

## **“Parihaka Sunday” a sermon preached by Jordan Redding at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 7 November 2021.**

### **I.**

On Friday morning at dawn, a group gathered at the Rongo stone on Portsmouth Drive, down by the causeway. “Rongo” means peace. And the stone commemorates the prisoners of Parihaka, who were imprisoned in the Dunedin Gaol and forced to do hard labour around the city including helping to build the causeway out to the peninsula.

The accepted kōrero, passed down through the whānau of survivors and of local Ōtākou Kai Tahu, is that the prisoners were kept in the caves, still visible today, while they laboured out there. In 2018, research was done that challenged the oral history, denying that the Parihaka men were ever kept in the caves, implying that it perhaps wasn't as bad as we thought it was.

Edward Ellison, a Kai Tahu kaumatua, responded, in turn raising questions of the research, which he claimed had diminished the authority of the oral history of tangata whenua and the recollection of the kaumatua that gave it.

Furthermore, he argued, whether or not the prisoners were kept in the caves, has “no impact whatsoever on the Crown's culpability and the complicit behaviour of those who colluded with the imprisonment of the Pakakohi and Parihaka men.” In other words, it doesn't lessen the injustice.

The point is well made and brings to the fore the question of history: its subjective nature and the role that history plays in carving out the path for the future. Whether a future based on mutual understanding, trust, listening, reconciliation, the setting right of past wrongs ... or otherwise. Whose history are we telling? How are we telling it? What's the outcome, whether unintended or intended, of the stories we tell about ourselves? What future is it marking out for us?

For Ellison, truth telling through mutual respect and listening, especially to the oral recollections of tangata whenua, is essential in setting past wrongs to right and in continuing on the path of peace together.

### **II.**

In technical language, we could say that reconciliation – healed relationship – is inescapably bound up with redemption – the restoration of what was lost, the setting right of wrongs, the empowering, dignifying and liberating of those who have disempowered and subjugated.

And so today, the Sunday after Parihaka Day, I want to reflect on the loaded theological word, redemption.

The story of Ruth is a story of redemption. The redemption of Naomi, who has left her home to go into the far country, to Moab. And while there she loses everything: her

husband, her social and legal status, her possessions. Indebted she is forced to sell her husband's land as well. So we have the redemption of Naomi. The story of how she came back into possession of what was lost.

And we also have the redemption of Ruth, who also lost her husband (Naomi's son) in Moab, and chose to go with Naomi back to Israel, out of single-minded devotion and yet with little hope of finding a new husband and establishing a life for herself. And so it's story of her redemption as well.

Today, we reach the climax of the story and hear how that redemption comes about. The redemption takes place through Naomi's next-of-kin, Boaz. Now, this requires a bit of explanation. The next-of-kin is a term we still use today. But according to the Torah, the Hebrew law, the next-of-kin had a special role to play: certain social and legal obligations, particularly regarding land ownership.

The ancient Hebrews had a very different view of land ownership than we do. Individuals did not own land. All the land was a gift, given by grace from God. Consequently, the land belonged to God and, through the patriarch, families were tenants, keepers, stewards of the land.

Sometimes, whether due to negligence, bad decisions, or unfortunate circumstances, people got into debt and needed to sell their land. And if this happened, it was the prerogative of the next-of-kin to redeem the land, to buy it off the indebted person to ensure it stayed in the family. Basically, it was a means of ensuring equality and protecting families from unfortunate circumstances that would have otherwise thrown them into a cycle of poverty.

The next-of-kin was seen as acting on behalf of God, redeeming the land, gifting it back to the family. An act of grace. And so the next-of-kin is also translated Redeemer elsewhere in the Bible.

There is something else rather surprising going on here though.

Boaz not only fulfils his duty as next-of-kin by buying Naomi's land. But his redeeming act is bound up, one-and-the-same, with his determination to marry Ruth. In marrying Ruth, he is fulfilling another social expectation. In the Torah, if a man died, his brother or another male relative was expected to marry the widow. And any children born from this second marriage would take the name of the dead man, ensuring that the family name lived on. What's more, the widow, who in a patriarchal society was very vulnerable with limited to no rights, came under the protection and social status of her new husband.

