

## **“Our heart in hiding...” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 23 May 2021 by Rev Dr Peter Matheson**

None of us, I presume, takes the story of Pentecost literally any more, flames around the head, people of different languages chatting together in some sort of divine Esperanto. We know this is figurative stuff, the language of prophecy, of empowerment. Language as every biblical scholar knows, is not the outer clothing of thought, values. The way we speak goes to the heart of who we are. Metaphor is the high road to all philosophy. And we forget too soon that with Jesus, the seannachie, the story teller, with Paul, the smart talker, with the early church, **a quite new language** came into the jaundiced Classical world. In literary terms the Gospels and Paul are amazing, chaperoning a brand new vocabulary for life, death, faith, hope, charity. With Augustine, biography becomes possible. A new language as the key to a new humanity. So we no longer talk by one another (Ha ha!)

Friends we think too little about language. It's crucial. Bad language is not swearing. It's talking in clichés, in jargon, professional, religious, sentimental clap-trap. Language is what makes us humans human.

Here in Knox we have the language of the organ, bracketing the service, taking us right out of ourselves. The language of hymns, which moves us beyond words. Anthems, the marvellous kick in the posterior the choir can give us, shaking the very rafters of our psyche; these soaring sopranos. Our marvelous children's choir. Now and then, too, Jordan treats us to a new musical way into prayer.

The language of sacred dance, pioneered in this country by Shona MacTavish, a life-long friend of Knox. The language of the sermon, which is so different from a lecture or a talk, because it makes the outrageous and bone-chilling claim to be channelling the sacred, the numinous, and, most eloquent of all, we know the language of silence.

So we in Knox do speak in tongues. Pentecost then, the opposite, as you know, to the story of the Tower of Babel, when humans got above themselves, and communication chaos set in.

Today as we look around the world we are closer to Babel than to Pentecost. Fake News OK. Look at the USA, two countries, split right down the middle. Fox News and CNN. No common language. Jerusalem. Israelis and Arabs. Look at ourselves in the Church, caught so often in a **churchy** language. For most Kiwis our religious talk is gobbledy gook, a hermetic code,

Pentecost is about the discovery, the recovery of language. God's most precious gift to us. Never easy. Poets, artists spend much of their lives in despair, searching for that elusive word, image, metaphor. (I'm trying desperately to learn Gaelic, when everything from pronunciation, to spelling, to vocabulary to syntax ties me up in knots, and utter humiliation, till Alison helps me out.)

The marvelous Jesuit, poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins sees a falcon ride the air

*My heart in hiding*

*Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing*

And what, pray, is the falcon a symbol of, what is it that stirs us

in the very abyss /hiddenness of our hearts?

Our generation faces incredible challenges: to the environment, to democracy, to global health, the yawning gap between rich and poor. It feels like Babel. It is Babel.

And with these apocalyptic challenges, **theological** challenges. When I began my ministry being radical was easy, because you could take for granted 90% as foundational and feel brave and radical questioning the Virgin Birth or Jesus physical resurrection. But today everything is in question. Where can you even begin?

Facing down death by the Nazi hangman, facing down the terrible shame of the Germany he loved Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* turned to poetry. Wonderful stuff.

Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen,      *Kept safe and sound by the good powers.*

Erwarten wir getrost, was kommen mag.      *We'll face whatever lies ahead.*

Gott ist mit uns am Abend und am morgen      *God is with us from dawn to darkness*

und ganz gewiss an jedem neuen Tag.      *And for sure on each new day*

Despairing of a church mired in piety and sentiment and fearfulness Bonhoeffer set about forging an edgy new language:

What distinguishes Christians from pagans is that they stand by God in his suffering.

Being Christian is not about being religious but being Christ to others in the life of the world.

Unless it is there for others the Church has no right at all to exist.

We have to learn to speak of God in a non-religious way.

abandon God talk unless you are crying out on behalf of the Jews.

We are Bonhoeffer people or we are nothing. Like him we encounter radical evil every time we open our eyes;

David Attenborough: everything precious in our culture is now threatened with extinction by the climate crisis.

No easy words for all this. Still less easy answers or actions. Yet as the kaitiaki of three thousand years of Judaeo-Christian prophetic agony and ecstasy we should not underplay our Pentecostal calling.

To find a new language for LIFE.

We can make a beginning, forge a language of resistance. Inch by inch stuff. I do pray that what I am saying here is not some pulpit rhetoric. I do believe this: that without the empowerment given by the Spirit, that raging wind and fierce fire in the belly which Pentecost is on about we will crumble

*This is not  
the age of information.*

*This is not  
the age of information.*

*Forget the news,  
and the radio,  
and the blurred screen.*

*This is the time of loaves  
and fishes.*

*People are hungry,  
and one good word is bread  
for a thousand.*

David Whyte.

What are the values we need to undergird a truly human society. If we can contribute to reflection on that, what hat a privilege

When it get too black I think of my wonderful colleagues in the East German Church under Communism who won over hearts because of their sober language, their Sachlichkeit, their nailing of reality, their edgy integrity of life and language for decades. It was this which enabled them with gutsy allies in the cultural and political

world to facilitate that unbelievable miracle in 1989 - the Berlin Wall collapsing ohne Gewalt, without violence.

I know this is scary stuff. We are ordinary folk, no Bonhoeffers or Martin Luther Kings. But in Knox are already exploring an angular language, in our praying and preaching, in our daily work and living, in our submission to the Commission on Climate Change. In our recent words to Synod. Let's continue to explore gently but determinedly what being angular means in this smooth culture of ours.

*My heart in hiding*

*Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

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