

God and Structures – Te Pouhere Sunday 10th June 2012 – The Rev Keith King

I have been watching some of the events surrounding the Jubilee celebrations of Queen Elizabeth. Of particular note for me was the celebration service at St Paul's Cathedral.

The British establishment and the Anglican Church do these things so well – the pomp and ceremony and that sense of dignity and occasion...

St Paul's itself looking absolutely resplendent as did the clergy vestments and those of the other attendants; and the trumpeters on the balcony with the royal emblem hanging below each highly polished instrument...

The building, the music, the ceremony itself and the worshippers all in their finest...a remarkable sight – choreographed so well...

And amongst all that glamour, a delightful glitch; one of the young readers had opened her book at the wrong page and began reading the wrong prayer.

After an embarrassing silence and some shuffling of papers she managed to find her place and carried on with dignity and clarity. A touch of real humanity I thought, and of professionalism from this young woman.

The whole ceremony was remarkable and memorable, but apart from the young reader, so removed from reality.

I must admit I do love watching occasions such as these; they do transport me into another place, and of course that is what they are designed to do...

But I must also admit that there is another part of me that finds the opulence of it all distasteful and disturbing, and the theology presented an anathema.

The monarchy and the church displayed as it was on this occasion, are vestiges of a bygone era where everyone had their place and they were kept well and truly in it.

And that is just how those who held positions of power wanted it.

An original verse from the hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' says:

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
God made them high and lowly
He ordered their estate.

That is pretty gruesome stuff; but one which held sway when it was written in the mid 1800's. A little Book of Common Prayer I have, given as a gift in 1923 still has that verse in it and if any if you enjoy watching 'Upstairs Downstairs' this sort of class distinction was very much alive in the late 1930's

Much as though, as I have said, I do enjoy the pomp and ceremony that is done so well on these occasions it simply perpetuates the idea of an elite class of people and a God who is sitting high and mighty on his throne in heaven.

I often refer to the stain glass window here at St Columba. I love it – the colours, and the many symbols that are captured within it – but again it presents Christ as a king and high priest who is high and mighty and sitting apart from common people.

It is really very seductive...

Jesus brought God down to earth, just as the young woman did in the Queen's jubilee ceremony.

Jesus put a human face on God and makes God accessible.

And Jesus tells us that it is we, as we listen to the voice of God within and are motivated by the Holy Spirit that will bring redemption and salvation to the world.

It is in our actions and our actions alone that the goodness of God is shown and known.

Samuel grappled with these same issues with the early Hebrew people.

Through the stories handed down they knew they were chosen and called to be a nation which would be an example of love and equity to the world. All that was required was that they trust God and remain faithful God's ways.

But they didn't and they weren't. Constantly the people turned their back on God and they refused to embrace the style of leadership that God offered.

Jesus later expressed that style as one of servanthood and friendship...no wonder he was vilified by the leaders of the time.

Judges rose up among them who exposed their hypocrisy and Samuel was among the greatest of these. He mediated God's leadership over the people.

When he retired after serving for many years as Israel's judge, the tribal leaders demanded an earthly leader - a king in fact who would rule over them.

Through Samuel God warns them of the dangers of an earthly king. Earthly kings will rule over the people and brutally exploit them; he will conscript them to fight in his armies and he will take the best of the nation's resources – people, flocks, lands and harvests.

But again they refuse to listen. God warns them that when the people finally cry out that they have had enough there will be no response from the God they have rejected.

So in these centuries before Christ – literally thousands of years ago – Samuel recognised that earthly monarchs set up a class system that does not help the people and from which there is no escape.

...the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate...

This may all sound like a plug for republicanism – but that is not what I am trying to say.

The journey of faith is a journey of trust in God and journey of listening to God. To do that we need to have hearts and minds that are open and receptive.

The entire tenure of scripture calls out for care of those who are marginalized and on the edges; it cries for justice, justice for one another and for creation as a whole; it calls for non-exploitation and for equity, a just sharing of resources; it calls for equality, for fairness and inclusion.

These are the hallmarks of a people of faith.

Forming structures to contain these hallmarks is no easy task.

Some years ago the Anglican Church here in Aotearoa New Zealand recognised that its own structures were unjust to a large segment of its membership.

After considerable consultation and discussion the three tikanga structure evolved and was adopted.

This allowed for three different strands within the church, tikanga Maori, tikanga Pacifica and tikanga Pakeha, to work within their own traditions and customs independently and yet being able to make decisions as a whole that were pertinent to the whole Anglican Community within the Province.

It was a unique concept that has stood the test of time and has worked well.

There has been and still are some difficult moments, but as a whole the structure honours each other's customs, traditions and ways of doing things whilst maintaining a unity as the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Pacific.

It is a model that emanated out of careful dialogue and listening with open hearts and minds.

It is a model that operates on trust and care and a just sharing of resources; on equity and fairness.

These are all the hallmarks of the people of God.

It certainly is not a perfect system, but it is an honest attempt to explore a structure that reflects the way of Christ and the precepts of God...

It is a model that we could well explore as a nation – although I doubt that will ever happen.

As we move on into the 21st Century I am sure there will be calls for new national structures here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

However those structures evolve let us work hard as a people of God to ensure that we listen and speak with minds and hearts that are open.

In the meantime, I for one will enjoy the pomp, the ceremony and the touch of humanness that will always break through and I will rejoice in the goodness of God shown to me through Jesus. Amen.