**Waitangi Day Message – the Reverend Brendon McRae, Flagstaff Community Church, Dunedin, New Zealand - 4 February 2024, followed by prayer. Readings:** 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

What’s the biggest people gathering you have ever been too?

* maybe family reunion
* gathering at the octagon for winter festival
* music concert – involving thousands – or attending a national sports game at a stadium

It’s Waitangi weekend – and thousands of New Zealanders head to events and celebrations – whether it’s on the marae, or like here in Dunedin - a community event in the Octagon.

A family from this church in fact has headed to Bluff to Te Aroha Marae where the official South Island Waitangi celebrations will take place where 100s are expected to gather.

Waitangi draws in thousands of people to both commemorate and celebrate a very important event that happened in our young history.

You might be aware there is a lot of conversation and media interest this year around Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

This has caused quite a stir and some swift responses.

As our new moderator of the Presbyterian Church - Right Rev Rose Luxford wrote in her Waitangi Day message – saying “There is some rhetoric that is inflammatory and harmful. Some policies from within the new coalition government have prompted uncertainty, anger and fear.”

**(PP)** A national hui just recently - saw 10,000 people – that’s a big gathering - united in the face of actions by the coalition government, including its proposed Treaty Principles Bill.

John Campbell, journalist and reporter was there and wrote an opinion piece with a statement as its heading…This is the heading…

“I saw peace, joy and 10,000 people uniting to say 'no'

That’s a big turn out and one of the biggest John has seen in his media career.

In the article John quotes New Zealand First’s deputy leader, Shane Jones, told RNZ the hui could turn into a “monumental moan session”.

But that wasn’t John’s experience – in fact a word he came away with – was joyful.

The National Hui for Unity it was called. And it felt like exactly that – said John.

**(PP)** So what’s going on do think…?

Our treaty relationship has been a big conversation of recent…

Stirred up by a number of initiatives…

A campaign throughout New Zealand led by evangelist Julian Batchelor involving pamphlet drops, meetings in cities – with its many critics describing the information presented as – misinformed, divisive in its language and a form of scaremongering.

I thought evangelists were bearers of good news?

Then there was the recent political campaign where again Māori were used as a political football game to gain votes.

Archdeacon Ngira Simmonds, calls it the “unhelpful and divisive rhetoric” of the election campaign.

As we gather as a faith community on Waitangi weekend – this is an important matter to discuss and reflect on.

Why you ask?

Well, as followers of Jesus walking on this whenua – we are invited to reflect on what the scriptures say about healing, justice and in particular, the subject of relationships between people – like sacred covenants.

What if I was to hold the bible in one hand and the treaty - Te Tiriti o Waitangi in the other hand.

What might our faith position be? – not our political position – all though of course – that may be informed by our faith perspective.

At Christmas we affirmed that God became flesh and moved into our neighbourhood – and made home with us.

That means faith in God is not some abstract thing that floats way up in the sky disconnected from our land, our stories, our lives, our histories.

Our scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 9 – our lectionary reading for this week – Paul here is talking about how we might relate to others. How we might approach relationships.

I wish my black lab Marley would pay attention to these words because for 6 years he has been at war with the neighbour’s dog – through the fence – and if he carries on – he will be the star – or villain of the next TV series – ‘Neighbours at War’.

Scripture has a lot to say about relationships. Which is appropriate this morning – as we celebrate a special relationship between two peoples – first peoples – tangata whenua people of the land – and Pākehā – which today basically means everybody else – who is not Māori.

Here is Paul outlining a template for relationships. What is he saying?

Paul is navigating the relationship between the traditional Jewish culture and a new dimension of Judaism viewed through the lens of Jesus.

To the Jews I became like a Jew

To those under the law I became like one under the law

Why is saying this?

Well, he gives some reasons.

To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews

Paul is doing it for the sake of the gospel. He is doing it in order that he might become a fellow partaker in it.

In what…you might ask?

Partaking in what Christ has done. This is living out the pattern of Jesus Christ death amongst others.

Paul is very clear in scripture. As he says, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings”.

Paul becomes all things not to gain salvation for himself, but as a means of embodying the giving of self for the well-being of the other – in a way he becomes a fellow sharer in the gospel.