Sorry, a lot of historical analysis today, but it's really important. In this one act of marriage, Boaz and Ruth redeem Naomi on multiple levels. Through their marriage and their child, Naomi's name would live on, her genealogy restored. Her social status and legal rights were redeemed. Her land and possessions were gifted back. In other words, the redemption of the whole person in her social and cultural connections and the redemption of the land she depends on.

It's a very earthed, measurable, material understanding of redemption. When we talk about redemption or salvation in the church, we often think of a largely spiritual reality, an

internalised and personal reality, something that has to do with eternal life beyond death. And certainly, in Jesus, those dimensions of redemption are there as the promises of God for life in fulness extend even beyond the grave.

But if the bodily resurrection of Jesus means nothing else, it's that redemption is also inescapably a bodily, material reality. A reality that is experienced now, albeit only partially, through the restoration of social status, the celebration of culture and language, the restoration and healing of land, truth telling of the past in order to bring healing in the present, the list could go on. We could talk about redemption in any number of ways. And on this Sunday after Parihaka, we might talk about it in some very concrete, particular ways.

### III.

I want to briefly touch one final element of redemption, specifically about Ruth's redemption. Perhaps the most surprising element of the story of Ruth is indicated by the name of the book. "Ruth". It's not called "Naomi." This story isn't primarily about Naomi, but about Ruth.

While the redemption story of Naomi is heartening, there's nothing particularly surprising about it. The Torah, the Hebrew law, was a remarkable ancient law that sought to put in place measures that protected the most vulnerable in society (like Naomi), the widows and the orphans and so on. These laws were built on grace, on the gift of God to provide for all God's people.

But therein lies the catch. God's people. The people of Israel. After all, she was an Israelite. As a daughter of the redeemed people of God, she was entitled to benefit from the law, to enjoy the fruit of God's redemption.

Ruth, on the other hand, was an alien, outside the redeemed community. The utterly subversive message of the book of Ruth to the people of Israel, is that the redeeming work of God extends beyond the people of Israel to include the outsider. Even more than that, that Naomi's redemption only comes about through Ruth, the outsider. Even more than that, that in marrying Boaz, the outsider's story had become intertwined into the genealogy of God's people. The outsider has become an integral part of God's redemption of Israel and indeed of the world. The story of Ruth ends with an unsettling genealogy. We're told that she is the great grandmother of King David, the symbol of the Jewish monarchy, of Jewish nationalism.

The author retells history, the whakapapa of Israel, in a new way that opens up the path to mutual listening, to engaging with "other", not as an outsider but as one whose story is inseparably bound up with my own. The author opens up the path, not of animosity and suspicion, but of recognition, inclusion, and peace.

Of course, for those of us who are Christian, the story of Ruth holds even more meaning. She is not only the ancestor of David. As we're told at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, she is the ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Messiah, the one who fulfills and breaks the banks of God's redemptive promises.

Jesus is the fitting conclusion, the fulfilment of the story of Ruth.

He is both Ruth and Boaz. In Jesus we see the fullness of Ruth's remarkable, single-minded devotion to be with the vulnerable. To journey into the far country. To make herself vulnerable. To be the bride who bears the promises of Israel.

And just as Boaz was next-of-kin, so Jesus is the next-of-kin to every human being, who redeems humanity by stepping in. Giving of himself in order to restore the vulnerable and the undignified. Redeeming the promises of God, given in grace. Setting the wrongs to right. Wedding himself to the vulnerable that his wealth and privilege might be theirs... we can probably draw other connections.

In concluding, I want to draw attention to the pounamu I wear today. It was given to me by my dad at my ordination. And it was given to him by the then-moderator of Te Aka Puaho, Millie Te Kaawa. The pattern is the pikorua, the braided river. An apt symbol to commemorate Parihaka as we commit to the way of peace. In the braided river, the strands remain distinct and yet they are inseparably bound up, interacting playfully with one another, journeying together on a common path, a journey that leads ultimately to the same destination, the peace of ocean, the fullness of life together when peace will reign and God will be all in all. Amen.

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