

WHITE RIBBON DAY
CIVIC SERVICE – WAIAPU CATHEDRAL

Reflection by Rev Tony Franklin-Ross
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Today we gather on White Ribbon Day – 25 November – which is exactly one month to Christmas.

Though Christmas is meant to invoke images of happy families, joy and peace on earth; sadly these two themes – increased violence in our families and community, and Christmas – too often coincide. Attending a series of workshops last year themed ‘Faith leaders addressing Family Violence’, organised by Live Hawkes Bay, we were informed by a member of the Police involved in Child Protection that the previous Christmas, in one week there were just over 50 referrals in Napier/Hastings involving family violence.

The church calendar between now and Christmas is the season of Advent, during which the four Sunday’s are often used to invoke the themes of hope, peace, joy and love. How can we, on White Ribbon Day, bring these themes to our common wish to not just reduce but remove violence from our communities?

Many of you here today will know all too well the degree of violence in our families and communities; while many in the wider community are blissfully unaware or turn a blind eye.

We are challenged to care for our most vulnerable. For sure those in our communities who are vulnerable includes tragically our most precious gifts of life – our children and young people. But there are too many others that also experience undue violence:

the aged by the hands of elder abuse by their own children;

people holding minority faiths by the hands of dominant religions;

people treated as disabled by a society afraid of imperfection;

women treated violently by the men who they love;

people of my own LGBTQI community made legitimate targets of hate and bullying through sermons that invoke us as being the reason for God’s wrath and earthquakes;

NONE of this is OK.

I often reflect back on when I was undertaking my initial theology degree. At about the same time as the so-called anti-smacking law was created, I was taking a paper on ‘Justice Issues and the Bible’. This was a paper exploring Biblical imperatives for justice on issues such as

land, poverty, hunger, labour, and ethnicity. I remember the uncomfortable silence that arose one lecture, when in a class discussion someone shared how they decried this piece of legislation as denying his cultural right to physically punish his children.

The White Ribbon reaffirms a position that no violence is appropriate, and that non-violence is starting point for the family and community life that we seek. We can't underestimate that sometimes it is small steps that are more important than the big ones towards this hope.

Consider this story encountered by a World Council of Churches delegation when visiting Kenya in 2007, in the midst of severe violence following a disputed election.

The team visited some of the hot spots of the violence. They were heartened to see that in a place where groups of people were involved in animosity, prejudices, blame games, accusations and killings, they encountered positive efforts by people and faith communities to calm the situation down and return to peaceful living – but one story of a small boy stood out.

This young boy's actions invoked an African folk tale: which is of a tiny humming bird trying to quench a forest engulfed in fire, with its small beak full of water; while the larger animals such as elephants, giraffes, lions simply watch on.

Like the humming bird trying to quench an inferno in its habitat, this 12 year old artist was using his talent to pass a message of peace to his fellow tribes' people. What he did was to paint a warrior from his community holding a spear in one hand and a young plant in the other. He stood on the roadside, conspicuous so every passer-by could see him. Out of curiosity most people from whichever tribe would ask him the meaning behind the painting.

The boy full of innocence replied with a simple answer: that he was trying to communicate to his community to stop fighting, to stop violence, and instead plant seeds of peace.

The great religions of the world carry a powerful potential for peace in their message and practice. All the great religions teach peace and goodwill. Yes, there are the texts of terror and violence, and the interpretations of scripture and faith to declare retaliation and punishment.

But let us remember the seeds of peace. I invite us to dig into the faith heritage, or basis of social ethics, that grounds us: to remind ourselves of a common call to hear the voice of the vulnerable, and challenge the basis for which violence is exercised in our communities.

I think of words coming from the Roman Catholic tradition, of Saint Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now but yours; no hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world;
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good;
Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.

Our Buddhist neighbour says,

“A state which is not pleasant or enjoyable for me will also not be so for him; and how can I impose on another a state which is not pleasant or enjoyable for me?”

Our Hindu neighbour says,

“This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”

Our Jewish neighbour says,

“What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the law: all the rest is commentary.”

Our Muslim neighbour says,

“No one of you is a believer until they desire for their brothers and sisters what they desire for themselves.”

Our Indigenous-faith neighbour says,

“Respect for life is the foundation.”

World Council of Churches, *Telling Peace*

For myself, I dig into my Methodist ethos to invoke the words of John Wesley:

Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the times you can,
to all the people you can,
as long as ever you can.

Let each of us find for ourselves the small seeds of peace and non-violence; and be a humming bird that gives hope.