

‘Noticing our patterns of empathy’ a sermon based on James 2:1-10, 14-17 and Mark 7:24-37 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 5 September 2021

Earlier this year I spoke to a group of about a hundred people in a different part of the country and not in church context. The group met monthly to hear a wide variety of speakers. The gathering was near where our family had lived for generations. So I thought I would use my pepeha to connect me to the place and to the people - Ko Tainui te waka, Ko Taupiri te maunga, Ko Waikato te awa, Ko Waikato te iwi, Ko Ngati Pou te hapū, Ko Tuheitia te kingi, Ko Oraeroa te marae, Ko Kerry ahau. Very brief. Locating me locally. And as I looked across the room, I noticed that as soon as I began to speak in te reo Maori, a few folk in the room crossed their arms or changed their stance. Within less than a minute, a few folk stopped listening. Afterwards I thought about how different that group was to a church. I realised that there were no shared set of values or beliefs that would lead people to listen to the unfamiliar or challenging. There was no shared commitment to using te reo Maori as I find in our church. There wasn't a willingness to grapple with something we don't like. It made me grateful for the church because it is there as much as anywhere that I have experienced life-changing challenges.

Now of course, the body language in churches can be as startling as anywhere. But in the Spirit of God, we go to worship expecting to hear the gospel, that does more than affirm what we already believe and how we already live. We come praying to be open to the Spirit of God, the Spirit who is more than our own spirit. We come anticipating that we will grow. We come thirsting for a word from beyond. That is very different to waiting for something to agree with or looking to be entertained or persuaded or even informed.

That stance is crucial for today's readings because they are confronting. "Listen my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor." Instead, says James, you have favoured the rich. How many times have we preferred people who are like us or who might offer something we might want? How many times have we turned from those who offer little or who are different from us?

The first minister of Knox Church Dunedin was Donald Stuart, a big hearted and popular man. He arrived from Scotland in 1860 and he continued as minister until he died in 1894. 1860 was during the Taranaki War where Maori were seeking to

regain land wrongly taken from them. They wanted to deal with it in Court, an approach the Chief Justice supported, but the Governor wanted war.

In September 1860, the Provincial Superintendent of Otago called a meeting to raise money for the Taranaki settlers. He said that it was deplorable that people who had been on their land for 15 years could lose everything through no fault of their own. At the public meeting, Dr Stuart gave a stirring speech. He spoke of a heritage of British sympathy. He referred to the relief offered to the Huguenots of France driven from their homes. He spoke of the persecution of the Waldensians in 1848. And he finished with a flourish. This was how it was reported - "Had not the age of chivalry passed away, we should have seen a band, raised in the Province, sent forth to aid their fellow colonists; and, were such a band collected, he should be happy to serve as its chaplain." That appeal led to the first ever special offering at Knox Church Dunedin and it raised more than seventy pounds for the settlers, a large amount at the time. It sounds right and good, to offer support for people who had been pushed off their land. But when Dr Stuart talks of raising a band, what does he mean? Well he could mean a group of people going to help. But in September 1860 there were still battles and skirmishes in Taranaki, so it seems more likely that he was referring to a militia. If there was still chivalry, he was saying, a militia would be formed and he was happy to be its chaplain. And although he does not say it, we imagine that the militia would be to join other militia in fighting Maori.

Looking back, it is startling to know Dr Stuart said that. But he had arrived from Scotland as a migrant in January of that year. He was a caring and compassionate man. He was naturally sympathetic to other migrants. And, as far as we know, he did not sense what had happened to the people who had lived on the land for hundreds of years before the settlers came and who had been pushed off their land. We have looked back 161 years. Our purpose is not to judge. Our purpose is to learn for our time. Through our reading and reflecting, our seeking to be a faithful Christian community, we can learn about the patterns of solidarity in that time and wonder about ours. And we can wonder what parts of our living will startle our successors. Because it certainly will.

So what are the patterns of our empathy? To whom are we naturally drawn and who do we turn from? Who do we notice and who do we miss? How often does the news share what happens in the United States or Australia and how rarely in Africa or Asia? Why is our news so different to that of Al Jazeera?

The growth that comes from confrontation is there in today's gospel. The story of the Syrophenician woman has several possible meanings. Here is one. The Syrophenician woman could have been one of the power brokers of Tyre. She

could have been one of the economic and political elite. Under Roman rule, Tyre's leaders were political pawns to extract goods and services from the regions further south where Jewish communities clustered. It may be that this woman did not creep in the back door of the house, hoping to see Jesus. Rather, that she entered boldly, accustomed to her place of privilege. Yes, she longed for healing for her daughter. Yes, she sought help from Jesus. However, if she was from the upper class, she assumed a position of power over Jesus.

If this was the case, then the confronting words of Jesus take on a different edge. Jesus challenged her unjust economic advantage with blunt words. Perhaps Jesus was saying ... "First, let the poor people in Jewish rural areas be satisfied. For it is not good to take poor people's food and throw it to the rich Gentiles in the cities." Perhaps Jesus was pushing back against rich people yet again claiming priority. But she does not accept his rebuff. She is concerned for her child. She is convinced that grace and mercy also extends to her. Jesus accepts her question, and his heart expands. We live in an age reports of inequality abound. The patterns of empathy are more evident. And we are part of the richly diverse body of Christ that will not leave us in our own bubble. And we share in that body, believing the Spirit will keep extending our compassion. Thanks be to God.

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