

**St Columba 8<sup>th</sup> February 2009**  
**Ordinary Sunday 4: 5th Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Strength and Commitment**

**Susan Adams**

**Isaiah 40:21-31**

**Mark 1:29-39**

Living in Aotearoa-New Zealand we cannot help but know that Friday was Waitangi day...; the National day when we acknowledge and celebrate the signing of the Treaty in 1840 that established the relationship between Maori and those who came to settle. It is that treaty that gives those of us who are immigrant or descended from immigrant families the right to settle here and call this land 'home'.

That treaty was initiated by Maori, who were distraught and tired of the lawlessness and 'anarchy' that they were experiencing from those who were arriving from over the sea and embodied a dream. It was the dream, the hope of northern Maori leaders, that Maori and tauiwi would find ways to live in mutual respect and to establish 'laws' or agreed ways of living that would guard the differences and cultural treasures of each - such as religion and language and land. Both parties expected to benefit from the Treaty, though it must be said there was not universal satisfaction with it by the various iwi. Some remained suspicious of the intentions of the Europeans! They were taking a risk with this Treaty!

But whatever the later arguments, dissatisfactions and satisfactions were that resulted from the Treaty, it was initially an expression of hospitality by the indigenous Maori people to those who arrived in ships from over the sea. *It expressed a dream, a hope for the future, an intention to find a way for two peoples to live together to the benefit of each, in one land that both would call home.*

The dream was inspiring; we can still say yes to it; we are still working to make it come into reality. But what a risk Maori were taking inviting 'strangers', people so different from themselves, to be 'at home' and enjoy the benefits of their homeland. (We can see that easily with hindsight)

The Treaty of Waitangi is in a very real way a sacred covenant between Maori and Pakeha(*the word, 'kawana', covenant, used when speaking of it, is the same word in Maori the missionaries used to talk about God relating to us*); it represents a commitment between two peoples to each other and it carries with it significant risk.

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God had a covenant with the Israelite people, and

Jesus established a 'new covenant' with all people who were to follow his way.

We are amongst those who inherit the benefits of both these covenants. The Biblical covenants and the Treaty of Waitangi set out a dream, a vision for how the world would be

and how the peoples of the earth would live in relation to each other and in harmony with the earth that sustained their life. These covenants all embodied risk! The risk that one party or the other would not live up to the expectations of the other, would not do their bit to keep the covenant, would not follow through in subsequent generations on the commitments established at the outset. Today, you and I, in this Grey Lynn community, are inheritors, of these covenants and commitments. *We experience both the benefits and the risks carried by the Bible and the Treaty and that are told in the stories of hope and faith from generation to generation.*

Week by week we read the Biblical stories and try to understand the implications of the dream for us, in our time and in our very different lives.

What is it that God, (however or whatever you imagine God to be), wants of us today as covenant partners, what is it- (as people striving to respond to the Jesus' call to love our neighbour and honour the earth) - we should be doing in our time to continue the commitments made at our baptism? *And how do we continue the hopeful commitments of the Treaty of Waitangi?*

The Gospel story this morning, another of the healing stories of Mark, reminds us again of Jesus engaging in an unusual way with people of his community. The situation painted for us in this story focuses on Simon Peter's sick mother-in-law! Jesus and his group of friends should have been more thoughtful than to descend on the house of an older woman who was unable to care for them and offer them the hospitality they were entitled to expect as guests! Their actions, in their own socio-historical setting, could be thought of as disrespectful!

If we focus on the so called miracle of the nameless woman's apparent healing by Jesus, we miss the full power of the story.

You might remember that last week I noted that these stories are, by many theologians and biblical scholars, thought to be representative of the community; the body politic, rather than about individual persons.

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If we take this broader view, what then is opened up for us?

Jesus, by taking the risk of entering the *household* (an ordered economic system) where there is *illness* (a break down in roles and responsibilities), and by inappropriately reaching out to touch the older *woman* (refusing to be contained by social tradition), the symbolic woman is restored to fullness of life and is once again able to fulfil her responsibilities within the household and offer hospitality to the guests! *A person of little account acts out the covenant expectation of hospitality.*

We do well to pause as we are this morning, and ask if this is a story about the individual person Jesus, and his miraculous powers that are not available to us

*ordinary humans or about the power of recognition and acknowledgment when all is not well in home and society. In this way we too have the power to heal when we are prepared to step across boundaries and social mores in to change things in order to enable both parties to carry out their responsibilities to respect and restore that are established in the covenant of God with all the peoples of the earth.*

As Christians we believe that our strength to engage in the continuing healing of relationships and the restorative work of the Jesus community comes from reminding ourselves regularly, week by week, that *we can do it!* We remind each other of the vision we hold to,

of how our world could be, nurtured instead of ravished,  
of how persons could relate respectfully to each other.

There are models for how to engage in this work provided in the stories of Jesus, and stories of people in our own time who have worked for justice, who refused to accept the boundaries that separate us a human persons. (Lange, Armstrong and Caldicott, and the anti nuclear stand, Minto and Beyer and their antiapartheid work)<sup>i</sup>

Our strength comes in being mindful of the presence of God amongst us;  
that empowering spirit that encourages us and challenges us;  
that sense that we are not alone when we are doing the work of covenant keeping,  
that confidence that comes with doing a 'good' thing.

We pray for eyes to see and hearts to hear the challenges of our own time presented to us in contemporary social illness, and for the courage to risk acting out our commitments as covenant partners to restore and to heal.

The poetry of Isaiah tells us 'God give power to the faint and strength to the powerless'  
May we be so empowered and strengthened. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lange Labour Government Prime Minister – legislation

Rev Dr George Armstrong - peace squadron leader

Helen Caldicott - Anti-nuclear campaigner

John Minto – Anti racism activist

Rev Andrew Beyer – leader of the Churches Against Apartheid Coalition