

Ministry of Reconciliation

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James Lower Hutt, June 18 2017

Keynote Bible passages: 2 Corinthians 5.14 – 19, John 15.9 – 17

Last week I watched a Documentary on the History Channel entitled '*Elisabeth of Berlin*'. This told the courageous story of a Christian woman Elisabeth Schmidt who in the years preceding World War 2 stood up to the German regime under Hitler. I'd never previously heard of her, unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer who also opposed the regime and was executed for being part of a plot against Hitler. The rise of the Nazis after World War 1 posed a huge dilemma for the church in Germany. A large number of the 'Confessing church' did support the movement hopefully bringing the German people out of the devastation and defeat and depression after the first War. Others like Elisabeth Schmidt were less sure and especially so when the persecution of the Jews began in the 1930's and the matter of race and Aryan origin became a key issue. Elisabeth wrote letters and spoke in the church about the dangers of what was happening – increasingly courageous actions on her part. She also secretly housed fleeing Jewish families – an action punishable by death. Amazingly she survived the war and lived to 1977.

1) This introduction serves to focus on the issue of racial differences, a source of persecution down through history. Take a moment to consider *the gospels and the issue in Jesus' day of Jews and Samaritans*. Jesus' ministry in this regard was also courageous and radical. He went on ministry travel through Samaria, a people and country so disliked by the Hebrews. His encounter with the woman at the well describes it: 'A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'give me a drink'. The Samaritan woman said to him 'How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? And John in his gospel comments: 'Jews do not share things with Samaritans.'

Another time when Jesus was travelling in 'foreign territory' he met a woman who challenged Jesus about dogs eating the scraps, crumbs from a table. She implores Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus at first protests he was sent only to the people of Israel. Then he relents and, admiring her faith to continue persisting, heals the girl.

A third example of ministry with racial implications is the familiar parable of Jesus of the Good Samaritan, 'was filled with pity. He went over to him....' And we know the rest. There were other instances of Jesus' ministry to non-Jews that led to his being alienated by the authorities.

2) We know *now* that Jesus was a unifying factor in matters of ethnicity: in him 'there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Nevertheless the issue was very real and alive for the *leadership of the early church*. Converts were coming from non-Jewish or no religion and what about their adherence to customs and attitudes of the Jews? It took a dream Peter experienced about eating food being ritually unclean. Then came a 'summit conference' of the apostles, a council of the church in Jerusalem to seek the Holy Spirit's guiding on the matter of racial co-operation.

Luke tells us the deacon *Philip* went off to the 'the principal city of Samaria' and preached the Messiah there.' Think also how difficult it must have been for *Paul* – as a Jewish leader, steeped in Jewish custom when converted on the Damascus road to totally change and by example and teaching declare the oneness of all believers in Christ. There are several references in his letters to this so important truth of Christian belief. As he reflected on the ministry of Jesus, Paul recognised it was the cross that broke down the divide between Jesus and non-Jew. Jesus died for all humanity. Thus he wrote to the Ephesian believers 'Christ is our peace; in his flesh he made both groups into one and had broken down the

walls that divide.....to reconcile both groups to God in one body on the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.' (3.14 - 16).

3) Thus we come to the critical high point in the sermon, and the title: '*Ministry of Reconciliation*'. This we heard mention of in the reading, of Paul addressing the Corinthian church. He states Christ has given us a ministry of reconciliation. There is the overall factor that in Jesus dying on a cross, humans are enabled to be reconciled to God. Despite their trespasses, that's bottom line. Since God has enabled this, the believers are also to exercise a ministry - of reconciliation human to human. What I understand in this is that Christianity is not only to accept racial equality, Christians are to work towards helping it happen, it's a ministry. Thus we are to be reconciled to God, and also to work towards this in humans. St Paul likens us as being 'ambassadors for Christ' and that God is making his appeal through us. Thus in this we work together with God.

4) The Anglican church in this country and the Pacific is working towards this in '*Te Pouhere*' - whereby there are 3 wakas (canoes) tied to a pole. The whenua pou are becoming more common around our country, as it were stating claim. [Photo]

For the Anglican church Te Pouhere incorporates three tikanga or broad streams of the believers: those of Maori descent, those of pasifica and 'the rest'. (I suggest broad streams as included in pasifica for example are the uniqueness of those from Tonga, from Samoa, from Fiji and other islands as well as those of pasifica descent born in New Zealand. The third stream is the 'rest', those of English and European descent, from Asian countries, including India, China, and from Africa, including South Africans, and North and South America.

The intent is to recognise uniquenesses and work to heal past hurts where there have been relationship issues, and our troubled history surely attests to that. That's the *ministry of reconciliation* part. Not only is it New Zealand. Racial issues are an international concern. We are not alone in this country facing such issues. From my observation in visiting the United States it is a very alive and often tense issue. Many 'Black Americans' continue to feel alienated, and the First Nation (Indian) people one less hears of are beset by social problems with alcohol and gambling and many living on 'reservations'. For me it was an eye-opener to hear a Navajo woman taxi driver telling me how she experienced discrimination. More recently there has been significant Hispanic immigration from Central and South America. So we all have to work on it, whether a majority or a minority.

Furthermore, as we recognise these we are also recognising our church as being *multi-cultural*. Thus it's my conviction the ministry of reconciliation is a work in progress. I love taking part in multi-cultural events as much as eating in ethnic restaurants! If we are working in the ministry of reconciliation, whatever opportunities we have let's take them or help make them.

In summary then, the history of humanity has experienced countless instances of racial, tribal and national difference. The Bible describes many such, from the time of the tower of Babel recognising differences, to the Hebrew nation seeking the Promised Land. Jesus' in his call to ministry and mission encountered it in his own culture and showed it to be God's will for humanity albeit with differences coming to an accord. This work in progress continues, that's the ministry of reconciliation. As it more happens St Paul describes it as 'a new creation'. 'He prophetically sees the time when 'everything old has passed away, see everything is made new! All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ.'