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Covenant Love

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We all enter into agreements of one kind or another...

...buying houses and homes, overdrafts and loans with the bank, perhaps hire purchase or lay-by agreements for goods or services, or an agreement for goods hired or borrowed.

Most of these agreements require a tit-for-tat arrangement – you give me some money and I will lend you a trailer; or more likely I will lend you some money if you pay it back to me over a period of time with interest...

But there is another type of agreement we can enter into, one that is not a tit-for-tat arrangement but one that relies far more on good faith, on trust and on love. Marriages and Civil Union agreements fall into this category.

They are legal documents and are witnessed and lodged with the registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, but in themselves they do not spell out the detail of the agreement or arrangement.

Rather these agreements are built on trust, fidelity and love. They are built not on a printed set of words or dictates, but rather on the growth and evolution of relationship.

They are binding legal agreements, but underlying these agreements is the understanding that relationships ebb and flow; that they evolve and change and that we will need to be constantly re-defining the boundaries and edges and detail of that agreement – where we will live, how we will deal with our finances, how we deal with friendships and relationships beyond the marriage of civil union...

Agreements that revolve around people or property are often termed covenants.

The Treaty of Waitangi I believe fits into this category of agreement. It is a covenant between the indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand and between the British Crown whose representatives were seeking to bring order and stability amongst what was rapidly becoming an unruly collection of settlers and traders who were taking advantage of the Maori people.

It is akin to a marriage or civil union – there are a set of principles contained in the document but essentially it relies on the goodwill and trust of the two parties involved.

And the two parties continue to define the boundaries and work through the issues that are part of this covenant relationship – be it the foreshore and seabed or the nature of our identity as a common people as expressed in a national flag.

Working on this relationship has not been an easy task – but if we are to be faithful to the covenant relationship between Maori and Pakeha as expressed in the Treaty of Waitangi we must continue to dialogue, discuss and explore.

However in the future we face some severe challenges.

The Treaty of Waitangi emanated out of the great European migration of the 17th and 1800's. The migration continued into the 20th century.

Europeans brought with them a culture, religion and political system, all of which are part of our New Zealand ethos today.

However we are now in the midst of a new global migration – the great Asian migration.

Millions of Asian people (mainly Chinese) have migrated from the country to the coastal cities and have now begun to move beyond their national boundaries in vast numbers.

I noted with interest that Chinese immigration into New Zealand exceeded European immigration for the first time last year. This trend will continue in the years to come.

Asian migrants will bring with them a culture, religion and political system which is different from the one we now enjoy. There is no criticism or judgement intended in this statement – it is just a fact.

In the New Zealand Herald this week where they have been discussing the merits of a new flag it was interesting to note the cartoon on the issue which showed the Southern Cross on a blue flag, but instead of the Union Jack in the top left hand corner, it had the Chinese flag!

I now regularly take funerals where there is incense, oriental flowers and Buddhist monks who chant as part of the funeral service.

Also here at St Columba I have been asked to bless a marriage relationship between a Christian and Hindu. They were married in a garden by a secular celebrant but now wish to have their relationship blessed and honoured by God.

How do I respond to that? Whose God do I acknowledge? Are they actually any different?

This whole new dynamic will certainly challenge the way we now live and will certainly challenge the covenant relationship between Maori and pakeha enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi.

Our relationship with God is also a 'covenant relationship'.

In First Testament times this covenant was restricted to a single people – the Hebrews – and bound by rules and regulations – basically by the Ten Commandments and the Torah.

The New Testament or New Covenant changes this dynamic enormously. The New Covenant sets us free from the constraints of the written law and affirms that God's love is unconditional and available to all – not to just the elite or select few.

God's love is available to all, freely – but not without cost. God calls us in return to love as we are loved – freely and extravagantly.

The Good News that Paul talks about is simply that – that all people are loved unconditionally and there is no barrier to that love.

This is the New Covenant shown to us through Jesus the Christ..

The Gospel reading this morning is a metaphor for extravagant love. There was nothing; the nets were empty – but love says 'try again' and the nets are so full that extra boats have to be called out to pull in the catch.

It is this extravagant love that we must bring into play as we deepen the covenant that Maori and Pakeha share through the Treaty of Waitangi; it is this extravagant love that we must bring into play as we explore the boundaries and challenges that new people and cultures will offer us; and it is extravagant love that we must explore and develop wherever we might find ourselves if there is to be trust, fidelity and a deepening love in covenant relationship with the God who is shown to us in the person of Jesus – who shows the way of extravagant covenant love.

Creator God, you have drawn us from deep within ourselves into your loving net of grace. Strengthen us to cast such a net of justice and mercy into the depths of our community and the world that we might all feel enfolded by your realm and encouraged by the covenant of love we share. Amen