

“Negotiating transitions” a sermon based on 1 Samuel 3:1-20 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 17 January 2021 by Kerry Enright.

2020 - a year of transition, not least in facing us with our vulnerability as creatures on this tiny planet. 2021 is already proving to be another year of transition, as we come to terms with the pandemic and its impact on how we live and how we understand ourselves. Of course, we are always making transitions of one kind or another. Nothing is static. And transitions often ask us awkward questions about what we had assumed to be true.

Fred Craddock spoke of how that worked out for his father. “When the minister used to come from my mother’s church to call on him, my father would say, ‘You don’t care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn’t that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.’ My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody’s feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the minister would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, ‘Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!’ My father would always say the same thing. ‘You don’t care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.’ I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn’t say it. He was at the Veteran’s Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out the throat, put in a metal tube, and said, ‘Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We’ll give radium, but we don’t know.’

I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them—potted plants and flowers. Even in that thing that swings out over your bed they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant came from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible class, of my mother’s church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. . . . He wrote on the side, ‘In this harsh world,

draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’ I said, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And he wrote, ‘I was wrong.’”

Sometimes we leave it too long to admit we were wrong. Sometimes we are so much part of the system that needs transition, we cannot see that we are wrong, or if we do see it, we cannot free ourselves from it enough to admit we were wrong. There is too much at stake, in reputation or relationships or the changes it will require of us. And we can feel we owe a loyalty to those who framed our assumptions.

We had just pulled up for a picnic on the shores of Lake Ruataniwha in Twizel and were about to get out of the car when we heard on the car radio the news that a crowd of people, incited by the President of the United States, had occupied the Capitol building. We sat and listened. And now some of the people who had supported the President are going through contortions trying to hold on to their supporters yet do what is right. For political reasons they cannot say “I was wrong.” And there are others who for religious reasons cannot say “I was wrong.” We have been there, in our way, have we not?

Eli left it too long and the consequences of leaving it so long went on for generations. The calling of Samuel and his critique of Eli signalled a major shift in Israelite society and religion. It began a period of prophetic criticism of Israelite leaders, precipitated by Eli’s failure to see how wrong he was. The spiritual context is stated: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (1 Samuel 3:1). The Israelites are no longer witnessing God’s leading of them, and they no longer hear God’s laws or prophesies. In 1 Samuel, the blame for that is largely laid at the feet of one man: Eli the priest.

Eli is a terrible leader. He mistakes Hannah’s silent prayer of deep devotion for drunkenness (1 Samuel 1:13). Nowhere in Scripture is Eli, the leading priestly and prophetic figure of his time, said to hear from God. Rather, we are reminded continually, Eli’s senses have grown dull (1 Samuel 3:2). He had got used to not hearing from God.

The worst crime of Eli was that he did not control his sons, who were also his subordinate priests. Hophni and Phinehas stole the best portions of sacrifices

from God for themselves (2:12-17). And if that was not enough, they also raped the women who were guarding the entrance to the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:22). Instead of controlling his sons and protecting the people of Israel from their abuse, Eli spent much of his time sitting on a throne (1 Samuel 4:13, 16). God pronounced judgment on the house of Eli (1 Samuel 2:27-36).

The first words of God that Samuel received (1 Samuel 3:11-14) set the tone of prophetic judgement on callous, abusive, unfaithful rulers in the rest of the books of Samuel and Kings. But before Samuel could speak he had to realise who was speaking to him. As Samuel lay by the ark of the covenant, he heard a voice crying out his name. His response immediately was "hineni" which means "here I am." It's a phrase uttered in their times by Abraham and Jacob and Moses and Isaiah and Ananias. And when they said hineni, here I am, each of them went on a journey of truth-seeing and truth-telling. Each of them acted from a wider accountability ... to God. Is that not what our faith represents, at least in part? It isn't just about us and those close to us.

Samuel had to tell Eli that Eli and his family were to be removed from power because of their abuse of power. Samuel brought a different approach. He travelled the countryside, prophesying and judging Israel (1 Samuel 7:16). Samuel's approach represents an intentional departure from the tent of meeting and the tabernacle and the temple as the centre of the biblical story. He began the tradition of prophets speaking to kings and people wherever they found them. What we see expressed is God's passionate disgust at abusive leadership and God's raising up of young prophets to undo the abuses of their elders who ignored God and failed to protect innocent people.

As people who seek to live the gospel, to listen for God's voice, we are part of an ongoing process of revelation and learning. That will often bring us to the point of saying, sometimes anxiously, sometimes reluctantly, at least to ourselves, "I was wrong", "we were wrong".

Just before Christmas I read an article about one of the earlier Premiers of New Zealand, John Ballance. It highlighted Ballance's involvement in some of the most troubling aspects of our history in relation to Maori. The more I read, the more personally troubled I became, because over thirty years ago I led a service marking the centenary of Ballance's death and I cannot remember

uttering one word of lament. I did not see enough. I did not know enough. I did not acknowledge enough. I was wrong. We were wrong. Just three years later, frustrated at how parts of the story were being represented, people occupied a park in that city.

We are invited to pray with Samuel – “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” Dare we pray it? Dare we pray it, given what we face? Our economic system keeps adding wealth to the wealthy. Our political system is not protecting our environment. Our judicial and health systems discriminate racially and economically. Our church system seems unable to engage in life-giving ways with the neighbourhood in which we exist.

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”, that we be part of God’s transitioning of this world to the world God wants.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net