

St Andrews 14 January 2018

Barrie Keenan's Reflection - "How do we determine value?"

Perhaps it was the culmination of all the busyness through November and December of last year and then the New Year always an opportunity to take stock – that got me thinking, trying to make some sense of what had been happening in our community, but I think more importantly what were the implications of what had been happening, especially the changes that we had experienced – and are likely to experience in the future.

An unusual question came to me – given all this – “what would I be prepared to die for? Maybe that idea came to my attention because on 27 November it was exactly 100 years since my great uncle Thomas Hawthorne was killed in France and we went that day to spend time at the truly marvellous exhibition at the National War Memorial. Being prepared to die for a belief, a value, a way of life is certainly the “end point” but for me it got me thinking about how recent changes and events had impacted on my perception of value.

My starting point is that I realise how very fortunate I have been for the past nearly 8 decades to have lived in New Zealand and the opportunities we have had and the progress that has been made. We have lived in a time of peace, have not been called up to serve in a war, have enjoyed good food and a life style in which we have had opportunities to pursue our ideas, hopes and aspirations.

But we have experienced changes in the last 20 or so years which certainly have created cause for real concern – and all the indicators are that the future will be significantly more turbulent than the past.

In what I consider to be an excellent book that Colin James entitled “Unquiet Time” Aotearoa/New Zealand in a fast-changing world” he says that the world of the 2010s is disordered.

- Major powers jostle for geo-political and geo-economic influence.
- The Arab region is in turmoil.
- There is widespread retreat from promoting freer trade.
- Europe and the United States are in populist ferment as their societies undergo a major transformation.
- Economic, social and political tensions within China are testing its technocrats.
- International finance is overheated and fragile.

There is a contest of ideas. There are four major drivers in this disorder.

Firstly, there is a new and denser phase of globalisation, applying to finance, production, of people and also expressions of anachronism – which may have reached the end of its first phase but is entering a new phase.

**Secondly**, and which is a major driver of the first, is the coming of age of digital technology which is transforming communication, finance, buying and selling and everyday life – while at the same time enabling new and potential serious insecurities.

The third is the looming environmental limits, particularly of water as the global population continues to increase, and all this definitely complicated by climate change. Then the fourth which is an outgrowth of the first two is a disjunctive shock, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, after which countries, peoples, economies and the international order have yet to find a new normality – with one another, and the possibility of a greater shock in prospect in this or in the next decade.

This all adds up potentially to a significant transformation of our society. This is the world a tiny, quiet nation at the bottom of the world must learn to navigate going into the 2020s and beyond.

In many contexts the criteria for measuring progress has been gross domestic product which is fundamentally a financial concept relating to services produced and consumed, but we have to question whether this is a comprehensive enough guide to economic well-being and by implication general well-being and the quality of life.

It is now some years since Treasury developed a wider concept in its “living standards framework” which centres on four essential “capitals” economic, natural, social and human.

In these days when much of the media concentrates on economic and monetary performance it is important to realise that the monetary economy is not the whole story. It is an enabler, not a determiner.

It is a subset of society not distinct from it and not its equal.

People are more than the goods and services they produce and consume. They have spiritual cultural and social lives.

In a well-functioning society, they live with other people, not in individualised cubicles.

One concept which has always been important in our culture is that all people will have a “fair go” and what we now realise is that overall well-being is a better measure of “fair go” than just material welfare and having more stuff.

The “fair go” we seek is for people is having justice and fairness.

But in this early years of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century inequality has made the “fair go” much more “go/not go” and the fear is that this might continue to be what happens in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 2020s?

Understandably over the past couple of years much has been made of the decisions by the people in the United Kingdom about Brexit - the vote to leave the European community and then on the other side of the Atlantic the United States presidential election in 2016.

In a very hard-hitting book Naomi Klein makes the case that “No is not enough” in order to defeat the new shock politics which she makes it clear are now prevailing in many of the major countries of the world and especially the United States.

Shock Politics is how particular business interests, especially those from the United States,

- benefited enormously in Chile after Augusto Pinochet’s coup,
- to what happened in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union,
- and what happened in Baghdad under the US “Shock and Awe” regime,

➤ in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

The term “shock doctrine” describes the quite brutal tactics of systematically using the public's disorientation following a collective shock – wars, terrorist attacks, market crashes or natural disasters – to push through radical pro-corporate measures often called “shock therapy”

Naomi says of the Trump administration, especially those appointed to the Cabinet - that there is a near-impenetrable sense of impunity, of being above the usual rules and laws and this is a defining feature of the new Trump administration.

Anyone who presents a threat to that impunity is summarily fired as was former FBI director James Comey.

This is new because up until now in US politics, there has been a mask on the corporate status of the White House proxies such as was in the Bush administration's Dick Cheney and his involvement with the Haliburton initiatives in Iraq - but now the mask is gone!

And no one is even bothering to pretend otherwise.

- The main pillars of Trump's political and economic project are the deconstruction of the regulatory state;
- a full-bore attack on the welfare state and social services rationalised in part through attacks on racial groups and on women for exercising their rights;
- the unleashing of domestic fossil fuel frenzy which requires the sweeping aside of climatic science
- and the gagging of a large part of the government bureaucracy
- as well as initiatives being taken against immigrants and particularly people from Islamic nations.

While all of this is really dangerous of even greater concern is what it would be in the event of a large-scale crisis - whether a terrorist attack, or a financial crash which would provide the pretext to declare some sort of state of exception or emergency, where the usual rules no longer apply. This in turn would provide the cover to push through aspects of the Trump agenda that require a further suspension of core democratic norms such as his pledge to deny entry to all Moslems (not only those from selected countries) and the threats to “bring in the feds” to quell street violence in American cities.

It is a hugely troubling scenario. As Naomi says simply thinking “No - is not enough”. Her book certainly is a challenging read.

And we think of the readings that Tony read for us this morning.

The young Samuel hears his name being called - but it was not Eli the old man that was calling him - and when the next time he heard his voice been called as before he was encouraged to reply, “Speak for your servant is listening”

And the message that came to him was

“See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle.

I am about to punish Eli's house for ever for the iniquity that he knew because his sons were blaspheming God and he did not restrain them. The iniquity of that house will not be expiated by any sacrifice or offering whatsoever."

This was long ago some 3000 years ago but what might we take from this in our present time and situation?

And then there was the reading from John's Gospel -

Philip saying to Nathaniel "we have found him about whom Moses and the law and the prophets wrote. He is Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.

When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming towards him he said to him "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

Nathaniel asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

This one a statement from some 2000 years ago.

Here we are in our time of tremendous changes and tremendous challenges.

One of the aspects that attracted Jenn and I to come back to St Andrews is the commitment that people of this congregation have to the valuing of people of all persuasions and ethnicities and circumstances and situations.

And the willingness to take the lead in taking a stand for justice, for important issues and encouraging others to join with us.

We must continue to work positively in whichever ways we can to maintain our values and to convince others that accepting and supporting others is that which we must work at and for whatever the cost.

So may it be.