

**E te whanau a te Karaiti, tena koutou, tena koutou, nga mihi ki a koutou.**

**E mihi ana ahau  
I te Matua nui i te rangi  
Nana nei nga mea katoa.**

**E te whenua te turanga o te iwi, tena koe  
Ko te tangata whenua, tena koutou.**

**Ko Ngongotaha te maunga  
Ko Rotorua te moana  
Ko Rosemary Dewerse taku ingoa**

**No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, greetings to you all.  
I greet the Creator to whom all things belong.  
To the land, the standing place of the tribe, greetings.  
To the people of the land, greetings.

I was born under the shadow of Ngongotaha  
By lake Rotorua  
My name is Rosemary  
And so, greetings to us all.

This morning as we ponder scripture together we are going to consider what it might mean to be living and dreaming God's vision for our world.

If we are going to do this, we need to begin by asking What is God's vision for our world? We don't have a lot of time this morning in which to respond to this, but we will begin by considering some of the sweep of the grand narrative of scripture.

Then, thinking of what it might mean to "live God's vision," I want to tell you a story of a rural community here in Aotearoa New Zealand – it is a story that I find incredibly inspiring and deeply sobering.

And then there will be the opportunity to ponder a question together with your neighbours as we prepare to dream, this week of what it means to live God's vision in your communities and nations.

PRAY

### **God's vision for our world**

I am currently teaching a course for Otago university in which I am encouraging my students to pay attention to themes that arc across the biblical narrative, asking ourselves Who is God? What does it mean to be God's people? And How then shall we live?

Too often we do not treat the Bible as a whole story. We pick and choose passages. But we don't normally read a book that way. We all know that the early pages are important for setting the scene, opening up the themes, introducing us to key characters. Later events depend upon us

understanding all of this. There is a moment in Luke's gospel when a stranger appears to two grieving disciples, asks them why they are sad, and when they express shock and deep loss because their Messiah has been crucified, the stranger takes them right back to the beginning because if they knew the story there should be no surprise in what has happened.

And so let's begin at the beginning as we ask What is God's vision for our world?

Genesis 1 and 2 paint a picture for us of a God who creates the heavens and the earth, breathing and speaking light, sky, waters, land, plants and trees, sun, moon, creatures, humankind. We are told of a God who sees and says that it all is good and who, making humans in God's image, imagines relationship, and entrusts us with not only caring for ourselves, but also for creation.

But then it goes wrong. A choice exists for humankind and we choose to carve our own destiny, without reference to God. Genesis chapters 3-11 chart a story that turns dark and bleak. And God is profoundly disappointed, angry. Wouldn't you be?! A good vision has been destroyed. Trust has been broken. And everything is going wrong.

God tries to obliterate what was made so that the darkness and evil is gone, but there is one family that is good. They must be saved because goodness is not for destroying. In saving them God commits to rebuilding and renewing God's vision of a creation where everything is good and the relationships of humanity with God, humans with humans, and humans with the rest of the created order brings delight.

But as the story goes, evil remains because choice remains. Humanity struggles and creation suffers. Wanting to begin the renewed bid for the vision God starts small, and in Genesis 12 calls a man and his family. Asks them to leave, to step into a journey. They are to be a light, showing what relationship with God can really look like and mean for everyone. God will stand with them and stand up for them. Bless them and through them bless all the families of the earth.

Abram and Sarai and their people respond in faithful obedience.

There is a fascinating moment in their story. Abram is now Abraham. God has heard an outcry against two cities – Sodom and Gomorrah – and decides they must go. But we hear this in Genesis 18:17-19: The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.'

Key in these verses are four things.

