

Epiphany 5 Year C Equality and Empire

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After calling Simon and James and Andrew and **John** to follow him – so he can teach them to **catch** people with the message of the Gospel...

Jesus goes **on** to preach in the synagogue at Capernaum and then on and on... to the neighbouring towns and villages. As Jesus **says**...to proclaim the message **there** too; for that's what I came out to do.

To catch people...to **win** people over...to get people on **board** with the good news... the truth about God's love and God's **purpose** of peace and wellbeing for **all** humanity.

A full twenty-five years **later**...in his letter to the infant church in Corinth... the apostle **Paul** identifies the same purpose for **his** life...

'I've become all things to all people, that I might by all **means**... win **some**. I do it **all** for the sake of the good news, so I may share in its blessings.'

What blessings? the blessings of **living** in the Messianic age...when instead of fear and the oppressional of a punishing transactional God...Jesus proclaims a different God...one of grace...one who loves...and seeks shalom...the peace and wellbeing for all **people**.

Jesus **extends** himself...he goes **out**...our text reports ... so **more** people can learn... that the time for the reign of **this** God is now...even if **Caesar** thinks he's god.

Jesus walks and talks and restores people to health and to community by sharing this message of Good News

And the same for **Paul**...blending in... adopting the **language** and the **culture** of the Empire **around** him...becoming a slave to **all**...a Jew to Jews and a gentile to gentiles...and even showing his weakness to the weak. **Why**?

So as to remove any and **every** stumbling block...which could get in the **way**... of people **hearing** the good news that God loves everyone and that changes **everything**

To **expand** their powerful **Empire**...the **Romans** would confiscate any part of the known world they wanted...for their own **use and enrichment**...

Of **course**... Caesar proclaimed...there could always be **peace**...As long as the conquered people...remember their **place**...in the scheme of things.

As long as they don't get above their **station**.

As long as they don't demand **equality** with Roman citizens.

Anyway equality **was unthinkable**...not even in their vocabulary ...**nor** their religion... not even between **men**...let alone men and women...or slaves and their **masters**.

And to complicate things...Jewish religious **authorities** had long since forgotten the original insight of **their** faith that **all** people are made in the image of God...

long since **ignored** the call of the prophets...to care for the **stranger** and the widow and the orphan. Neighbours **outside** the faith are labelled unclean...and untouchable **foreigners**.

So in my interpretation anyway **Jesus...** and then Paul...**extend** themselves... to bring the message of God's **love** for everyone...**to** everyone...on **every** side...of the political and religious equation.

Jesus **enters** the forbidden territory of people **labelled** sinners...or_un-clean...he dives right into their **midst** ... to **announce** the good news... to those who've been **marginalised by** their community

Harvesting corn...healing on the Sabbath...touching a bleeding woman...

Jesus tears **down** legal restrictions and rejects definitions of who is clean and unclean.

And Paul...**inspired** by what he's **learned** of Jesus' teaching... becomes a subversive **chameleon**...among the diverse cultures of the Empire...so absolutely **no** people-group... would miss **out**... on the good news.

This would mean that for the early Christians...everything they **did** required **discernment**.

Every **decision** about... how they were to **live**...**has** to pass muster against this **good news** of justice and peace and wellbeing for **all** people... in other words everything they do... has to **contribute** to a world where all are loved...

Jesus and his followers have to discern what is **pro** love if you like... and what is **anti**-love.

Constantly using the good news...the gospel...to **critique** political...religious and economic powers in every culture they encounter...

The gist of Jesus message...**both** Roman **occupiers** and occupied Jews ... need to wake up their ideas...

And repent...change their minds...and **repent** of their attitudes... and extend this loving reign to the ends of the earth.

But this loving movement intended for everyone...didn't last...did it...Why...

because the human lust for power is the **antithesis** of love...and its equalities. [pause]

Caesar **Constantine** of Rome would convene the Council of Nicaea and half a century later Caesar Theodosius of Constantinople would declare the God of the Nicene Creed to be the God of the Roman **Empire**...

Popes and kings would then play 'who's on **top**' who's the most **powerful** until the lust for power reached a crescendo in 1452,

when Pope Nicholas the Fifth wrote these words "invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens, Pagans whatsoever. Reduce their persons to **perpetual** slavery. Convert them to his and their use in profit."

This formal **proclamation**...this Papal Bull and others written afterward till 1493 collectively became known as what we now call 'the Doctrine of Discovery'.

The Doctrine of Discovery... is essentially the **church** in Europe saying to the Catholic **nations** of Europe,

"Wherever you **go**, whatever land you **find** not ruled by Christian rulers, those **people** are less than human, and the land's yours for the taking."

Not at all what Jesus and Paul were thinking...

The Church's Doctrine of Discovery quite literally gave ecclesial authorisation for European nations to colonize the continents of North America, Africa, Asia **and** the Pacific and enslave their people. And easily **justified** if they weren't fully human.

This was not the good news announced by Jesus in the Nazareth manifesto...

And **precisely** at the ends of the **earth**... a hundred and eighty-two years ago...a **treaty** would be signed between an occupying nation and the people who arrived first... a treaty...**deftly** brokered by Christian missionaries...

