

Priorities

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1 – 10, Luke 4:14 - 21

In 1972 John Gunther, an American journalist, defined Australia and New Zealand in this way:

“Never mind” is the national motto, afternoon tea is the national ceremony, a jolly weekend is the national goal.¹

Okay, he had a cheek to lump us in the with our rivals over the ditch. That aside, what has changed for us since then?

1. Now we say “no worries”
2. It’s much cooler to drink espresso coffee rather than tea, or perhaps a herbal tea
3. Weekends are still the highlight of the week for many

The tourleader website² describes us like this:

You’ll find that they are very informal and easy to talk to, Kiwis like to keep things uncomplicated and in most situations there will be no etiquette issues (except on the marae ...). New Zealanders follow the rule “live and let live” (that doesn’t apply for possums, fish and wild pigs). Being friendly is just part of their nature, they’re so laid back they’re almost horizontal.

Of course in any people group, broad categories only work to a certain degree but are we generally so laid back, we’re almost horizontal? Is that a good thing?

10:30 am discussion

As Christians what should our priorities be? What should we be aiming for? What about us as a church?

I’d like to consider our Scripture passages and then ask those questions again in the light of what God’s word has to say to us.

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:4) is the plaintive cry of God’s people in exile in Babylonia.

In spite of their sin – they rejected God and refused to help widows, orphans and aliens – our merciful God hears their cry. They are allowed to return to Jerusalem. But it is far from wine and roses there too. The temple and city walls are in ruins. But the temple is rebuilt then Ezra also returned to Judah. He helped them to know and obey God’s commands.

Nehemiah story is the second part of the return from exile. Nehemiah’s a pretty smart guy and cupbearer, advisor and counsellor to the Persian King Artaxerxes 1. All is well. He likes his job (as much as you could like checking out the wine for poison.)

¹ Inside Australia and New Zealand. 1972: 301

² <http://www.tourleader.co.nz/index.php/about-new-zealand/people-of-new-zealand>

Then he hears of the situation in Jerusalem. His heart is torn. After praying and fasting, Nehemiah heads off as governor of Judea to his beloved city Jerusalem. When he arrived, he worked persistently to rebuild the walls and, despite continual opposition. Miraculously the task was completed in 52 days (Neh 6:15-16).

After registering all the new immigrants, Nehemiah calls for a gathering to publicly read the Scriptures. Men, women, teenagers and children gathered. Most likely children as young as 8 or 9 would have been present. They were unified in purpose and in worship.

Notice they all stood when the Word was read. This may be where our custom, (mostly at 9am) to stand while we read the Gospel, came from. They wanted to pay attention.

This was a very moving time. Imagine thousands of people all shouting Amen, Amen! Yes, Yes. And they were weeping.

Why do you think that was?

Whatever the reason Nehemiah told them they mustn't be sad but celebrate. And notice what their celebration included; experiencing the Lord's joy and caring for those who didn't have enough! Always the Lord's command is to care for those who need it.

Now we come to Jesus in the synagogue. His time has come to announce his mission to his own people. At this stage of Jesus life, he was enjoying a relatively positive reputation – though he knew there would be scepticism in his home town where he is now.

What do you notice about this important step in launching his mission?

- Someone handed him the scroll – he didn't choose it himself –
- The reading is from the prophet Isaiah and clearly points to who Jesus is:

Some of us went to Founders over the weekend to Evolve festival. Basically it's a new age festival with lots of mostly genuine people there seeking something more in life. We hoped for opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus with some. We did get some opportunities – as far as I know, no-one actually decided to follow Jesus. But we sowed some seeds that the Holy Spirit will water. Please do keep praying for those we connected with.

The mission mandate points to Jesus and no-one else.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,

and that the time of the Lord's favour has come.

When we get the opportunity to speak to others about our faith, we ought always to point them towards Jesus. Many people actually respect Jesus, as a person or teacher or whatever. This gives us an opportunity to talk about Jesus as a living person now – our Saviour, Redeemer and King

The prophet Isaiah pointed to the coming Messiah. Jesus pointed to himself not so he could get glory, though he deserved it. But because of what he could bring to the people.

- Jesus is anointed by the Spirit to bring the Good News of the Gospel to those around him. Even Jesus didn't do stuff in his own strength.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,

that the blind will see,

that the oppressed will be set free,

and that the time of the Lord's favour has come.

- I'm sure you will also notice that Jesus' mission is holistic.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,

that the blind will see,

that the oppressed will be set free,

and that the time of the Lord's favour has come.

Some wrongly try to over-spiritualise this passage. Yes, the passage talks about the spiritually poor, captives, the blind and oppressed but this message of release and freedom is not just spiritual. It is also physical, emotional, and psychological as well as spiritual.

We see this very clearly in Jesus' own ministry. He healed people and set them free from demons, as well as forgiving their sin.

Both of our Scripture passages point us towards God's priorities. Take a moment to think and pray about (discuss with your neighbour) what those priorities mean to you.

Only Jesus can bring true freedom. The Lord's favour comes in knowing him. This is the essence of the Good News. Through his death and resurrection, everyone can have a full and meaningful life. When our priorities align with God's priorities, life is far more satisfying and productive than when we do our own thing.

It is important to note that this freedom, this satisfaction does come at a cost. We need to lay aside our own priorities and follow the Lord's priorities.

As a church we aim to do just that. Our church's mission statement tries to reflect God's priorities, not our own.

Following Jesus: Building Community

The first part is self explanatory I hope. We call this the "UP" bit. Our focus must be first and foremost on the Lord.

IN

This is all about our growth as disciples and our fellowship together. We know that we, and churches in the West generally, have been poor at helping each other with our growth in Christ. We've bought into lies. The first lie is that faith is a private matter. It is not; faith is a community affair. We grow best in community.

To aid that we will be doing Lenten studies again. There will be two short-term groups set up for just that purpose – one in the evening and one in the day time. Some of the existing groups will be open to having others join them too.

The second lie is that it is all about the individual. This too is ridiculous. We need to learn to work together, sometimes laying down our own preferences for the good of the other. We need to study God's word and pray and live together. We know that where there is unity the Lord commands a blessing so this year we will be focusing on discipleship and figuring out what that means together.

OUT

Building community is about our community at Church on the Hill and it is about our church contributing to the wider community. This happens in two ways – our verbal witness (and we need more confidence in this) and also our acts of compassion; the way we contribute to society as a whole.

In early March we go on a short term mission trip to Westport. This is geared towards helping the community there. At the same time we hope it will re-ignite our passion for mission generally.

One major goal we have as a church is to begin building the Lantern – hopefully in October. This goal covers both aspects of building community. It will be a great facility for us and for the wider community.

Being laid back as Kiwis is not a bad thing. I want to suggest that being laid back doesn't exclude having a goal, a focus. It's important that we have goals as a church and as individuals. You can call it a bucket list or whatever you want but we must have something to head towards.

I hope to clarify those goals using a consultation process in our church this year. While they need clarification broadly speaking they are –

- Growing closer to God is always number one.
- A clearer pathway for discipleship is number two.
- Beginning the Lantern is number 3.

I'm sure you have heard it said "If you aim at nothing, you will every time."
Apparently Zig Ziglar said that.