- **Relationship.** God could act in this situation without reference to anyone. That has happened before in the Genesis story. But here God decides that because there is now a relationship with Abraham, Abraham will be told what is about to happen. And then we listen as Abraham, standing before the Lord, asks if 50 people in Sodom were righteous, given that you are a just God, you can't slay them with the wicked. In response God agrees to forgive and not to destroy if there are 50 righteous people. The conversation continues and Abraham makes his case until the number gets down to 10. What intrigues me is that back in Genesis 12 when God spoke of cursing those who will curse Abraham (as well as blessing those who bless him), one of the verbs translated in English as 'curse' actually means 'to be despised'. God in Genesis 12 promised to defend Abraham's reputation and character if he steps into relationship because he is risking much stepping into the unknown;

here Abraham is arguing for God's reputation and can do so because of being in relationship. There is something quite remarkable initiated here.

- **Call.** In Genesis 18:19 we are told that God speaks with Abraham because Abraham has been chosen – called into a relationship based on trust. God has initiated but God seeks a robust and returned relationship. This pattern will play out again and again across the biblical story. God calls and God empowers but it is always with the desire for a robust relationship in view. Think of Moses – unwilling, needing to be convinced, but eventually one who like Abraham will negotiate with God, will hear from God, will be guided by God. And Moses is lovingly remembered by others and lovingly buried by God as God's friend. Think of Mary, congratulated by an angel for being chosen, who houses the divine within her body, is trusted with Joseph to parent God in Jesus, is rebuked by him at times, but at the cross, having not left him, is remembered, comforted and a care plan put in place for her.
- **Purpose.** We are told in verse 19 of Genesis 18 that God chooses to speak Abraham about what is about to happen because Abraham has been called **in order to keep the way of the Lord** – he, his children and his household – **by doing righteousness and justice**. In other words, Abraham and his family are to become beacons of God's good vision for our world. The Hebrew Scriptures describe for us what shape and direction just and righteous living will need to take. God's expectation is high; there is much at stake. So easily all could be lost as it was in Genesis 3-11. Here in the context of relationship and call God needs Abraham to understand that what is evidenced in his and his household's character and behaviour is important. Why?
- **Promise.** So that God's promise to Abraham can come true. That promise is that all families of the earth will be blessed. Blessing here is not just living a nice, prosperous life. It is living a fulfilled life grounded in peace, a Genesis 1 kind of life where the whole of creation becomes fruitful and where relationships between God, people and the earth are not only in right balance but enable flourishing. If one people can do this then all peoples can be challenged and invited into this.

These themes of **a God who calls** a man, a family, **a people to live out goodness, so that all peoples of the world might enjoy relationship with God** play out again and again, expanding in ever-widening circles across the biblical story, through history, to and beyond us. They enable and provide a liveable shape to God's vision for our world. And they remind us that a call made to a particular person or community is never for their blessing only but always for the blessing of everyone, for the whole of creation.

There is another thread we must not forget, the thread of redemption, God acting as kinsman-redeemer – a family member prepared on the basis of relationship to step in and enact rescue when evil must not have the last say. Think of the Exodus, think of the cross. Living into God's good vision is not an easy call and we will experience distress, fear, struggle, injustice, loss. If we are people who know the whole story of which we are a part, however, we will remember that redemption is part of the weave and will come. The resurrection tells us so.

God has expectations of us and we heard them in Genesis 18. God's vision is for a good world – a world full of good. The alternative is a world overrun with evil. So how are we to live? The biblical story reminds us again and again of what God's hopes are for people living God's vision. Justice, righteousness, mercy, humility, compassion, sabbath. (Micah 6). Rules for living are given to Abraham's family who become the people of Israel, in hope of bringing into everyday practice these big principles that uphold and empower God's original and remaining vision for a good world – in which all are blessed and fruitful because they see the goodness of these people and take up for themselves God's invitation to relationship. As Jesus – God in human flesh – will point out, at the heart of these rules for living established in the Pentateuch, and when broken lamented by the

prophets and punished in the historical books, at their heart are love for God, love for self, love for neighbour, and love for the earth.

What is required of God's people? Faith and obedience.

Of course the biblical story charts a rocky journey. A confusing and seemingly contradictory journey. God's vision gets obscured – by the behaviour and failings of the people and the actions of others in their wider world, and by the narrators, divinely inspired but still human and learning to be God's people.

