

## Sermon Archive 345

Sunday 23 May, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Romans 8: 22-27  
John 16: 12-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'm going to say "Kia Ora" to you God. I choose "Kia Ora" as our greeting (not **my** greeting, but **our** greeting - since a greeting is something shared between at least two - never a private word invented by and for only one. Is Kia Ora OK with you?) In choosing "Kia Ora", rather than "hello", I **am** reminded of the controversy of 1984. Working as a telephone operator for the New Zealand Post office, Naida Glavish was ordered by her supervisor not to answer the phone with "Kia Ora". Threatened with termination if she persisted in using te reo Maori, she only kept her job after the intervention of the Prime minister. Good God! Kia Ora was declared OK by Rob Muldoon. Life's full of surprises, isn't it? So anyway, with Rob's agreement, and our getting on board almost forty years later, "Kia Ora" it is.

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Kia Ora, God. The room erupts into laughter, and I'm trying to laugh along. All the while, though, I'm still trying to work out what it is that I've said that's been so funny. It turns out (as I find out later) that while I've tried to say "Ich habe durchgefallen", perfect German for "I have failed", instead I've said "Ich habe Durchfall" - "I have diarrhoea". I suppose it's funny. And I'm sure I'll catch up with the joke, given time to understand my mistake. Non-ironically, I made my diarrhoea gaffe while trying to answer a question about how my latest German language exam had gone. I wanted to say "I have failed". And in my attempt to say it, I failed all the more spectacularly.

The Germans you gave me, God, generally, gave me encouragement. They were always kind in telling me that my German was good. And I guess that what I said was most of the time not completely hopeless. The trouble was that I only ever said what I said after some silent culling process had gone on



in my head. What I really want to say is this - but I don't have the words - so I settle for something simpler. And half-way through delivering the compromise, I'd lose track of where I was going, so only deliver half of it. The seemingly adequate German that came out of my mouth came nowhere near to saying what I really wanted to say. At home I'd always been an articulate person. My participation in discussion, explanation, teaching (for goodness sake) indicated some intellectual capacity. In Germany I couldn't keep up with four-year-olds. My German experience made me think, for the first time, about how language equips "the person among other people". The whole world is out there, full of people expressing themselves, and I can't express myself. Kia Ora, God. Kia Ora.

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Kia Ora God. I hope I was useful to that young woman. She clearly needed someone to talk to. She wouldn't have asked for my time, if she didn't need to talk. So it was good that I was able to be there. To the extent that you are in the opportunities, hiding your gracious self in my diary, making of time something to be shared, thank you. I don't thank you for the fact that I had trouble hearing her. Tears were getting in the way of her speaking. It's hard to project your voice well when your diaphragm's busy powering the sobbing. And it's hard to lip read when the speaker's head is bowed and the hair's getting in the way. I couldn't say to her "speak up, I can't hear you". I just couldn't. It's all in English, God; no German. But some of it might as well be in Greek. I just hope that nothing vital was said and not heard.

You sent me a friend, God. He reassured my deaf old self about it. He made the point that while I mightn't have heard individual words, I had a competent idea of what was being said - big-picture "said". And there was body language in use as well. That's probably right, God. So over to you I hand that wee fear that I missed something really important - in the words that got away. Kia Ora, God. Kia Ora.

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Kia Ora God. It's still me - still trying to expressing my thoughts! These ones are about my television and the Middle East. It's Israel and Palestine, the latest round of bombings and ultimatums to the enemy. "We won't stop until you stop. You won't stop until we stop." All we're saying already has been



said - during the last fourteen day war. When asked for a way out of the circular cycle, the canny commentators say there is no way out. It's going to happen every seven years, because it always has. And nothing new is ever said - only a repeat of last time's script. And what are you going to say anyway, to someone whose family you just now have killed? What words will create a way out of that? I can repeat my understanding of my religious heritage. I can repeat my right to exist as a nation. We each can repeat our right to peaceful existence. We've all said this before. Just as many times before quiet diplomacy has inserted many words behind the scenes. The words seem less potent than the rockets and rocks. The pen may be said to be mightier than the sword, but just now words aren't doing it. Kia Ora, God. Kia Ora.

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Kia Ora God. Thank you for the pamphlet. It got popped into my letter box the other day. I know I've got "no circulars, please" written on my box. I'm trying to cut down on wasted paper and unsolicited approaches from strangers selling stuff. But this pamphlet was welcome. It told me that I don't need to get a Covid jab. Did you know, God, that the vaccine might not be safe? The trials have been rushed, and the herd-immunity argument's just a theory. What business does the government have, anyway, telling me what to put in my body? Even when my body's close to yours (close as a sneeze).

The pamphlet was glossy - looked like it came from a real publisher. And the name of the sponsor sounded good - "Voice of reason", or something like that. And I know, you've got to be careful these days about what you read, but the pamphlet seemed good, because I've heard the arguments before on social media - that circle of my friends. I mean, why would my friends know the truth and not speak it? Why would anyone deliberately want me to believe something damaging? Well, yes, I guess some people do, but the question is "who?" Words argue and contradict one another. Even when they're in perfect English, even when we hear every word, even when it's not war rhetoric, where is the truth? Kia Ora, God. Kia Ora.

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Kia Ora God. A lighter note. I love you very much, but saying it doesn't quite work. So I thought I might write you a song instead - or a poem. Or maybe pick you some flowers, do my ikebana-best, and pop them into your open hand. And you know, around my love for you, feeding it, giving it shape, there's this new experience my community's having of the company of Christ - who was with us, then taken from us, then given back to us - kind of. And he's promised us a new kind of "being present", a new expression of life and friendship. The words are struggling to say it, God - to frame it. They feel like they're kind of just gesturing towards it, whatever it is.

We kind of know that the whole creation's been kind of groaning - trying to express something, but making more noise than sense. We know, when he says to us "I have more to say, but you're not ready for it yet" that he's right. This beautiful thing called language (poetry, prose, song, expression of heart, declaration of intent, the greeting being ours, not mine) is stretched. It always has been. Maybe you, the great expresser of the heart, are going to need to take us by the hand (by the lips and tongue and dictionary as well) and teach us to speak differently, listen differently, hear anew. Maybe we need your new Kia Ora - a Pentecost to mend our conversing. Maybe so, God. God, Kia Ora.

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Kia Ora, God. I'm not sure to what extent your church has been a force in the world for greater communication and understanding. The record is probably mixed. But, send your wind and flame upon us. Fashion within us a wisdom that shines with light. And then give us the language we need, so that it may be shared throughout the warring world. Be the carefulness in our speaking. Be the attentiveness in our listening. Be the unity in our greeting. Be the deep desire in us to know and to be known. Increase in us the delight we have when people understand one another in love. Be, for us, the God of the Pentecost conversing.

Kia Ora, God. Receive our thanks and aspirations, even as we keep together a moment of quiet.