

“Let’s be bold” a sermon given by Peter Matheson on the first Sunday after Epiphany, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand, Sunday 9 January 2022

As we begin a new year, what are our hopes and dreams, our darker thoughts, our nightmares? There’s a heaviness around. Not much good news. In the Church as well as society as a whole. We can’t deny that. So how to ride the challenges? In the American football tv series Friday Night Lights they talk about having “clear eyes, full hearts.” Didn’t expect Peter Matheson to come up with s.t. like that, eh. You’re right, too. Rachel put me onto it.

Clear eyes is a big call, of course. Full hearts, another.

Facing the reality that we’re standing on a precipice right now, as a species and as a whole planet, is sobering, to say the least. But facing what is real opens the heart to grief, which somehow opens the heart to love even more deeply. . . .

Constance Fitzgerald

Facing what is real. But what is real? Norman Kirk used to say: people don’t want much: someone to love, somewhere to live, somewhere to work, something to hope for. Not much. But how many of those we know and care for have all four of these. I think of the bright, high achieving student who responded to my question about how she saw the future: “What future? I don’t see any future for us at all.”

When planning this service about a new year Rachel and I were reflecting why we remain hopeful. We both draw on our rich, but realistic traditions of hope, Corrymeela in N. Ireland and Iona in Scotland, modern Reformation movements, still with us. In the violence and hate that ravaged Northern Ireland, splitting Catholic and Protestant apart, Corrymeela was such a brave, shining light for reconciliation. Costly, difficult stuff. In the misery that followed the First World War and the Great Depression Iona’s genial inception, rebuilding an ancient abbey on a remote island, opened up hope for a better, non-violent, more compassionate world. These inspiring heritages continue to light up our lives. To hold us, embolden us. Fire us.

And of course, behind all that, there is this Jesus of Nazareth who cherry picked Judaism’s ancient prophetic tradition and proclaimed a coming kingdom in which children and folk on the margins would hold the reins. The poor would inherit the earth. Crazy, of course. Folly to the wise.

Our readings today certainly take us into deep water. I won't be the only one here who stumbled on the fierce message of John the Baptizer, that desert figure who so haunts our art and imagination. Jesus, he says, will not be baptizing with water, like him.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Echoed in the Acts reading. None of here, I imagine, think this a verbatim record of what John said.

It gives us, though, a vivid insight into how the earliest Christian community saw the utterly new world Jesus was ushering in. A fiery faith. The stark metaphor attributed to John is taken from the ancient way of harvesting grain. **His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.** Decisive and divisive. Jesus decisive and divisive.

We talk glibly about a New Year. We can go through the motions, baptize with water. But will there be real change? COP26 went through the motions in Glasgow. But we chug on globally on a path to disaster. Then there's the personal stuff. Recently a friend of a friend, after a two years wait, got admitted to the wonderful six week rehabilitation course at Hanmer for druggies. Hugely successful, till that person got home to the familiar environment which negated everything. Back to square one. Real change is hell. Or involves, as our creed says, a descent into hell. We express that in our Christian context by speaking of fire, by speaking of Resurrection.

Maybe that needs to be our message to our society today. We can change, yes, and we desperately need to change but change is hell. Baptism by fire, by the Spirit, is what the first Christians called it. But who would be listening if we as a Church tried to get that message across. It's strange, isn't it? The almost unprecedented moral and spiritual changes required of us coincide with the increasing marginalization of the Christian Church. Who listens to Bishops and General Assemblies any more?

Radical change. Sure, here in little Aotearoa we've done pretty well with Covid, but what about the toxic sludge in the social media. I don't need to remind you about the youth suicide figures, every third woman experiencing violence, outrageous housing problems. Worst of all, the shrugged shoulders. **Not my problem.** We continue to plan their summer holidays, refit our suburban homes, spend big on gas guzzling SUV's.

I want to leave you with this question: where in Kiwiland are our values coming from these days The smart set regard Christianity and the Churches as passé, for the silent majority we're just not with it. But who are the gods **they** are worshipping?? Not recognized as gods, of course, but in Kiwiland so many just go with the flow. And we

know, don't we, where that flow is taking us. Banality on a personal level. Climatic and political chaos globally. Where will our children get their values from? My hunch is that we have to be bolder as a church. Scholars are clear that the early followers of Christ were an **eschatological** community. Meaning they lived hope. Were lit up by the vision of a better future. On fire. People saw them as a third race, as different. So they were. In terms of power and influence a tiny mustard seed. But they outlasted, outthought, the mighty Roman Empire. Martyrs, scholars, saints. Let's remember that. That's our whakapapa, folks. The Rutherford Waddells. Our incredible heritage.

So could John the baptizer, be someone we need to hear? Decisive, and divisive. Jesus after all, initiated his ministry in solidarity with him. The fiery gift of the Spirit to broken disciples after the dark days, they'd been through. So if we dare to talk about hope it's a Resurrection hope, a defiance of the obvious. Bishop Tutu up against the racial prejudice, the hate, the tanks, the terror in the night. Against all the evidence let's hold on in this precarious present of ours to Resurrection hope, hope for Tuvalu, the Cooks, Samoa, hope for our poisoned rivers and burning forests and flooded plains. For endangered species. Hope for peace in Ukraine and justice for the Uighurs... Hope for young people having to cope with the mess our generation has made.

OK as Churches we've been pushed to the periphery of our society. Much of that our own fault. Maybe, though, that gives us some advantages, clear eyes, warm hearts. . Seeing things as they are, but also seeing beyond. The vision we have in our heritage. Our whakapapa. Paul Reeves and Sister Gladys here in Knox. Rachel and I wonder how we in this congregation, so privileged in our spiritual resources, can nurture hope for our wider community.

Kerry Enright has challenged us to be **brokers of hope**.

People come to this church, the recent review has told us, for a huge variety of reasons. Because we're not fobbed off with easy pious answers. The great music. The care for children. Because of the people, what they stand for, who they are. The record of service out there in our daily life and work, in our hospitals, our schools, our social agencies, our neighbourhoods. Who cares about our survival as a church if we're not there for others. Full hearts. We've got that all right. The marvelous Advent film our Knox youth leaders produced shows the way. Our children dancing down the aisle, A little child shall lead them.

A lot of ignorant nonsense floats around about Christianity and the Churches these days. But what if we happen – no merit of our own - to be the kaitiaki of rare insights and tough disciplines which our society so desperately needs. Our feel for the sheer wonder of life. I remember standing in a Roxburgh orchard where I was working as a student. The clever, smart-arse guy I then was, and suddenly I was overtaken and overwhelmed by the beauty and wonder of the world. Changed me for ever. God saw the world and it was good. The deep satisfaction of living for the other. The transformation of broken lives, not least our own. All the Kingdom values.

Let's be bold. Find imaginative ways to body out our vision in what we do individually and corporately. Get across to the worried and harried folk of our generation that freedom is our mantra. That's what the old language about forgiveness is about. Freedom from self, freedom for others, for life, for joy. For hope. Bishop Tutu's giggles. Humour, too, is a direct fruit of freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free. To giggle.

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