

‘With sails unfurled, we join in with the Spirit’ a sermon using the readings Psalm 104:1-4, 10-13 and Acts 11:19-30 preached in the Knox Church Dunedin online service by Kerry Enright on 22 August 2021

This weekend I was to be preaching at the 50th anniversary of St David’s Church Ashburton. As that celebration isn’t happening, I have adapted my sermon for today. I am sticking with it, because I think it speaks to our context of lockdown. Events like lockdowns can give us a feeling of being thrown off course. We had planned. We had prepared. We anticipated ... and then it’s all thrown in the air. Will we stay at level four? How long will lockdown continue? Over the last fifty years, sometimes it’s felt that the church is in lockdown. Church after church has closed. Congregational numbers have shrunk. People have worried about whether they will be able to hand to their children what was handed to them. One response is to try harder and work more, to persevere with grim determination. We won’t give up. We won’t give up! So churches can become grim places, dour gatherings of determined people who refuse to let go of what they have been given. And we become tempted to focus on ourselves and what we need to do. This sermon is an invitation to a different approach. It’s an invitation to delight, to be open, to look around, to notice, to trust that God’s Spirit is always moving. The wind of God’s Spirit has been blowing in New Zealand for centuries.

On the East Coast of the North Island, in the 1700s there was a man named Toiroa. Toiroa predicted the arrival of Europeans before they arrived. Although he had never seen them, in the mid-1700s, he drew images of people with carts and horses. He slit a cloak and turned it into trousers (pukoro) which he wore. He made a pipe and puffed smoke through it. He carved a tiny wooden sailing boat and took a small black mussel shell and set a fire burning within it. It was the funnel of a steamer, which he called ngatiroirangi (the fires of heaven). He had not seen any of these things. Yet he visited villages to try and prepare people for what was to come. In 1766, three years before Captain Cook arrived, he declared ... “Te ingoa o to ratou Atua, ko Tama-i-rorokutia, he Atua pai, otira, ka ngaro ano te tangata.” “The name of their God will be the Son who was killed, a good God, however the people will still be oppressed.” The Spirit was blowing.

Forty eight years later, on Christmas Day 1814, the news of that good God was proclaimed. But of course, God was here long before that. In the wisdom of the first people of this land, God was already known. The Spirit was already active. There was here a natural, earthy, working spirituality and there was insight into life as full and enchanted, of creation seeped in Spirit. Samuel Marsden did not

turn up out of nowhere and just start preaching. The respected chief Ruatara had prepared for this moment. He had spoken with other chiefs for nearly a year and out of those discussions they invited Marsden. They were eager to hear from a friend of Ruatara who became known as Te ara mo te rongopai – the gateway for the good news. But Marsden had a bad attitude. He wrote of the people here as in heathen darkness and ignorance. They had to be civilised like Europeans. Marsden was wrong and we are still dealing with the fallout of colonisation. But the remarkable thing is that the gospel broke free and continues to break free of its colonial shackles.

Piripi Taumata a Kura was Ngati Porou based on the East Coast. In the 1820s he was captured by Nga Puhī in the north and taken there. While in the north he was introduced to Christianity by the missionary Henry Williams. In a later incident, in 1833 a storm off the East Cape blew a ship northward. The chiefs that were onboard that ship were captured by Nga Puhī and taken in by Henry Williams. Eventually he persuaded Nga Puhī to release them all. On the first evening of his return to the East Coast, Taumata a Kura held a prayer service and invited people to hear his story. From his memory of the gospel and with hymns, he told the story of Jesus. He and the others travelled throughout the area. He took Totara bark, greased it and rubbed ash over it. He used a sharp point to etch into the bark, teaching his people to read and write. The word spread. The movement grew. And so, well before the missionaries arrived there, Taumata a Kura planted the first expression of an indigenous church in New Zealand. When William Williams arrived in 1838 he wrote ... “A great work has been accomplished in which the hand of the Lord has been singly manifest. It has not been through the labour of your missionaries; for the word has only been preached by Native teachers. We had literally stood still to see the salvation of God.” They had not been there yet the Spirit was active. They stood still yet the Spirit was still moving. By 1845 it was estimated that over half of the Maori population of Aotearoa was exploring the Christian faith.

The book of Acts is the story of what the Spirit did in the early years of the Christian movement. The Spirit in our land is the same Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles continue. They are not ended. The ecumenical image for the church is of a sailing boat, like the boats on Lake Galilee, sailing boats driven by wind, ruach. Not rowing boats that need us to row and row and row. To try harder. To do better. To work more. They were boats with sails that were unfurled to carry the boat over all kinds of seas. No wonder the image was used. In Jesus time, sailing boats were used by the poorest of the poor, the fishers of Capernaum. Those fishers were subject to oppressive taxation by the Roman Empire which

also claimed ownership of the lake. So the fishers paid tax, paid for the use of the lake, and some days after they had laboured all day, they still owed money to the Romans. Before Jesus called his first followers, they would have seen the growing agitation about what the Romans were doing. The call to follow Jesus was another step on the way for people who knew the world needed changing. The wind was already blowing, and now it was blowing them. Would they raise their sails?

About ten years ago I was part of a delegation to the China Christian Council. We learned how during the cultural revolution when all religion was banned, the church grew beyond sight. When Deng Xiaoping came to power in the 1980s, the church re-emerged. We visited the first congregation to open. The English translation of the name of that church is “no worries church”. What a name! They knew that the Spirit was active even when it seemed closed down and banished.

The Spirit of God is alive and active in the world and our call is to discern what she is doing, and to unfurl our sails to catch that wind. If we dourly try harder and work more, we miss the lightness of being caught up in the Spirit. If we trust, we see the delights of what God is doing around us, despite us, without us. We see the wider horizon, the longer story, the lightness of God. With our sails unfurled, we join in with God’s Spirit.

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