

Gospel as Credible Truth and Necessity – Part 2

Isaiah 25: 1, 4-8; Colossians 3:1-4, 11-17 (with Galatian 3:28);

Luke 14:15-24

Last week I spoke of the Gospel as credible Truth. This week I want to talk about the Gospel as *necessity*.

...

In an interview with Guyon Espiner in August,¹ the prime minister agreed we have somewhere between 500 to 750,000 New Zealanders living below the poverty line as defined by the Ministry of Social Welfare; 13% of New Zealanders of working age are on benefits supporting around 230,000 children! John key agreed with Espiner that something had to be done concerning these statistics though acknowledged the problem was complicated and the solutions even more so.

Despite this, the last week of the election campaign has been dominated by “tea gate” and its fall out. The government’s seemingly unassailable position in the poles has suddenly been threatened by the possibility of Winston Peters entering parliament as power broker from the opposition benches.

Against the backdrop of ecological disaster (no less than off our own coast), and the possible unravelling of global capitalism rippling out from Europe, threats of legal proceedings, fractious accusations and counter accusations, vandalism and personal abuse have suddenly erupted from what, up until then, had been a fairly ho-hum personality cult campaign on the one side and pork barrel politics on the other.

All this stands in contrast to just a few weeks ago when we were in the full swing of the Rugby World Cup. I had the good fortune to be in Nelson for much of the round robin and then travelling the country as I looked at worship at various churches. It was good to get a feel for a wider New Zealand than I am used to.

¹ Interview for Q&A just before John Key’s address to the 75th National Party Conference, 13 August 2011. <http://tvnz.co.nz/politics-news/key-s-radical-policy-target-teen-beneficiaries-4351021/video?vid=4350929>

Nelson hosted the Italian team. When they arrived the council closed Trafalgar Street (which is the main street), put up trestle tables and invited everyone to come with food to share. Heaps of people did. Both the Italians and locals loved it.

[PPT: Nelson knitting]

Locals knitted “jackets” for trees, lampposts and drinking fountains in the colours of the various teams who came to play. School kids also made decorations and did the haka whenever given the chance. There were stunning exhibitions on rugby themes at the local museum and gallery. There were lots of visitors from other places who were often greeted in the street and cafés. People chatted with strangers in a general spirit of ‘bon ami’.

This pattern was repeated up and down the country. Even Bennydale (located on state highway 30 in the Waitomo heartland, for those who are not in the know), had their homemade banners hanging from every lamppost in the 3 streets that constitute the town.

I don’t know where you were for the final (Kirsty was at Eden park!). I was at the Te Waitere Boating Clubrooms on the southern end of Kawhia Harbour. The place was full of an assortment of characters: cockies, farm labourers, fishermen, some local Rasters, beneficiary lifestylers, retirees and a few weekend townies such as myself. The beer was cheap but relatively little was drunk as the gathering quietened over the last very tense 10 minutes.

At the end, pandemonium broke lose. Suddenly there were no pakehas and maoris, men and women, workers and bosses, sophisticates and country bumpkins, rich and poor, there were just people hugging each other. I found myself in a bear hug with a Raster twice my size who finished it with a hongī.

On the way back down on the country on Tuesday, I got talking to the petrol pimp lady at Waiuru. She said she really noticed how different people had been over the previous few weeks. I told her about a man I was chatting to in a Taupo café, who offered me his iPad to send an email

while he talked about the need for people to put aside differences and show kindness to each other; and I told her about a fishing coach who had said almost the same to me as we drank tea on the banks of the Tongariro – that we need each other and, especially, Pakeha and Maori need to respect each other. She agreed that that was so. She'd noticed it with customers. People *had* been somehow friendlier and kinder and helpful. She wished aloud that we could all be like this all the time.

This last week I visited a Lebanese family in Wellington. Though they had lived here for years (the wife since she was nine), they had for the first time felt welcomed and a part of things – connected to their neighbours and community through the game, even though they knew very little about rugby and had hardly watched it before.

...

I can't help thinking that this is a great commentary on the meaning of the readings we have heard today concerning the present and future reign of God and the church's part in it.

Our Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah, concerning the new messianic age as a time of plenty and unrestrained feasting, a time of reconciliation and peace, of healing and joy, foreshadowed the wedding feast with which John begins his Gospel; and all the Gospels are full of Messiah Jesus having table fellowship with those you wouldn't expect.

His teachings revolve around this as well. The so called Messianic Banquet where all are welcomed, especially the outsider and the marginal, where the presence of strangers are an occasion for hospitality, not exclusion, and where there is generosity and celebration, are everywhere both taught (as in our reading from Luke), and acted out by Jesus throughout the Gospels.

Similarly, what better picture of our wonderful reading from Colossians can we have than that of the Te Waitere Boating Club on cup final night.

[Re-read Colossians]

This is what the church is meant to be. A place of inclusion, connectedness and community; a place of common kindness and happiness where good things happen, where people go out of their way for each other. It's an upside down place where '*the peace*' is more than a handshake, it's the core of our common life together.

Our nation is longing for such a place – a place of renewed moral vision and deep values that work. People long for such ways of doing things even while, as almost every social indicator shows, they fall short and settle for much less. Moreover, our world, our global economy, our politics, the way we relate to each other and the creation as nations, is in desperate *need* of such renewal. *The Gospel lived, is an urgent necessity*, especially in those countries, such as our own, where God is not honoured and the way of Jesus is forgotten.

It is the challenge of scripture that such a world begins here, in the church, with you and me. If we “cannot come to the banquet”, for want of motivation or because of distraction, others will be invited in our place.

Yet, to paraphrase St. Paul, “against such a place there is no law”.² There is nothing to stop us – nothing, that is, except our willingness to really live as the people of God.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!

² C.f Galatians 5:23.