A treaty meant...to **eliminate** hostilities and tensions between British **settlers** and the people who already **lived** here.

The treaty was written in English and Maori...with **help** of Christian missionaries who...**like** Paul... had **immersed** themselves in the language and cultures of foreign lands... to bring **them** the good news.

The **English** text guarantees protection of Māori interests from encroaching British settlers while **allowing** settlement to **proceed**...and establishes a **government** to maintain peace and **order**.

The **Māori** text suggests the **main** promise of the settlers **Queen** is to provide a **government**... while securing rangatiratanga...Māori autonomy and authority over their **own** area... and **land** ownership as long as they wish to retain it.

Peace and wellbeing **was** to be ensured for **all** parties.

The more optimistic of the missionaries **hoped** perhaps Aotearoa New **Zealand** could even become a model ...for the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

Well that **was** 1840

In 1866... without warning **or** consultation with **any** tribes in the Bay of **Plenty**... the British **Crown** confiscated **all** the territory from the coast... **inland**...for ten kilometres. **all** the territory

While they did this to punish **another** tribe...**half** the best land of the **Tuhoe** people... was also seized –

Tuhoe is the tribe with whom we...the Presbyterian Church has had our primary mission partnership. None of this land was **ever** returned.

This **transgression** against their mana and dignity... **embeds** itself... into the consciousness of the Tuhoe people.

The loss of half their finest **land**...has **devastating** consequences...on their wellbeing **some** Māori retaliate **against** the confiscation... so the **Crown** sends in **troops** to arrest the **ringleaders** and restore peace... in the chaos of the fighting...women and children are killed homes and crops and taonga... are destroyed.

Yet **somehow** the good news taught by Jesus of Nazareth finds its **way**...to the mountains of the Urewera and the ears of the Tuhoe people.

In 1887...a young Rua Kenana...joins a **shearing** gang on the East Coast. During this time he studies the Bible and develops a sense... of prophetic **vocation**.

Returning home... Rua forms a self-sufficient community at Maungapohatu...which he calls the 'New **Jerusalem**' ... Eventually his followers number...almost a thousand.

Rua was one of many Māori prophets in this messianic movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Rua Kenana set about **deliberately** to usher in the reign of the God of love among the people of the Urewera... many say he owed his **influence** to the great **skill** with which... he applied the teaching of Jesus to the daily lives of his followers.

You see **inspired** by the Jesus' good news...**Rua's** community...like Te Whiti's in Taranaki... was steadfastly **non-violent**...and shared all their possessions in common as did the early church.

The few **Europeans** willing to **risk** the tough journey **inland** to Rua's mountain **settlement**... would praise the **enthusiasm** of the faithful people Rua was **leading**... towards an enlightened and equitable **life**... on ancestral Tuhoe lands.

But...alas...it seems Rua **allowed** the gospel to influence his **politics** a step too **far** for the **Crown** to tolerate ... during World War I...Rua tried to keep his people **out** of military **service**...

holding to the beatitude...blessed are the **peacemakers**... Rua insisted it was **immoral** to fight for a **Pākehā** king **and** country... who carried out so much injustice against Māori.

Rua was charged with sedition for his gospel commitment to non-violence...and this gave the Crown the excuse they needed...not only to arrest Rua...but to raid his community

Yet while he was imprisoned...other practitioners of the good news ... weren't **deterred** by the criminal branding of the Tuhoe people and their leader... nor were they put off by the **isolation** of their settlements...

like **Paul**... these missionaries became slaves to all... in their service of the good news

...chief among them Deaconess... Sister Annie Henry and her contemporary the Rev John Laughton. Known as Hoani...together they shared the load across the Urewera and into Taupō.

Hoani Laughton became a recognised **scholar** of the Māori language...and played a major part in revising the Maori translation of the Bible.

when Rua Kenana was **released** from prison...mutual trust and friendship formed between the two men... Together they developed a concept of **unity** based on the belief that one God was the authority for **all** peoples.

Their relationship forged an on-going **connection**... between the Presbyterian Church and **Rua's** church of the Iha rai ra...the Israelites...

When Hoani Laughton died in 1965 the Moderator of the General Assembly, said 'No words of mine can convey the sense of loss our Church will feel on the passing of this great and humble man ... I believe history will speak with deep gratitude of his leadership and the solid foundation he has laid... for a true and practical expression of Christian faith and deep harmony in race relations in New Zealand.

How are we doing...do you think? As a **nation**...was the treaty of Waitangi between **equals** or between conquerer and conquered.

It took one hundred and forty-eight years... Only 8 **years** ago for the grievances of the Tuhoe people to finally be acknowledged by the Crown...for their claim for justice under the Treaty to be **recognised**...

My prayer is that this Waitangi Day...
we repent of the sins of our ancestors...
we repent of our indifference to history and its legacy...
we repent of our unwillingness to play our part in bringing about the reign of a loving God in **our** land...

Let us each **be** signs of the good news
in our speech and in our actions...
in our families...our church...our community...
and in our world...