

Reflection

16 January 2022

To catch and share the dream

We live lives that are often all too small and short. The Venerable Bede, when speaking in a dining hall wanted to illustrate this to his neighbours (including a king). He looked up and his eyes followed the path of a sparrow as it flew in one door, across the hall and out another, likening the time this to the span of a human life.

Small in stature humans may be, and their lives a flicker of eternity, but people such as Martin Luther King can make a difference that changes the lives of millions. He was far from perfect, visionaries seldom are, but the stand he took resonated around the globe and through the decades.

Tomorrow will be a public holiday in the USA for Martin Luther King Jr Day. The commemoration date was chosen to be close to Martin Luther King's birthday on 15th January. Had he still been alive Martin Luther King would have been 91 today. We wonder what a 91 year old Martin Luther King would make of the USA today? Of our world today? And had he lived, what more could he have achieved?

While possibly his most famous speech was the "I have a dream" speech in August 1963, there was more to Martin Luther King than one speech. His impact on civil rights, including the rights of people of all races is legendary. He spoke about creating community. He said "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

In preparing for today we read around Martin Luther King and particularly enjoyed an article written in 2015 by Dwight Welche titled MLK's Progressive Christian Faith. He points out that following King's post graduate study "the centrality and dignity of personhood became the cornerstone of his thought." Welche says also "We are who we are because of our relations with others. Sociality precedes individuality. Racism is a rejection of the very make up of the world and the forces

that make us. MLK writes “He who works against community is working against the whole of creation.”

It is good to think about Martin Luther King - but what happens when we think in New Zealand about our leaders past and present who support social justice and help New Zealand create (or perhaps re-create) a beloved community.

We started with a non-systematic and perhaps idiosyncratic look at those in NZ who stepped forward to take the cause of social justice forward in NZ. Who we consider as role models or creators of a our own beloved community. You will have seen from the children’s talk that we focused on issues such as women’s suffrage, rights of Māori and on equity.

Here are a few of our choices,

Sir Apirana Ngata

Tony’s mother, like many of her generation had an autograph book collecting some notable names in the process. Often the person would write a short sentence as well as their signature. In 1949 Ngata wrote in the autograph book of school girl Rangi Bennett, ‘Turn your face to the sun and the shadows will be behind you’

This could well be a motto for all community builders.

Sir Apirana Ngata was the first Maori to graduate from university. He chose to use his legal education to become an MP. He spent over 40 years in Parliament keeping Maori issues to the fore. Over the 40 years his views changed - that strikes us as normal. Our views have changed over the last 40 years - and I am sure will continue to do so. In this time he came to see the importance of uniquely Maori development, as opposed to assimilation. Ngata had an unwavering commitment to the Maori people. Unlike Martin Luther King he was not a pacifist but was active in supporting Maori in enlisting for WW1 and WW2 and the formation of the Maori battalion. Part of his rationale he says was that by fighting alongside Pakeha soldiers would both command respect for Maori and create a sense of moral obligation for the returning soldiers.

Whina Cooper

All old enough, recall a pained and plodding Whina determined to play her part. But What possessed this kuia to lead a land march at nearly 80? Whina held important roles including becoming the first president of the Maori Womens Welfare League and she worked alongside Apirana Ngata. But by the 1970's She had long retired from the national spotlight and most would say that she had 'done her bit.

But in 1975 she was asked to lead the march by Maori leaders, such was her mana.

It would have been easier to refuse but there seems to have been no real choice for the woman honoured as 'mother of the nation' when she stepped down from her Welfare league role.

Dame Hinewahi Mohi

Dame Hinewahi Mohi came to national prominence as the first person to sing the national anthem in Te Reo, in the UK in 1999. All interviews with Hinewahi show a very mild person who weathered the storm of protest and now says she welcomed this opportunity. Certainly hard to remember now just how controversial this was just over 20 years ago. Soon we will play the her song and tribute to her daughter, Hineraukauri. She has severe cerebral palsy. Combined her love for her daughter and her passion for music, even taking Hine on at least one tour is just one of the many ways in which Dame Hinewahi acts out her dream.

Ashley Bloomfield and Siouxsie Wiles

Very contemporary names and two years ago few outside the Ministry of Health or the academic institutions would have known them. Today their faces are recognisable to many. Ashley is an unlikely superhero - he is the first to say so. In 2020 he gained a cult following - if having your picture on teatowels is a sign of being a cult hero. Siouxsie's enthusiasm for communicating what anxious people really needed to know about Covid, and her courage in dressing and wearing her hair

flamboyantly...in short, being a person who was totally present in this pivotal role despite the misogynistic trolling she was subjected to. They have both brought their knowledge and scientific approach to the management of Covid in a way that did in fact bring the New Zealand population willingly along the Covid journey with less loss of life than many other countries experienced.

Lloyd Geering

Many of you will know Lloyd far far better than we do, but we have in our midst a man who. In trying to simply and honestly explain what he understood about Christianity and the place of religion in general, became a figure of tremendous controversy and the subject of Presbyterianism's last heresy trial in 1967.

Two things add to our picture

The first is the contrast between the autobiographies of two great thinkers, Lloyd Geering and Jack Spong. We were struck by the far greater humility and equanimity in Lloyd's writing, whereas Spong seemed to be frequently still scoring points from long ago battles.

The second was our running joke that we still have 40 years to become as incisive at speaking and as cogent at writing as Lloyd.

Janice

Not all of the names that came to mind are public figures. Tony thought of a parent he knows who brought up 4 boys with Fragile X syndrome. This leads to intellectual disability and some autistic features. For most parents finding that they have one child with intellectual disability is huge. In each case this parent kept moving forward and began to take leadership roles, to be the beacon for other parents. Consider that because Fragile X is a genetic disorder, she knew the risks and had the children anyway.

As part of our search for our new Minister we had to write a Parish Profile for this community. You may recall that this profile had to be agreed at a Special General Meeting in 2019 prior to any search commencing. Our Profile says that we describe ourselves as

Progressive and that the 8 points of Progressive Christianity resonate for many of us. Certainly they do for us. We thought each of the people could demonstrate by their words and actions some of the points - particularly:

- Point 3 An all inclusive community
- Point 4 - the way we behave with others is the fullest expression of what we believe
- Point 6 - striving for peace and justice
- Point 8 - committed to lifelong learning, compassion and selfless love.

And of course from our own tradition we must include Jesus. The reading we chose from Luke suggests that Jesus did not shy away from his mission. In the temple in his home town he took Isaiah's dream and proclaimed it as his own. 2000 years on the words and actions of Jesus still inspire; continue to show us a way to be better people and that we too can capture the dream

The contemporary reading from Nepia Mahuika had words that resonated.

E tipu e rea mo nga ra o tou ao (Grow up in the days destined to you)
Each generation he says has its own mana, our own dreams, responsibilities and challenges. We liked the way he says this expectant and hopeful affirmation is a gift. It's not a challenge or a threat but a gift. And to make use of this gift we have to look to our past - the people of our own and other cultures who lead and inspire as we too look to live out the dream.

The Psalmist said "Because of your light we see the light". We think we see the light of something beyond ourselves in all of these people. The light of the holy. These people remind us that the words of the Jim Strathee hymn we sign later that actually the work of Christmas only really starts from now.

