

‘Buoyancy’ a sermon based on Song of Solomon 2:8-15, James 1:17-25 and Mark 7:14-21a preached online by Kerry Enright as part of the Knox Church Dunedin offering on 29 August 2021

In last week’s post, I used the image of the sail boat, of unfurling sails to be caught by the Spirit of God. I spoke of the lightness that comes from being carried along. Since then, I have kept thinking about that image. How do we remain light when there is so much weighing us down? COVID and the tragedy of Afghanistan unfolding before us. What keeps us being Spirited people? How do we keep buoyant? Buoyancy.

I recently returned from a long period of study leave, most of it undertaken next to my marae in the Waikato. I arrived at the camping ground where I was staying, and was welcomed by the people managing it. As we talked about what I was studying, in the first minutes they told me the history of the land. The camping ground was on land given by a local chief to the first missionary in the area, Robert Maunsell, in 1839. A few years later, a chief further up the Waikato River offered Maunsell better land so the missionary moved there. He no longer needed the original land. But that land was not given back to the chief who gave it, which is what was normal and expected. It was eventually sold. 177 years after the land was originally given, Maori wished to get it back in order to run the camp, to provide employment, to support their people. And they had to pay for it, millions of dollars. They still felt the injustice from years before, and now their nose was being rubbed in it. It burned in their bones.

And yet, and yet. The person to whom I spoke was remarkable. She had established the local kura kaupapa. She had been a Maori advisor to a University. She was leading the development of that camping ground. I asked her – “With so many setbacks, what keeps you going?” “We are investing in our young people so that the future will be better than the past.”

I spent time with another Maori elder. He told me the story of his forbear who at the age of seven witnessed the atrocity at Rangiawhia. She saw children and old people killed by colonial troops. She saw a house burnt down by General Cameron and his troops, a house in which children and old people were sheltering having been promised safety. She managed to escape when someone lifted her up on to a horse. That story had been passed down. He spoke as if it happened yesterday. And he told me much more, story after story of struggle. And yet ... he is committed to enabling young Maori to build a better future and he is active in supporting them.

These stories burn in the lives of people. They know them. They tell them. And yet they are not consumed by them. The burning gets turned into action. It made me think of the motto of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand – “nec tamen consumebatur” - “burning but not consumed.” They burned but they did not let it consume them.

What kept them buoyant? Those people remembered the stories of injustice, but they remembered other stories as well. They knew who they were, where they had come from, where they belonged, and they told and retold those stories as well. The injustice was only part of a longer narrative and a wider reality.

The reading from James highlights the wider realities. It reminds people who they are and what they have received. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights ... “ So in the midst of struggle we look for grace, in the grief of loss we find a memory, in the times of despair we believe in hope, in the darkness we look for a flicker. Most New Zealanders now know the word whakapapa. I had not realised the breadth of its meaning. I thought it only had to do with human lineage, the line of forbears. Whakapapa includes physical and spiritual things. Ancestors can be whales, trees and stars. Our lives are seen as integrated, connected, not just spatially but in time, and over time. Our whakapapa bequeaths us our identity. It puts us in relationships with our environment, with people, with our past, and in the future towards the harmony of all things. So it is for Christians. Buoyancy comes from knowing we are part of an enduring movement, and a reality that extends through space and time. Far beyond the present.

James goes on to write of integrity, of faithfulness to who we most truly are in Christ. “But be doers of the word and not merely hearers ... “Let our whole lives reflect our identity in Christ. Ngai Tahu is the largest iwi in the country, one of the first to go through the Waitangi Tribunal settlement process. It was a tough process. Ngai Tahu leader, Sir Tipene O’Regan waded through red tape and resistance. The iwi came close to insolvency. But in the negotiations, their attitude was remarkable. Remember that by 1860 the entire South Island had been taken from Maori. Today most of their tribal land is privately owned. They are reminded of that every day. But when Ngai Tahu made their claim, they only asked for the return of land owned by the government. They did not reciprocate injustice. They did not ask others to give up land. And when land was returned and with financial compensation, they did not invest it overseas but here in Aotearoa, for the benefit of all New Zealanders. They knew who they were, and were determined to be doers of the word, not just hearers.

Buoyancy needs an inner life, so we subject ourselves to questions about faithfulness and consistency, about whether we are being true to who we are, about whether our identity in Christ is being consistently lived. How are we keeping in touch with the Spirit of God in our hearts and minds and wills? How are we ensuring that Christ still has a home within our lives? What are we doing with our spirit? The reading from Mark, “it is from within, from the human heart ...” I ask people taking up church roles to be careful. Sometimes the more we are in the Church, the more we can lose touch with Christ. We can imagine that because we are doing church things, we are growing in Christ. Not so. We need to maintain an inner life, an openness to the Spirit, a heart for Christ. Because the Church cannot do in our life what only Christ can do. The Church will not keep us buoyant. Buoyancy arises also from God’s Spirit in our core.

I want to finish by noting the reading from Song of Solomon. We hardly ever hear it read in Church. Many are surprised to find it in the Bible. Its sensuousness embarrasses people. There are sniggers and giggles. It’s a book of passion. A woman speaks of her male lover. He gazes in through her window. He calls her to come away with him. And he sings “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come ...” This is buoyancy in the extreme, but not just to be sniggered at. Here is a dimension of buoyancy worth celebrating. For we are made for love, for relationship. I’m speaking of more than marriage. What keeps us above water, is knowing love, experiencing love, receiving love and giving love. We were made for love, to receive it and to give it. And there are times to delight in it.

Buoyancy.

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