

Celebrating Our Three Tikanga Church

Hey, you guys we are in the second Sunday after Pentecost and Ian has been encouraging us to find creative ways for us to become a community with each other, because I believe it is the way that God is mending the World. Last time when I spoke here, we saw that when the Spirit was poured the Jews and converts to Judaism from the diaspora heard the community speak of God's great deeds in their own native language. Which is to say that the litmus test of a community shaped by the power of the Spirit is its ability to extend diversity and give space for all voices to speak.

Today we are going to talking about our Three Tikanga church. And so, we are going to talking about racial realities and the Church. Which is a very incredible volatile topic in our culture, but importantly and very much germane to what is going on around us. What is your experience of talking about race? What is your own experience about taking about racial issues, about racism?

As soon as I asked that question, I can follow it up with a different variation of the same question. To talk about race. Let me ask you this: What is your threshold for discomfort? Because to talk about these kinds of things is to put ourselves in a position to be uncomfortable.

It was during my third year at St John College up in Auckland. That we went to a Maree in Rotorua. Every start of the year the College would provide for us (students) with opportunities for different cultural emersion experiences. And this was one of those profound Maree experiences. Because we got to go to Opotiki and listening to one of the descendants of Mokomoko relate to us some of the traumatic experiences they had endured as an Iwi... and they also relayed to us the implicit and explicit racisms that they have experienced living in New Zealand as Maori on a regular basis... so we listened to how a whole iwi lost it livelihood as a result of their lands being confiscated ... we listened to the effects of institutional racism that they had experienced... it was mind bangling as Kenyan learning that dark piece of New Zealand history... I had never heard such a thing... they were all kind of things that were sheltered about my experience of living in New Zealand... that story was so disruptive and eye opening and painful as we listened to the descendant of Mokomoko tell us about their experiences... if you have never heard the Story of Mokomoko and Volkner, here is the snap shot. The story goes like this...

The Te Whakatōhea chief Mokomoko was one of five Māori executed on 17 May 1866 for being implicated in the murder of the missionary Carl Völkner at Ōpōtiki in 1865. The government punished Te Whakatōhea further for Völkner's death by confiscating much of the iwi's land.

Völkner's death had occurred during what Pākehā called the 'Hauhau disturbances. Many Māori saw Völkner as a government spy. When in May 1865 he ignored warnings from Te Whakatōhea to stay away from Ōpōtiki, he was seized and later hanged. Mokomoko denied responsibility for the killing. He claimed that he went away after the decision was made to kill Völkner and was not present at the death. His descendants claim that earlier he had tried to help Völkner escape.

Mokomoko surrendered in October 1865 and was tried in Auckland on 27 March 1866. Witnesses identified Mokomoko as a member of the procession that took Völkner to his execution. Testimony that he had carried the rope with which Völkner was hanged was to be crucial in his conviction. No witness, however, claimed that Mokomoko was directly involved in the killing itself.

According to Te Whakatōhea the rope had been taken from Mokomoko. In the end the evidence was deemed sufficient to make him an accessory to Völkner's murder. Heremita Kahupaea, Hakaraia Te Rahui, Horomona Propiti and Mikaere Kirimangu joined Mokomoko on the scaffold on 17 May 1866. Mokomoko's last words were, 'E

mate hara kore ana ahau. Tēnā koutou Pākehā. Hei aha.’ (I die an innocent man. Farewell Pākehā. So be it.)

His song, ‘Tangohia mai te taura i taku kakī kia waiata au i taku waiata’ (Take the rope from my neck that I may sing my song), became an important expression of Te Whakatōhea’s anger at what had happened to Mokomoko and his co-accused.

In 1993, the justice minister, Doug Graham, made an official visit to Ōpōtiki to apologise to Te Whakatōhea and the descendants of Mokomoko. In September 2011 a pardon agreement was signed by Māori Affairs minister Pita Sharples and Mokomoko’s descendants.

It is such a sad but a precious piece of New Zealand history.

This year it has been exceptionally volatile in terms of racial conversations in our country. The News has been filled with disturbing reports of racial incidences and violations. 15 of March (Friday afternoon) breaking news and subsequent news cycle was the day New Zealand bubble busted. The innocence or the ignorance that many of us had been enjoying came to an end. Suddenly we were made aware that the evil that is being experienced elsewhere is also alive and active in our Utopia green New Zealand. And I remember the Prime Minister response to the tragedy. She said “this is not us” “you are not one of us”. “They are us” But as days turned to weeks and 3 months later, as I have been hearing and reading conversations of people who are unhappy or even angry with the kind and generous treatments, which the families who were affected and traumatized by the attack have been receiving. Also, the prime-time coverage that the Muslim community are receiving is and has elicited surprising reactions from many people, even many Christian communities ...And so, perhaps a few months later the thought that “he is not one of us” might not be the case. Maybe we are more polarized than ever. If we are not polarized, maybe Christchurch attack did reveal the deep level of polarization that has always existed below the surface that we are just now becoming aware of.

