

TO SPEAK INTO BEING – Napier Cathedral, 1 October 2017

Musicians talk about recording “that difficult second album”. I feel like that about my second sermon. So much so that I said “Lorde help me”, but I think she's a bit too busy being famous to assist.

In my inaugural sermon I talked about learning what it means to be a community of brothers and sisters, and the dangers of “othering” people. I want to say some more about who and how we are called to be as this church.

There's a riveting scene in the 1960s movie *The Miracle Worker* - the story of Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller. Helen is practically feral when her new teacher arrives. Ann Sullivan immediately begins to spell words into Helen's hand with American Sign Language. Helen proudly mimicks the spellings, but is unable to relate them to the objects themselves and smashes a d-o-l-l in her frustration. On the second day of their relationship Anne Sullivan spelled W-A-T-E-R into her hand. This is what Helen recalled later:

*We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten - a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!*

Helen Keller had discovered meaning through the symbolic language of words. Without language we cannot have a common sense of the world. The ancients knew this: in Genesis chapter 1 the repeated motif is *God said let there be...* so the capacity of divinity is to speak things into being. The question then is *Do you think that humans, being made in the image of God, have the capacity to speak things into being?*

I recall being very struck by learning from Bishop George about the imagery in parts of our Prayer Book in Te Reo, for example: *Ko te Karaiti te pou herenga waka*. We say “We shall all be one in Christ”

but the Maori expression means *Christ is the hitching post for all the canoes*. Thus we have the opportunity to be enriched by language.

When George Orwell wrote *1984* he created a world in which language took on a far more sinister function. *Newspeak* was a language continually being reduced so that there was no longer a range of vocabulary for nuance. Orwell was envisaging a kind of thought-control. There was a time when this seemed a mere fiction. But today it is becoming shockingly real. Donald Trump is a master of this kind of reductionism. Charlottesville, with its blackshirted neo-Nazis: *Fine people on both sides*. Nancy Pelosi, by way of contrast: *There is only one side to be on when a white supremacist mob brutalizes and murders in America. The American people deserve a president who understands that*.

And the doozy from Kelly-Anne Conway regarding inaugural crowd size: *Sean Spicer gave Alternative Facts (to that)*, to which the interviewer replied *Alternative Facts are not facts, they are falsehoods*.

The now-notorious expression was labelled Orwellian by many, and immediately after it was uttered sales of *1984* rose 9500%!

Shouldn't we be wondering what is currently being spoken into being as people of faith? Shouldn't we resist the kind of manipulation of language which dulls our thinking until it becomes the new normal?

We might well pray for deliverance from name-calling ego-maniacs with the power to blow great swathes of our planet and her people to bits.

In these times I think we need to discern very carefully the investment of meaning we need as people of faith. In the reading from the letter to the church at Philippi we heard words from an early Christian hymn:

*Christ, though in the image of God, didn't deem equality with God something to be clung on to – but instead became completely empty and took on the image of oppressed humankind: born into the human condition, found in the likeness of a human being. Jesus was thus humbled, obediently accepting death, even death on a cross! Because of this, God highly exalted Christ and gave to Jesus the name above every name...*

In a bonkers world of surrogate living through bottom-feeding reality television and consumer label envy, the Gospel offers us something radically and shockingly different: *meaning which is located not in filling up, (or consuming, if you like) but in emptying. Meaning which is located in accepting lowliness. Meaning which is located in a spirituality of obedience to God.*

As many churches struggle to survive (while entertainment churches are jammed) we are witnessing the last gasps of consumer Christianity, by which I mean *I'll come as long as I get what I want, and if it's not communion then I'm not coming.*

When I was being interviewed for the Dean's role part of my presentation was on my understanding of the relationship between a Cathedral for the Diocese and the community, and being a parish church. (This was before the waterboarding). I talked about the parish congregation being the heart of the Cathedral, and how it had a difficult but special vocation in line with the Philippians hymn: *The congregation is called to imitate Christ in self-emptying because so often it must make room for, and work for, special occasions in its wider life. Our opportunity to be more Christ-like is to find meaning in self-emptying love, not just as individuals but as a community of faith in this place.*

For me the principal meaning of the cross is not to be found in a petulant God who can only offer us forgiveness by demanding the sacrifice of his own son (something which has been described as “the cosmic child abuse” (let that sink in)) - but the Cross as love unto death, the result of Jesus' teaching about God's upside-down reign which so terrified the powers that be. It is in self-forgetful love that we can receive Christ's understanding of life's meaning, his sense of vocation, which of course is also ours to take up if we will.

Paul writes *There must be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be humble: value others over yourselves, each of you thinking of the interests of others before your own. Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus.* Clearly this is written in response to concerns that this is exactly what was not happening in Philippi!

It's a tall order. *Each of you thinking of the interests of others before your own.* Thomas a Kempis called it “The Imitation of Christ” and there can be no doubt that *valuing others over ourselves* is a life-long work. We need the grace of God precisely because not being self-centred is grunt-work, it is conscious practice, and we will often fail at it.

Jane Williams writes: *What marks Jesus as God is not anything that we would normally recognise as 'power', except when we begin to recognise that it is a power completely outside our own experience and abilities – the power to be utterly obedient to God.*

I believe that as humans we invest the world with meaning, because we have evolved the capacity to think about the world, and have been given divine freedom to name what is. Indeed it is dangerous not to think about the meaning we are creating – take for example the expression “child poverty” - where do each of us stand on meaning?

Helen Keller said: *People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions. Conclusions are not always pleasant.*

Helen became the first deaf-blind person to graduate with a BA, and in case we remember her as only “*that poor girl who had a revelation about the meaning of words*” let's celebrate her as a suffragette, a advocate for people with disabilities, a pacifist, radical socialist, supporter of birth control, a world-famous speaker and author and person of faith.

But let's also remember it was self-giving love, the vocation of Ann Sullivan who first spelled W-A-T-E-R into Helen's hands that enabled her to fulfill her life's calling. Ann was her companion at every lecture, faithfully spelling each word into her hands.

That is self-emptying love.

That is the power to speak into being.

*Ian Render, 30 September 2017*