In other words. It’s not all about Paul. He puts himself in the shoes of the other. He identifies with the other and does so respectfully. He learns the local language – Paul could speak two languages.

**(PP)** So Paul didn’t get grumpy when he was watching the local news and someone said hello in the local language. In fact, he probably responded in their language – which he has learned and practised. Paul didn’t get upset and spray paint on a sign that was written in a language that was different than his own.

Here is Paul pitching a greater goal in bringing healing to relationships. Remember, Paul was interacting with many different types of people, people groups – people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Paul – renounces his own privilege and honour – and says – actually - it’s all about relationship – and putting others first. And he hopes that in doing so – it brings people into an experience of God’s blessing.

So here we have a template from Paul for relationships which is….

* centred on Jesus
* modelled on Jesus own life and ministry
* generous and respectful
* puts others first
* walks with and learns from others

It’s like Paul is setting a Christian ethic or a set of moral principles, in how we relate to others – especially those who are culturally different.

I was talking about this subject with a member of this congregation – a teacher – who shared a recent example. The first day of school and all these nervous children outside the gate waiting with some anxious parents to be called in. This person noticed a child and parent with a headscarf, and of colour, who were looking a bit awkward and nervous.

Recognising the ethnicity, the person went over and said hello in their native language – which they had just learned from a recent overseas trip. Well, the mum relaxed and reached out and hugged and kissed the teacher on the check – warmed by the occasion and the use of her language by someone ‘other’.

Those rebuffing the proposed Treaty Principles Bill – are saying there are no ethics – or a moral compass underpinning these new ideas.

Which by the way – National have said they won’t support past the first reading.

I think New Zealand’s first female prime minister Jenny Shipley would be pleased with that.

**(PP)** *“I believe as a Pākehā New Zealander that the Treaty speaks for itself… it is an embodiment of how we should build a nation together.”*

Behind the formation of the Treaty, are values and ethics that were shaped deeply in relationships between early missionaries and Māori which was informed by biblical principles of respecting differences and equality.

We know the bible and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are inseparable.

That’s why on Waitangi day – at the national official ceremony – church representatives gather at dawn for prayer followed by a sermon.

**(PP)** In some churches – on Waitangi Weekend – including at the Waitangi day dawn service - the Treaty is read out publicly as a liturgy - alongside the public reading of the Bible.

This is to highlight the sacredness of the words which were inspired by the bible under the guidance of God.

The Treaty was established, informed and initiated largely by a Christian ethic – in how one people should get on with another people respectfully.

**(PP)** *The Treaty of Waitangi is regarded as the founding document of New Zealand. In signing the Treaty the Crown agreed that, within our society, the values and traditions of both cultures (Māori and British) would be reflected in society's customs, laws, practices and institutional arrangements. There was also an agreement to share control of resources and decision-making. The Treaty guarantees Māori equal status and power within New Zealand society, and it also legitimates the rights of Pakeha New Zealanders. Sharron Cole*

Set a framework for the future of New Zealand.

It’s no wonder there is some nervous energy around because the Treaty is not seen just as a legal document – but a sacred covenant of high importance which is held together by an ethic of respect and equality.

In fact. it was the missionaries who believed the Treaty was the best way to protect the interests of Māori.

You have to wonder if Rev. Henry Williams and colleagues read 1 Corinthians 9 as their morning devotion before drafting up the Treaty principles.

A quote from Professor Margaret Mutu in an article said this…

“And while it seems clear that this government wants to abolish the Treaty," “that can never happen. For one thing, you have two parties to a treaty, and one of them can’t uni-laterally redefine it. But also, our tūpuna were very, very wise. In the Treaty they invited Pākehā, the British, to come and live with us. But they had to live with us in peace. In peace and friendship. And that’s what the Treaty is. It’s a treaty of peace and friendship. You can’t redefine that. You can’t rewrite that. It was very wise and it was very clear.”

If you look closely at Paul’s ethic for relationships – there is a call for unity and oneness in Christ but this sits alongside an acknowledgment of difference.

True unity values each culture, learns from each other and receives from each other.

