

Church on the margins

Sermon 1 in the series: Hahi Karaitiana (Christ's Church)

Jeremiah 29.10-14, 19, Matthew 2.1- 8

Dave was hopping mad. "What the hell are the churches doing over here?" he demanded! We were talking about how most of the churches in Spain were closed. Dave continued his rant: "Someone said they are closed so the homeless can't get in and cause damage. What does the church exist for if not for people like that? And what about us pilgrims? Don't they know about the Camino?"

I had no answer. It frustrated me too. The church's primary purpose is to worship God. But what is worshipping God?

Worship of God involves serving the poor. Worship of God is opening our doors so others can come in. Worship of God is far more than we have allowed it to be. No wonder the world has no place for the church. The world has had enough!

In some circles we are tolerated when it is convenient. Joe Bennett comments on the Royal Wedding. He notes:

Clergy floated about the barn in thick jewelled capes as worn by the leaders of badly-run planets in Star Trek. All were delighted to pretend for the day that the church still mattered.¹

Wow! Doesn't that smack you in the face?

"All were delighted to pretend for the day that the church still mattered."

People push us away, not because they are antagonistic, but simply because we are irrelevant. We have no impact, or very little, on the lives of most people in our communities.

In mainstream Aotearoa New Zealand we are rapidly become exiles just like the Jewish people were exiles. Perhaps we already are exiles and just haven't had the guts to face it yet.

In Babylon the Jews had no choice but to face the fact that they were exiles in a strange land. At the time Israel was split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms; in a way they were ripe for the picking by various nation states. Finally in 587BC Jerusalem, the one remaining Jewish city, was razed in. The Jews were allowed to live in their own settlements in Babylon and were treated fairly well there. They ran businesses and got fairly comfortable. Some even had powerful positions but a few wanted to revolt against the Babylonians, apparently to hasten the return home. But the prophet Jeremiah felt very strongly God wanted them to stay for longer.

And he writes to tell them so. Our first reading is part of his letter.

The exiles are clearly getting despondent. So are we, if we are honest that is. We struggle with our powerlessness and ineffectiveness in reaching people with the Gospel. I hear so many people wondering what we can do that is different; what is the miracle cure that will make the church flourish again?

People try a lot of different things in order to be cool and attract the crowds. Apparently one pastor (guess where that was) drove a tank, onto the platform of his church and stepped out of it to preach the sermon. But it ain't working friends. We aren't cool. We never are going to be cool. We need to face facts and sort out what it really is that we are up against. Because it isn't the people themselves we fight.

And yet there is hope right? There is hope for the Jews. Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon telling them that the Lord hasn't forgotten them. After a period of time, probably not literally 70 years, they will be rescued.

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<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/celebrities/104098519/love-broke-through-the-stuffy-charade-that-was-the-royal-wedding>

Then he pens these well-known verses:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. vv11 – 14

We love those verses don't we? They've been endlessly quoted to bring comfort and hope.

But there follows a warning to the false prophets who want to escape exile. Things won't go well for them. While the language is that of God driving them out and punishing them, I wonder if what is described is actually natural consequences of rebellion. The Babylonians were not known for their mercy to their enemies.

Anyway Jeremiah reminds the false prophets and the rebels that they are not listening to God in verse 19 and then the sting in the tail:

"And you exiles have not listened either" declares the Lord.

What are we not listening to? Is our exile something that is a consequence of our own complacency? Is it something God has allowed, perhaps even caused, so we can hear what God is trying to say? What does the Lord have for us in these years of exile?

In consultation with a few wise people, we have decided to try and use my remaining time with you to consider who we are as a church, what God wants us to do and be in this community where we are placed.

The title for our sermon series is 'Hahi Karaitiana'. It means Christ's Church. That is what we are. And we long to be truer to that calling, right?

I love that 'Hahi' sounds like laughter. The church is laughed at by some; perhaps by many. We really are exiles, separated from the real world in so many ways.

But laughter is a good thing isn't it? Laughter isn't always derisive. Laughter can be genuine. Learning to laugh at ourselves is very healthy. Growth and change happen more easily where there is good natured laughter and acceptance of mistakes.

So over the next three months we want to celebrate being Hahi Karaitiana and to look at some of the challenges we face. We will look at them squarely and honestly; admitting where we fall short of the dynamic interactive people we are meant to be in the community. That's the 'Hahi' part.

And the Karaitiana part? Well Christ is the centre of who we are. There is no church without Jesus. The life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus are the reason we are here.

And Jesus promises hope to the church; to us. Most are probably familiar with Jesus promise that the gates of hell (hades) shall not prevail against the church. It's a great promise, one that is based on Jesus himself. It's not based on Peter as some think. Jesus is the rock; not Peter in spite of the word-play on his name.

But where does Jesus make this promise?

There is an actual place that was called the Gates of Hades. It's near the city of Caesarea Philippi. There is this enormous mountain side of rock, like a solid wall stretching straight up to the heavens. At its base there is a cave, which was a source for water for the Jordan River. (That was stopped by an earthquake.) The pagans thought the cave was a gate to the underworld.

At the entrance to this cave was a temple to Caesar and to the god Pan. There were niches carved in the wall of the rock for statues of gods. The temple was built on a huge rock.

Jesus and his mates came to this region, and see the temple with all the statues of gods. [Here](#) Jesus asks them who people said he was, and who they, think he is. That's where Jesus made this promise that he would build his church on a rock and that it would survive the gates of Hades or hell.

So even while we are in exile, there is Jesus' promise that we won't be destroyed. That's good.

But what does the Lord want to teach us while we are in exile? What opportunities are there for us while we are here? These are the questions we should be asking instead of trying to go back to the old days of the 70s or 80s. We need to stop trying to be acceptable and to confront the gods of this age. We need to live out, not just talk about, an alternative reality to how everyone else lives.

If we were to imagine a temple today, what gods would be worshipped there? I reckon the prominent gods would be materialism and busyness. Those things hold our world captive. Let's be honest; they hold us captive too.

King Herod presented himself to the magi as a worshipper. He wanted Jesus dead so that he could continue on as he always had. He charged the Magi to "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

In our search for what it really means to be Hahi Karaitiana, we too will need to search for the living Christ and who he really is. Part of our journey will be trying to stop making him in our image.

Trying to make Jesus, the One who was born King of the Jews, in our image is effectively killing him, perhaps less dramatically than Herod wanted him dead. But, think about it for a moment, making Jesus in our image does kill the work he came to do. Over the next few weeks we'll be exploring the life of Karaitiana in order to become the genuine Hahi, in this community, the Hahi the Lord wants us to be.

Reflection Questions:

1. In what ways do you see the church being pushed to the margins of society?
2. What opportunities do you see in this?
3. Where do you see 'the One who has been born King of the Jews' at work?
4. In what radical ways might this One be asking us to get out of our comfort zones and really follow him into the community he cares so passionately about?