

Called to Christ's mission

On September 19th, just a few days ago, we celebrated the 125th anniversary since the women of New Zealand received the right to vote; being the first democratic elected country to do so we led the way and opened the door for other countries to follow.

Over the past few days many women have been remembered for their courageous part in making this country changing event happen, none more so than Kate Sheppard.

Who was this woman of courage, tenacity and commitment to such a life changing cause?

Catherine Malcolm was born in 1847 in Liverpool England and named Catherine after her Scottish grandmother, however very early in her childhood years she made it very clear that her preference was to be called Kate. Influenced by her uncle who was a Minister of the Free Church of Scotland she adhered strongly to religious principles and Christian socialism.

Following the death of her father, her mother brought her and her brothers and sister to live in NZ and they settled in Christchurch. Here she grew up and married. An active member of Trinity church she also became deeply involved in temperance work and when evangelist Mary Levitt, a delegate of the Women's Christian Temperance movement, commenced her mission in New Zealand Kate became a founding member of the New Zealand arm of the movement. From that moment on Kate dedicated her life to supporting and encouraging women to reach their full potential as equal contributing members alongside men.

Kate Sheppard was motivated by humanitarian principles and a strong sense of justice. She once said, “All that separates, whether of race, class creed or sex, is inhumane and must be overcome.”

As you will be aware this month has mission as its focus for our Sunday services and those of us down to preach have been invited to share our perspectives on mission with a particular emphasis on one or more of the marks of mission, and today I’m giving focus to the 4th Mark of Mission which is *‘to seek to transform unjust structures of society’*. The texts I have used for today to underpin my reflection on this mark of mission are taken from the book of Isaiah and the Gospel of Mark.

Both these readings speak of justice, fairness, respect for life and liberty, and above all the freedom to love and be loved.

Let’s hear the words as written in Isaiah 42,

“here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

In Mark 22 we read of the question posed to Jesus and his response, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The text from Isaiah is one of the many texts in the Bible that refers to justice and our role within it. The text from Mark outlines what is considered the two greatest commandments. Taking the directive from Isaiah that we are called to bring justice to the earth leads us to interpret the text from St. Mark, not as an assertion that to follow God is simply to lead a virtuous life. But rather it reminds us that the faithful loving, revealed in God's word requires action. A true and living faith then will be evidenced by our love for God and one another inextricably linked with a commitment to carry out justice.

Often as a Church we hear the word justice and the term social justice being spoken of, *what exactly do we mean?*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was quoted as saying, *"Justice is conscience, not a personal conscience but the conscience of the whole of humanity"*. I totally agree.

One Dictionary describes the word just as being guided by truth, reason, and fairness. Within Plato's book 'Republic' justice is interpreted as 'giving to each what is owed'. This would be in line with other interpretations that emphasis equity, fair treatment and due reward. There is an inherent goodness expressed in actions that give due regard to the dignity and worth of every human being, that is at the heart of the very nature of God. Justice therefore begins by recognising and valuing each person as being made in the image of God and therefore of infinite worth and equal value.

The inherent right of every individual person to a life of freedom is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights whereby it is stated, the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person

and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...'

The freedom prescribed in the Human Rights declaration, for all people everywhere to have the prospect to experience the joy of effort, to live a life of dignity and worth, where equal rights are afforded to all, will only be realised through an equality of opportunity and the collective understanding that all people are of infinite value. Any form of abuse such as gender discrimination and violence against women, or deliberate disadvantage through unfair trading systems which create wealth for the few and extreme deprivation for the many violates identity and dignity.

Empathy and compassion and a kindly nature willing to extend a helping hand towards another in need, is demonstrated again and again within scripture and we are called to do likewise.

Indeed, belief in humanity, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable, those in the 2/3rds of the world who are struggling to make a living and survive, is threaded throughout the Biblical story. Furthermore humanity as portrayed within the Bible is seen within the wider context of God's creation as a whole and not isolated into the latest campaign or a designated Sunday. Two synonyms for humanity are human race and compassion. Neither definition can be deemed as individualistic, but rather communal. Indeed the biblical focus on community calls us to think in terms of we rather than me.

Numerous times over the years I have returned again and again to the African concept of Ubuntu which holds that 'I am who I am through my relationships and interdependence with other people.' If such relationships are destroyed by violence, degradation or sheer indifference to their plight, so is a person's concept of identity and self, rendering a person as invisible.

Using the example of people trafficking and labour exploitation, this thrives within a cloak of invisibility and will remain that way until we collectively bring it out into the open. How can we do this? For a start, we can do this by challenging inaccurate assumptions and by also decrying the presently uneven global trading field which sees so many workers in poorer nations struggling to survive,. Then using our power as consumers we can say NO to goods filled with child abuse, extreme poverty and loss of freedom.

Bringing justice close to you and me and our communities of faith, justice, I believe is best described as faithfulness to relationships; relationships that extend beyond the familiar – family, close friends, local community to embrace all of God’s creation both human and non human. Biblical justice therefore demands from us a response that is imbedded in all we think, act or do.

If we profess to be a follower of Christ then justice is not an optional extra to be picked up or put down dependent on our priorities of the day. Neither, I suggest, is justice something we stick on our prayer list as something that’s out there – distant from us- something we add to our list of concerns that somehow is divorced from our daily priorities.

The women of the suffragette movement showed great persistence to the cause even when the going got tough and tough it certainly got. By the late 1890s opponents to the suffragette movement were mobilising. There were dire warnings that any disturbance to the ‘natural’ gender roles of men and women would have terrible consequences for our country. The liquor industry weighed in too fearing the women would support growing demands for the prohibition of alcohol.

Such anti suffrage rhetoric was not based on fact; yet was very dangerous and divisive as it played on people’s fears and phobias. Today we could

likened such fears and phobias to some of our key concerns. Take immigration for example, too often these days those coming into our country under the category of refugee or asylum seeker are viewed negatively.

Seen as taking jobs away from New Zealanders, as well as stepping into homes much needed for our homeless families, the social media responses, following the announcement of the increase of the quota of people to be allowed to come and settle permanently, has been overwhelmingly negative. This is concerning as it has the potential to feed racism leading to unrest.

Immigration in our rapidly changing world is a reality, how we change and adapt to these changes is up to each one of us. As faith based communities we too have a key part in this. Diversity is a fact – inclusion is a choice.

As followers of Christ we are mandated to ask and respond to the questions,

Who is invited around the table?

Who is being included/excluded?

And lastly, what are we going to do about it?

As I finish I want to share with you a delightful quote I came across, that for me says it all.

“Diversity is about being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” (Verna Myers)

Chris Frazer, October 2018