This is the gift of the Treaty

For many Maori - it is seen as a special covenant – with all the biblical connotations that go with our understanding of covenants as highlighted in scripture.

The treaty itself is a statement of faith

**(PP)** *“…the treaty is always speaking, in the context of faith, is also to say that the Treaty is not only a contract between two parties, or a covenant of mutual good faith. It is indeed a statement of faith in itself and is the sign of covenant between Māori and Pākeha”. Māori Minister*

It invites us to keep working at showing mutual respect. This is a great template for all New Zealanders whether you are Māori, Pākehā, Asian, Syrian.

It is not enough just to acknowledge another culture; and say simply and ignorantly – we are all one people.

It’s a bit like a marriage isn’t it - it is not difficult to determine if our attitude and behaviour honour a covenant relationship. As in a marriage, we simply need to keep asking ourselves - “are

we protecting and nurturing the relationship or merely our own interests?”

This is why there is a national call rising from the ground up calling for an honouring of the treaty **(PP).**

Our position as a Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa is very clear. As a church we honour the Treaty, and this is not a political position as such – it’s a faith position - inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus.

Let’s not get side tracked by the humanist, individualistic, uneducated populist narratives around the Treaty that are undermining the very foundational core of a special covenant.

If you want some further reading from a faith perspective on the Treaty and a critique of some of the current political narratives that are been proposed then I have a collection of helpful resources including…

Mini-series on Shine TV – called Colonisation, Christianity and the Treaty.

Academic article called: YOU’RE GIVING ME A HEADACHE: A Political–Cultural Critique of Alt/far-right Anti-indigenous thought on indigenous issues in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It examines the emergence of Tross Publishing - who are producing books fill of misinformation and myths and who are funded by a group of wealthy white men.

I have an article by Jay Ruka – you used to work for Youth for Christ – now an Anglican minister who comes out swinging – good to see some righteous anger!

If you want to dig a bit deeper and consider a Christian response then I am happy to share those resources

Friends, let us consider the words of Paul, who ultimately hopes that others might share the benefits of relationship with Jesus.

Let me finish with Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 9 – this time reading from ‘The Message’

“Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn’t take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I’ve become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn’t just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

**Prayer for Waitangi Day - Kia inoi tatou.**

E te Atua o Aotearoa, God of all, we come grateful, that in our nation, there is a sacred covenant to uphold the rights of tangata whenua and that enabled others, tangata tiriti, to migrate here. We thank you for progress made in honouring the Treaty, repenting of injustice, listening respectfully and speaking and singing the languages of our land. Thank you for the aroha New Zealanders have for each other and for our faith that shows how God heals hurts and overcomes oppression. Steel us. Give us kaha - strength - for the challenges ahead and the work yet to do.

We remember with gratitude those who have inspired our Church’s journey – Hoana and Horiana Laughton, Sir Norman Perry, Tame Takao, Sir Rodney Gallen, Jim Irwin, Duncan Jamieson, Sonny and Mona Riini, Millie te Kaawa, Wayne te Kaawa and many many more. We pray for the Moderator of Te Aka Puaho, Tamiana Thrupp, and for its people. We pray for those leading the way in their professions and institutions including those known to our Church, Justice Sir Joe Williams and Frazer Barton. Bless and encourage them.

May churches, schools, courts, universities and workplaces be increasingly inclusive, using tikanga, learning from te ao Maori. Let truth prevail. Let respect flourish. Let maturity grow. Let justice flow down like a river.

E te Ātua e aroha mai ana ki a mātou, *k*o ōu iwi katoa hei iwi mō mātou, *a*whinatia mātou ki te mārama tetahi ki tetahi, Kia whakapaingia tōu Hahi, E mahi tahi me te whakaū i te rangimarie kua tango nei mātou.

God who loves each one of us, All your people are our people. Help us to understand each other. Let your Church be blessed, as we work together, and preserve the peace we have received in you.

What we pray for our nation, we pray for others where hatred consumes, in Israel and Gaza and the West Bank, in Sudan, in Yemen, in Iran, in Iraq, in the United States of America, in Ukraine and Russia. May peace reign.

Mā te Karaiti to mātou Ariki. *Through Christ our Lord.* Amine.