The reality is that things like racism don’t just disappear you guys. Because sin doesn’t just disappear. Sin never disappears. It has to be rooted out. I was reminded of a quote from the prologue of C. S Lewis extraordinary book, The Great Divorce. He says this:

I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A sum can be put right: but only by going back til you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on.

Evil can be undone, but it cannot 'develop' into good. Time does not heal it.

Time does not heal evil. In order to undo evil, you have to go back and figure out where did we go off the path. The sin has to be named, as to the implication of the sin and you have to unwind it in order to move afresh from that point. If we just continue to bury and pretend, we can never experience the healing that is available in Christ in any number of challenging things. And that is the reality of sin and I remember my history teacher saying racism is New Zealand original sin. It is our original sin as a country and many of us have never had the courage to reckon with that. And we will never evolve beyond it. Until we name it. And deal with it in pretty systemic ways. And that sin manifest itself in many ways does it. Last week my CPE supervisor made a very compelling observations: She said, that Pakeha makes the highest population percentage represented in our Rest Homes. And that Maori and Pacifica makes the highest population represented in our prisons. We can see the manifestation of sin there as well. Sin manifests itself in so many ways. We have difficulty even as a city we have uncomfortable history. Our neighbourhoods are divided on racial terms. That is our heritage. And the difficulty of this conversation you guys is that it can keep us from starting it. The difficulty of having the conversation can keep us from having uncomfortable, difficult conversation. Because they are some things that are easy to get wrong right? There are other people that are more qualified to have the conversation, even in our Parish. It is complex, it is

confusing. We like/ I like to have a message that at the end of it is tied up and the problem is solved. We like leaving Church light. Not heavier. But this is one of those topics that none of those things will happen. You may leave feeling heavier than you came in. And that is also okay. Maybe even necessary.

Because I believe one of the chief difficulties of having this conversation is identity. In fact, that is what is implicit whenever we talk about “The Three Tikanga Church”. Who are we, as we gather in this space? Are we primarily Kiwis? Because if we are primarily Kiwis, we will have this conversation through one lens and framework right. But if we are men and women whose primary identity is shaped by Jesus Christ and we see ourselves as citizens of his Kingdom. That will locate us in a different position. We will begin to have this conversation in a different way, with a different vocabulary. So, as we sit here, I wonder what lens are we viewing this conversation. Primarily as a Kiwi or as a citizen of God’s kingdom because our starting point will impact everything.

For me I have been having these conversations with friends and close mentors for year. Maybe close to 20 years now and I got be honest I am still intimidated by it. Because I recognise I am still in process, as I imagine most of us are, and they are still dynamics at work in my head, and in my heart and in the systems that I participate in, in this world that I don’t fully see or comprehend. So even as we talk about these things, I am excited to talk about them in one level, but I am also very very aware just to put it out there, I am first of all a learner. And that is not always true when we talk about the messages that we give here but it is to me as it relates to the Three Tikanga Church, i.e; race, racial identity, racial division, the church and what it means to follow Jesus into the breach between “us”. And whoever “us” happens to be and “them”. Pakeha, Maori, Polynesia, African, or Arab, Arsenal or Manchester United...

Again, it was during my time at St John’s College that I had the privilege of having intentional conversations with my Te reo Maori teacher. Matua Victor was the name of my Te reo Maori teacher. And Matua Victor began to talk to me about my own implicit biases, and the fact that for me having grown up as African in Africa meant that I had all of those prevailing assumptions that rarely got challenged, I began to see that racism existed not just in the human heart (though it is very much imbedded in the human heart and human mind) but racism also existed within systems because when sinful people create structures, create framework and systems in the world and in culture they are always mired by sin.

Matua Victor is the one who pointed out to me that I had come to believe that New Zealand was made up of one story, i.e white, middle-class, and safe environment to raise kids. And what Matua Victor began to expose for me to was my ignorance not just as related to my own perspective, but my ignorance related to my position in culture vis a vis other people, and he would say gently and patiently overtime exposing my ignorance about New Zealand history, about some of the violence and injustices that is woven into our collective story from the very beginning. He would also expose to me over time, again gently my arrogance. My belief that the way that I see the world and the way I experience the world is the way the world is. Matua Victor gave me something else in the process and I am so grateful for this gift, he gave me a desire to see things become different. He gave me the desire to experience something different.

