

**Trinity Sunday**  
**St Andrews on The Terrace**  
**7 June 2020**  
**Rev Dr Niki Francis**

**I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change,  
I am changing the things I cannot accept.”**

Angela Davis, USA, 1970s

Dame Whina Cooper ONZ DBE (1895-1994) Aotearoa New Zealand, 1975

Do you remember the Serenity Prayer?

grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) wrote the prayer in the early 1930s. It spread widely and was adopted and popularised by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve step groups. The prayer is certainly helpful at times. Gillian used it a few weeks ago in one of our YouTube services when her children Emily and Lucy lit the Rainbow candle for us.

But there are times when we need to reverse the words, to refuse to accept things, particularly injustice. In the 1970s, US academic and civil rights activist Angela Davis made famous the words “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change, I am changing the things I cannot accept.” Dame Whina Cooper (1895-1994) used the same words during the land march to parliament here in Wellington in 1975 to protest that not an acre more should be taken from Māori.

These words can help make sense of the protests we have seen during the past week in the USA and here in Aotearoa. Protests triggered by George Floyd’s murder by a white police officer who knelt on his neck as Floyd cried “I can’t breathe” and called for his mother who has been dead 2 years. Protest at 400 years of oppression and police violence against African Americans and Native Americans. If we have American friends we may have heard their distress and anger, grief and rage as they bear witness to their country’s history of racial violence – the deaths of thousands of black Americans at police hands. We may have felt heavy hearted ourselves.

Thousands of people around Aotearoa rallied in solidarity. The US movements for Civil Rights, Black Lives Matter, and Black Power have long influenced Māori activists. Dame Whina Cooper’s use of Angela Davis’s saying about change is evidence of this, and Māori activists and academics I follow on social media testify to the influence from the USA. After all, there are connections – both countries were founded on British colonial practices and attitudes of white superiority, as with our neighbour Australia where 434 Aboriginal people have died in custody since 1991 with not a single conviction.

Here in Aotearoa we should not be complacent. New Zealand’s Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon commented during the week on events in the USA, “It gives us pause to reflect on our own police and justice systems and the importance of equal outcomes for tangata whenua and all communities.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Meng Foon – Race Relations Commissioner, Facebook, 1 June 2020 at 13:43.  
<https://www.facebook.com/MengFoonHRC/> Accessed 1 June 2020.

The disadvantages of Maori and Pasifika in New Zealand are well documented – in home ownership, education, health and justice.

In New Zealand, we have the highest rates of incarceration of indigenous women in the world. Māori are almost eight times more likely to be subjected to force by the police than Pākehā, and seven times more likely to be charged with criminal offences. Between 2009 and 2019, two-thirds of those shot by the police were Māori or Pasifika.”<sup>2</sup> Maori make up 50% of NZ’s prison population despite only accounting for 15% of the population. Data from the recent trial of armed response teams shows the trial had a disproportionate impact on Māori. Nearly half of those apprehended were Māori, with Pasifika making up another 11 percent. Tasers, police dogs and pepper spray are all used disproportionately against Māori and Pasifika.<sup>3</sup>

That’s enough statistics. A common response to such statistics is to assume Māori and Pasifika carry out more criminal activity than other racial groups, but research shows police carry out racial profiling, that Māori and Pasifika are more likely to be stopped and arrested than Pākehā in similar circumstances.

In light of all this, it’s not surprising Māori and Pasifika community leaders are strongly opposed to the permanent introduction of police armed response teams.

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I included the poems about Parihaka by Pākehā poet Dinah Hawken in the readings today as a reminder of state violence in our past. In her book “There is no harbour” Hawken reflects on her family history in Taranaki.

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But this is not about looking backwards. It is about looking to the future and imagining what sort of country we dream of for our children and grandchildren, our tamariki and mokopuna.

I spent a lot of time this week reading and reflecting on what to say to you this week. I listened to Meghan Markle talk about preparing a speech for the graduating class of her high school. She said she worried about saying the wrong thing, having her words picked apart, but in the end, she decided the worst thing would be to say nothing. I agree. Silence in the face of injustice is collusion. Silence is violence. Some people think religion and politics don’t mix. I believe religion is highly political, that our calling as followers of Jesus is a call to political action. It’s time to talk less and listen more. Put aside our sensitivities. Listen to Māori and Pasifika. We are not being asked to apologise for our ancestors. It is time to listen.

On this Trinity Sunday when the church celebrates the triune God – the creator, redeemer and sustainer of life, or the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – I reflected on how to approach this from a non-theistic point of view – what to say to you in the context of the situation in the USA and what this means for us in NZ. Jim Cunningham and I chatted about possible approaches to a

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<sup>2</sup> Cat McLennan: “Aotearoa is no place for armed police”, 3 June 2020, The Democracy Project, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington.  
<https://democracyproject.nz/2020/06/03/cat-maclennan-aotearoa-is-no-place-for-armed-police/>  
Accessed 3 June 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Tim McKinnel, “Arms and Race” in *E-tangata*, 1 June 2020.  
[https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/arms-and-race/?fbclid=IwAR209dPV-71RMo8-gaEeyrR2Ft1jSm60eDVneCY0xvX1TMqrcaf0ZwlZp\\_Y](https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/arms-and-race/?fbclid=IwAR209dPV-71RMo8-gaEeyrR2Ft1jSm60eDVneCY0xvX1TMqrcaf0ZwlZp_Y), accessed 1 June 2020.

non-theist trinity. I thought one approach for we who are Pākehā might be to think of a trinity of acknowledgement, lament and action:

- We can acknowledge aspects of our history and current systemic racism by reading and listening to others, particularly Māori and Pasifika.
- We can lament the situation for us all because we all suffer when there is injustice, but there is no doubt Māori suffer more, have suffered since European settlers began to arrive in droves 180 years ago.
- And we can reflect on how we might be part of the change. That starts with education. There are many resources available – books, blogs, podcasts and articles. I provided a brief list of mainly articles in a newsletter a little while back. I can provide a more extensive list.

As I wrote in the newsletter, acknowledgement of systemic racism is not about taking on guilt or apologising for our forebears, it's about acknowledging what's happening in the here and now and doing what we can to make it better.

It is an uncomfortable process. I know that only too well, but it's nothing compared to living with the chronic disadvantages of racism. We will resist, people we talk to about it will resist, sometimes vehemently and unpleasantly no matter how careful we are. And if we keep in mind Jesus's words to love one another, then by the sheer force of love we can make those changes – in ourselves and in our communities.

In that love, we can look to the future and start creating a better future, we can value the beauty of diversity in our country, we can practice curiosity about our differences and value them, we can decide to change the things we cannot accept.

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