The realisation of God's vision for our world receives a major new injection in the gospel accounts of Jesus, God with us, dwelling amongst us, embodying and exemplifying the vision for real. And God is **good**. Loves kindness. Values all. Notices the forgotten. Pauses to listen and to heal. Engages in conversation with the despised and the dismissed – a Samaritan and a Canaanite woman, a blind man, a leper, a Roman centurion via his servant. Causes trouble when he calls a bent-over woman a "daughter of Abraham," says to adults their faith must be like that of a child's and to his own people that God's Good News is even for foreign widows and a leader of the Syrian army, offers justice to a woman caught in adultery. God in Jesus speaks truth to the self-righteous, the self-serving and those living the letter rather than the spirit of the law - people who've forgotten those big principles at the heart of their rules for living. He gets angry with those who have turned the part of the temple where Gentiles are welcome to worship into a marketplace, making it impossible for them to respond to God's call on their life. Jesus' life, discomfiting many in power because he cared for so many without power, carries no evidence of criminal behaviour yet he is sentenced to death. He dies recognised, by those who can see, as a good man, surely the Son of God.

Suffering and death seems a deeply strange, abhorrent and disturbing path for God's vision to take toward realisation. It's counter-intuitive. Paul in Colossians 1 tells us that in Christ "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." God's good vision of peace for us all – proven to be something we humans are incapable of fully achieving on our own – is only fully made possible by God in Jesus on the cross absorbing evil, being broken by it. But he is not defeated.

We live in a time beyond that event. Now the call God offered to Abraham, which asked him in response to live in justice and righteousness because his family was to be a light so that God's promise to bless all the peoples of the earth might be realised, is our call too. The Spirit was gifted to Jews and to Gentiles; we all without exception are invited into relationship with the God who dreams good for our world: justice, righteousness, peace, mercy, humility, compassion, flourishing.

### **How can we be living God's vision for our world?**

As a response to this question let me tell you a story from this land.

It is not my story; it **is** our story. It is not my story because I am not Maori and this story is of two men (prophets) and a community in Taranaki called Parihaka. It **is our** story because all those who have made their home in this land have a responsibility to remember what happened there, to honour, to lament, to be changed.

Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti o Rongomai lived in the 1800s. The British had by then arrived in the country and so these men, both of chiefly lineage from the tribe of Ngatiawa, were born into a

traditional Maori world being challenged by new ideas, including Christianity, and different conceptions of land, ownership, stewardship, status, and power.

Both men were identified early in life as having special gifts of teaching and prophecy and were nurtured and educated extensively by their elders in Maori tradition and knowledge.

Christianity arrived in their area of Taranaki in the 1840s. By 1846 Te Whiti o Rongomai at least was being taught and mentored by a German Lutheran missionary and developed a deep and profound understanding of the Bible. Later that same missionary would prove duplicitous when he acted in the interests of settlers in regard to Maori land – an early, perhaps a first, taste for Te Whiti of a clash in keeping faith.

Some descendants speak of an ancient prophecy foretelling the arrival of two birds of knowledge on the peak of Mt Taranaki. This prophecy was also received in a dream by Aotearoa's first Maori king just before his coronation in 1857. It was believed to speak of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi.

His descendants remember it like this: 'Towards the south there is a sacred mountain; below the shadow of the mountain there is a tree with a branch and on this branch are two birds of knowledge, Mumuhau and Kereto. These birds will receive the message from on high, and they will lead the people into everlasting life.'

In 1860 war came to Aotearoa. British settlers were greedy for land, particularly in the Waikato and decided to take it by force, refusing to engage with the submissions of such chiefs as Wiremu Tamihana. Tamihana founded a 400 member Christian Maori village at Matamata and was a proactive peacemaker. He finally took up arms in the face of profoundly disrespectful and murderous behaviour on the part of the British government and soldiers. While Te Whiti was not directly involved in the fighting he did become well aware of the severe impact it was having. Maori ways of living and knowing were being destroyed.