The reality is that we can hold the highest view of humankind – i.e.; a theologically sound view of human majesty and yet be racist. And then something drastic happens in our life and cause us to become painfully aware of how ethnocentric our understanding of the world is. And we will have to stop and actually ask forgiveness multiple times to people who do not look like us because of what we might hear coming out of our mouth. Brother and sisters, we are called to learn to be profoundly patient with each other. We are called to form friendship patiently across different races.

Because that is the work that Christ is out to do in his people. This is what Jesus is talking about in John 15:16; he says,

You did not choose me, but I chose you.

The implication is I don't get to choose who I do life with. Christ does. Christ takes all initiative. And the other implication is that left on my own devices I will choose people who look like me and think like me. But we are called to become friends of Christ, and by extension become friends with each other. Christ has managed to break down the wall that divide us and made us friends with each other.

We may have profound differences between us, but we are joined in Christ by something even more profound. And if we want to be a part of this friendship, if we want to experience Christ begin to erode our boundaries between Tikanga, understand we are going to be messed up, our ignorance is going to be exposed, our arrogance is going to be exposed, our anger is going to be exposed. It is going to be very uncomfortable for us. But I am here to tell you there is something better than comfort. There is something more beautiful than comfort. There is something more life giving than comfort. You know what it is – Community. Friendship despite the odds. Solidarity. Between people that the world has set up as enemies.

You know what is better than comfort, relationship where we begin to experience over time Christ knocking down walls that we can never knock down on our own. That is what is better than comfort.

What I am trying to give us is not just an appetite for racial reconciliation, not just for racial justice – restorative justice, racial healing (Whatever you want to call it) What I am trying to give us is an appetite for the gospel. I am trying to build in us an appetite for the gospel. For the work that Christ can do among people who have every reason to distrust each other and to be separate from one another. And so, understand when I talk about race in the church, I am talking about an issue or a problem, or a wound that exist over here and then the gospel over here. I am talking about Christ and the work that Christ is trying to do in his church and the way that Christ work is meant to flow into Christ people and into the world. I am talking about what flows through the gospel into a very fractured world, are you with me?

So, Paul say it like this in Galatians 3:28 “As many of you were baptized into Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek” (lets pause for a second. This is an important point. This is no small thing for Paul to be saying to the people is writing to at this time. You know Paul grew up in a tradition that said that the work of God was constituted in and around a particular ethnic group, mainly the Jews. Right? God chosen people... And yet Christ has revealed to Paul, and he has revealed to the early Church that God's tent, Gods family is way bigger, way wider than they ever imagined. And so, Paul is writing to the Galatians and saying do you understand something happens in the lives of Christ people, when you put on Christ, you know what begins to erode? Hostility and homogeneity. Hostility and homogeneity and instead Christ begin to work in his people in such a way that he creates a new community characterised by unity on one hand and diversity on the other hand. The same unity and diversity that characterises the God who we worship, who is three persons and one as we saw last week.

And so, Paul says, “there is no longer Jew or Greek – i.e.; there is no place for racial prejudice, no place for racism in the body of Christ, there is just no place for it. Those distinction between us are no longer primary. And understand this Paul is arguing for more than colour blindness. He is not talking about colour blindness. Paul is saying there is something better than colour blindness, you know what it is Unity and Diversity. A community brought together not by sameness but by solidarity with Christ, in Christ.

“There is no longer slave or free,” there is no room in the body of Jesus for Classicism, class warfare, working class, middle class, wealthy people demonizing each other. antagonizing one another, there is no place for that. No. In the body of Christ these people learn to serve and honour one another. And work together for the common good.

Likewise, “there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. There is no place for sexism in the body of Christ. This is not to say there are no differences, what Paul is taking about here is the erasure of hostility, erasure of belittlement and antagonism between the sexes.

And here is what is powerful for me about this passage you know, sometimes we hear people say men the bible is so stuck in the past. You know the bible is really holding us back. It is holding us captive to all these old modes, but if you think about a passage like this and then you think about the world that we live in then and our relationships that are still mired in all this kind of things: racial tension, Class prejudice, gender discrimination, you realize the bible is way out ahead of us right? The bible is pulling us forward. The bible is saying come on guys catch up. And scripture is ahead of us, because Christ is ahead of us. Christ is the one saying to his people do not be stunted by the patterns of the world around us. We are called to be a sign that something new is breaking in. We are called to be the new humanity clothed in and constituted around Christ.