

## **Sermon Knox Church, Dunedin 22 November 2020 - Kirkin' the Tartan Sunday, given by Rev Margaret Garland**

**Readings:** Ezekiel 34:11-16 Matthew 25:31-40

We pray: O God may we hear your word for us this day, with open ears and willing hearts. And may we respond to your grace generously and fully as we seek to be your people here in this community and beyond. Amen

Picture this – 1853, a family – waiting on the dock by the Clyde, waiting to board the ship that would take them forever from their beloved land away to the other side of the world. They had memories of their life in the highlands – it was in their blood if not under their feet these past generations. Now this seemed like the right thing to do – even if the journey was somewhat perilous, even if they knew little of what awaited them – it seemed right, their one chance of a new beginning, of a life away from the uncompromising hopelessness. With their belongings at their feet, the family waited. And while they waited the woman pulled out the one thing that they had chosen to leave other things behind for. She opened her bible and it fell to the reading from Ezekiel – and she read these words:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

She breathed again. She was held in the promise of God with every fibre of her being. Her shoulders came back, her head up and her gaze fixed on the future with some hope. It was enough for now.

Have you wondered, about what it is like for those who travel to a new land – for Maori, the first people of Aotearoa, sailing south to a new beginning, finding this speck of an island in the midst of the vast ocean. For the early European arrivals, the whalers and sealers, the missionaries and the surveyors. For the families that came to prepare the way for the 'first' ships – I always have a wry smile when I hear the phrase! For the settlers, rich and poor, eager and apprehensive, what was it like? What was it like to leave, and what was it like to arrive?

We find it hard to imagine the farewells as they would have been in the 19 century and earlier – because they were pretty much final farewells, no hope of returning, of popping across to see family every couple of years (although we might have a slightly better understanding having experienced 2020!)

For those who came from Scotland to New Zealand as part of the Free Church settlement of this southern land, I imagine that the passage from Ezekiel would have resonated. The people had seen injustice, division, the scattering of their communities and the breakdown of clanship. Spread to the four corners of the earth, for many Scots the words Ezekiel spoke from the reality of exile in Babylon to the scattered and dispossessed Hebrews in the 6th century BC would have seemed very relevant indeed.

Ezekiel is speaking words of hope. Lamenting the way in which the shepherds of Israel had turned from caring for their flocks to looking to their own ends, he preaches God's presence and guarding for each of the flock wherever they may be. And maybe as the people listened, maybe they too breathed again, held in the promise of God, maybe their shoulders came back, heads came up and they reclaimed hope for the future. And it was enough, for then!

Ezekiel then speaks of God's judgement on the leaders of the people of Israel for failing their flock. It doesn't sound too good for them to be honest. But he also reminds the people, the flock, that God expects much of them too. In this new place, says Ezekiel, do not become like the ones that have failed God and you. Be instead the breath of God for each other, be not selfish or thoughtless or uncaring of others. You must live the promise of God that is in you every day – and if you do, you will look upon the face of God at the end with peace in your heart.

Jesus lays it out the same message in the Gospel of Matthew – an expectation that the people of God will live in close relationship with God, living out the promise of love and reconciliation. And it is interesting to note that Matthew places this passage as the culmination of Jesus teaching, just before the anointing of Jesus, the last supper, his arrest.... this passage has real significance and we are to pay attention to that I believe! The lectionary compilers thought so too. Today is the final one of the church year – the last Sunday before Advent – a time for gathering the threads of Jesus' teaching together into the 'this is the message I want you to remember.' There is, too, a sense of utter simplicity and of finality in this gospel passage – of end times and judgement for sure yet also a final reminder of how we are to live out in a very practical way the presence of love that is Jesus Christ.

So Jesus final words of teaching are about how we are to care for one another – not because we live in fear of judgement but because when we are held in the promise of God-with-us and we can do no other. In Babylon or Jerusalem or Glasgow or Dunedin our God given purpose is to find the hungry and the homeless and the imprisoned

and the unloved and the sick and to be Jesus hands and feet serving them. It is a simple message and we are to pay attention to it.

We are called to action in the name of love and justice. We are called as the people of God to love each other as we are the beloved of God. That surety of belonging will wither and die if we do not share that gift, that blessing, that certainty of not being alone, of being loved, with our world, our aching, broken world. For there is need.

It is 1853, December in this new Edinburgh. A woman sits on the plank bench staring out to the water, wondering how to do this. The hope and assurance found on the banks of the Clyde is still there but overlaid by the shock of it all. She never imagined the loneliness, she is tired and dispirited and missing home. One day maybe she will settle but it is almost Christmas and she misses her family desperately. And the sun is shining, its warm and the trees and wildflowers are in full bloom – what kind of Christmas is that? And so she does what she always does when she is troubled. She picks up her bible – this time it is the Gospel of Matthew that falls open to her – she knows this passage well and is pleased to be reminded. She had been too much immersed in herself and her family, not seeing the rest of the ‘new world’ around her. Goodness there are so many people who could do with her help. She has only been here six months and yet she has so much she can offer the newcomers. A cuppa, a word of advice, a shoulder. And she suspects that they could bring new life to her – stories of home, fresh ideas, shared troubles. After all this is a community of people not matter where you are. There are still the rascals and the religious, the visionaries and administrators and doers and dreamers. Her bible, she knows, is still her rock, and Jesus is still her saviour and there is still work to be done in this new and strange land.

And so she sits there for a moment longer, and she finds she can breathe again, held in the promise of God before she gets up and takes some food to the family down the muddy path. She has hope for the future in this new beginning.

It is November 2020 in Otepoti Dunedin. It has been a difficult year, many of us are struggling at being part of a journey we did not willingly set out on. It is like we have left our safe harbour and the way forward is unknown. Yet as a people of faith we take a moment to look around and know our blessings. We have loving community. We have democracy – no small thing these days. And then we look around us to the scared and the lonely, the acts of injustice and the trampling of the vulnerable and we be Christ’s voice, hands, and love wherever we can – because we can do no other. There is much to do, people to love, justices to pursue, mouths to feed and hands to hold in this new place, this unexpected new beginning. We are to pay attention to others as God attends to us.

So let us look to our living, our future with hope in the transforming presence of God with us

Let us take time to breathe in the presence of God. To be held in the promise of God with every fibre of our being. Let us look to the future with hope and let us be that hope to this hurting and broken world in every way we can. Let us be enough we pray. Amen

Margaret Garland

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**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand

[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)