A new Maori religion emerged in the early 1860s called Paimarire that combined Maori and Christian understandings. In 1865 Te Whiti o Rongomai joined in. Initially it preached worship of a Good and Peaceful God who would protect followers from bullets. It was Trinitarian, proclaimed God's love for Maori people (believed to be one of the lost tribes of Israel), prophesied their ultimate vindication, promoted regular days of worship, and offered a visual symbol of God – a pole – as a rallying point. The prophet of this religion, Te Ua, scorned the Bible, however.

Te Whiti left Paimarire and returned home in 1866.

In September 1869 Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi sent out a message inviting Maori tribes to meet at Parihaka, their home. They declared an era of peace and promised restitution of confiscated lands for the purposes of bicultural habitation, Maori with Pakeha (Pakeha being the name for those British born and their descendants). Te Whiti believed that even if it may not happen in his lifetime, though he hoped it would, God would vindicate Maori and stretch out his hand over them.

Parihaka over coming years grew into a community of, at its height, around 3000 people. Maori came from all over the central North Island, including 12 helpers sent to live there by the Maori King. They used cutting edge agricultural technologies, established a school for the children, began businesses that served local Maori and Pakeha, and met monthly for teaching from the Bible and the prophets of Parihaka and singing of specially composed spiritual songs. Europeans were made welcome at Parihaka.

Te Whiti preached of a just God who had not forgotten the Maori people, a God who deserved their obedience and desired peaceful living and who would ensure that evil did not win and the land would be returned to them. The people of Parihaka were asked to live lives of good conduct and high morality, thereby exposing the rot at the heart of much of the European way. They worked hard, farmed the land co-operatively, and cared for those living with disabilities. Key inspiration were the words declared by the angels at Jesus' birth: Glory to God, peace on earth, and goodwill to all. A three-feather plume of white from the albatross became the symbol the people wore to remind them of this.

The Pakeha government, needing more land for the increasing numbers of settlers was eyeing up Taranaki, which was rich and fertile. They began to confiscate it. In response, Te Whiti drawing from many biblical texts reminded the people that obedience to God took the way of peace. He called for all fighting to cease and preached against the use of physical violence. In 1879 Te Whiti was quoted as saying: "Go put your hands to the plough. Look not back. If any come with guns, be not afraid. If they smite you, smite not in return. If they rend you, be not discouraged. Another will take up the good work."

A path of peaceful resistance was carved. People ploughed up their land to claim it, pulled up government surveyor's pegs, met British militia with singing children, and refused to meet violence with violence. In 1881 Te Whiti warned the people that there were troubles ahead and called for manawanui, fortitude. He and Tohu sensed that sacrifice and suffering would come yet Te Whiti was quoted as saying, "Though the lions rage still I am for peace... Though I be killed I yet shall live; though dead, I shall live in peace which will be the accomplishment of my aim."

On the 5 November 1881 a contingent of 1600 British soldiers marched on Parihaka. They met 2000 quiet and seated Maori, but the soldiers were there to destroy. They forced those not originally from the area to leave the village, burned the buildings, raped the women and marched many of the men away, including Tohu and Te Whiti, to exile and imprisonment across the South Island.

When the exiled men returned around two years later Parihaka was a devastated landscape. They began again. Parihaka never grew to the same numbers but the message of peace remained. In 1907 both Tohu and Te Whiti died, old men still waiting for vindication. The community since 1881 has carried deep scars.

Last year in June 2017, 136 years after the events of 1881, the government of New Zealand officially apologised to the people of Parihaka: for imprisoning members of Parihaka and depriving them of their basic human rights; for invading Parihaka and forcibly evicting those who had sought refuge there; for raping the women; for arresting Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti o Rongomai and holding them without trial in the South Island; for depriving Parihaka of the ownership of its lands; and for denying Parihaka the right to develop and sustain itself on its own terms and failing to address their grievances. A Deed of Reconciliation, written in Te Reo Maori and the English language was signed by representatives of the government and Parihaka. A number of restitutive acts were begun. It was a solemn, tear-filled, poignant occasion but as one member of the community said, reconciliation has given the people "a new fresh start." "Healing can begin."

Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti o Rongomai responded to the call of their people and of God on their lives. They inspired their community to live God's vision of goodness and peace, welcoming all people – friend and enemy. They suffered and they died still waiting for the vindication they were convinced would come. Their story brought blessing in the years of Parihaka's flourishing to those who joined their community. In a dark time in Aotearoa New Zealand's history Parihaka was a beacon of light.

Since then their story and their pain, and the deep injustice they suffered, has lingered in the weave of this country, often ignored, but never leaving us, calling for action, repentance, reconciliation, vindication.

Parihaka's commitment to peaceful resistance is known to have inspired Mahatma Gandhi in India who read their story while working as a lawyer in South Africa. It wove into the legacy of peaceful and nonviolent resistance adopted by Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States. It is recognised as an inspiration by Daisaku Ikeda, a Buddhist leader in the peace movement in and beyond Japan.

What does it mean to be living God's vision for our world? Parihaka offers one answer from a rural community to that question.

### **Dreaming God's vision for our world**

Across this week the learning community approach to be taken will ask you in groups to consider what God is doing in your nation, what COULD BE the God-given vision for your nation and to draw up an action plan to move towards this vision.

To to do this well I want to say this morning that we **must** take time to remind ourselves of what God cares about and why.

Our primary resource for this is the grand narrative of scripture and, of course, the gospels in particular as we **see** God in Jesus. The Bible offers the big picture of God's hopes not just for your nation but for the whole of humanity and all of creation. It teaches us how God has worked in history to realise those hopes. The Bible also speaks of God's expectations for those who would step out in faith and obedience and join in. How will we discern well what God is doing in our nation, what God is envisioning and how we can respond if we are not anchoring ourselves in this story?

Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi grew their action plan from a deep and ongoing immersion in the conversation between their Maori world, their context and the biblical story. They offer a powerful example to us. Their understanding of who God is, what God cares about and what God requires of those of us who have responded to God's call to relationship held them through times of growth and goodness and through times of struggle, devastation and waiting.

As you set out on this week of seeking to discern, while engaging with others, God's vision for your community, your nation and the part that you are being called to play in that, let us first pause prayerfully together with our neighbours and ask 'To live God's vision as expressed in the biblical narrative, what do we need to remember, to take up, to lay down?'

Books are best read by beginning at the beginning. We need to immerse ourselves in the beginnings of our story so that we know not just in our heads or our hearts but also in our bodies, the setting, the themes and The One who is the author and the subject, the One who created us, who has a grand vision, and who leads this story in which we live.

What do you need to remember? Is there anything you need to take up? Is there anything you need to lay down?

## Conclusion

The trajectory of scripture clearly shows that God is the one who initiates relationship and does so because of a good vision and because of deep love for us. A desire to see the transformation of our world lies at the heart of God's vision. Evil – perpetrated, suffered – is not to determine our existence. Our God calls us to be healed and renewed, to live justly and righteously in unity, and so, going out, to bring good to all. Our stories are complicated and complex, goodness does not always seem to be winning, but God's vision is true and remains true. As we live and dream God's vision for our world let us remember Who it begins in and be guided and inspired by it.

We love because God first loved us  
and by grace through the work of the Son  
we are healed, renewed, invited into  
the dreams of our transforming God.

We love because God first loved us  
and by grace through the work of the Son  
fear and hate are gone, we are all made one,  
weaving hope with our transforming God.

We love because God first loved us  
and by grace through the work of the Son  
we are called, sent out to bring good to all,  
empowered by our transforming God.  
Inspired by our transforming God.  
Deeply loved by our transforming God.

Music and lyrics: Rosemary Dewerse 2016