a response to secularism, that the church seems so small and weak, we cannot imagine changing much and so we look away from ourselves, speaking of salvation of a kind rather than creation as God intended. For much contemporary music in New Zealand, the mountain of God seems very high. In the Beatitudes, the mountain is more humble, to help us see what is happening around us, with us and our society. We are singing from the Knox Tower. In the music of Shirley Murray, we sing from that mountain, in the spirit of the Beatitudes. Thanks be to God for the life and music of Shirley Murray.

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