

Sermon Archive 522

Sunday 9 February, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Waitangi Day

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A Reflection: Mana, Tiriti, and a little detour

In our late-summer Season of Caring, as we turn to caring for our country, I want to preface this series of reflections with the assertion of a key principle. The key principle is mana.

For a long time, when I heard the word "mana", I did a quick English swap in my head. Mana means "dignity", I thought - and it sort of does. But then I tangled it all up with my Christian understanding of the inherent dignity of all people - something that we all have from birth, by virtue of our being human. As I have a heart, and as I have a mind, so I have inherent dignity - say the Western hemisphere Christians. But at that point, with respect to mana, something gets lost in translation. For in te Ao Māori, the Māori world view, mana is **not** something that we just have. Mana comes, only as it is given by others - and given freely. I suppose, at a push, you could say that it is **earned**, since people give it to us as we do dignified things - but it can't be bought (because if you're trying to get mana, you've sort of failed in the spirit of it. It certainly can't be seized or stolen - for there's no mana in grabbing stuff that doesn't belong to you - thank you Tariana.) Mana is kind of a social licence - an acknowledgement by the wider community that you are a person of honour. As we turn to explore caring for our country, call it "nation-building" if you like, a central concept is mana.

-ooOoo-

On Thursday it was 185 years since a treaty was signed, by which the tangata whenua gave permission to the British Crown for its people to live in this land. In other places around the world, that same British Crown had just invaded and occupied, no permission sought - but here it was done by coming to an arrangement with people who already were here. Encouraged by the Christian missionaries who'd earned a reputation of being trustworthy, 43 Māori rangatira signed te Tiriti at Waitangi. By the end of the year, roughly 500 signatures had been taken. And of course, there also was the signature of Governor William Hobson, in the name of the Queen.

To put your signature on a piece of paper like that, is no simple physical deed. It is a moral commitment - because you are "putting your name" to an agreement. You're not just scribbling; you are promising. And in promising, you are putting your name at risk. Does the name now, and will it later on, have mana? You don't seize mana. You don't steal mana. You don't simply have it. Closer to truth is that you earn it - as by your works you become known. The names are written. A new "living together" begins, and mana is at risk.

We acknowledge that current politics have caused us to think more deeply, and to discuss more widely how the "living together" has gone, and what our continuing responsibilities are to one another as we "nation build". Whether the new piece of paper (the Principles Bill) has been a wonderful invitation to dialogue, or a sinister mechanism for hurt and offence, is contested. Not contested, I think, is that somehow mana lies somewhere near the heart of who we are as we build - dignity recognised by others as dignified deeds are done.

If our acting is not dignified, then the harvest shall not be mana, but shame.

-ooOoo-

Here's a little detour. It will be short, I promise! America is being made great again. The nation is being rebuilt. On Tuesday, the nation's president suggested that any further support for Ukraine against Russia was contingent on Ukraine surrendering its mineral resources to the United States. This seems to me to be using the desperate plight of an invaded country as a commercial opportunity - something of a mineral grab. Well you can grab minerals, but you can't grab mana. Is there any mana in this part of that nation's nation-building? An American facebook friend of mine posted in relation to the Ukraine proposal "go to hell, you orange moron". Mana is not being given. I promised the detour would be short. Suffice to say that history and current events, are full of illustrations of how not to do "care for the country". Detour ends. We turn to better things. A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The First Lesson: Isaiah 50: 4-7

Hymn: Blessèd Jesus, at your word

Reflection: The power of listening

Isaiah is trying to describe what makes it means to be a person of "prophetic insight". And the interesting thing about prophetic insight, as Isaiah describes it anyway, is that much like mana, it's not something private or generated from

within. It's not good ideas that the prophet hatches in the lab of his or her own mind. The expression that Isaiah uses, is that it's like an open ear - it's a kind capacity to listen. Morning by morning God wakens my ear. God enables me to be a listening person. I listen as those listen who are taught. Could we call that a "teachable spirit"? People of prophetic insight don't have to have brilliant ideas - but they need to recognise wisdom when they hear it. And then they share the wisdom with the weary, so that the weary are sustained. It's a vision of someone who listens well, who welcomes wisdom, and who cares for those who are weary.

I harken back to last week's sermon, where we heard the expression "the culture of contempt". Contempt does not listen. Contempt does not rejoice in any good idea that needs crediting to others. Contempt certainly does not care for the weary - or for the frightened, or those needing mercy (who wash the dishes and do the night shifts). Having no capacity for compassion, contempt is contemptible - it has no mana. Though it might attempt to seize it, it has none. Shame.

On the second Sunday in our late-summer Season of Caring, as we wonder about how to care for our country, Isaiah describes insight as something that involves listening, recognising wisdom, and sharing words that sustain. Isaiah notes, at the end of the passage, that in being a faithful person of insight, there is no shame. "The Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore . . . I know that I shall not be put to shame". Mana. Dignity. Honour given to the other. No shame.

On Waitangi Day 2024, many people said to people from the government, "we don't want your bill". They said it clearly. A year later, they had to say it again. Did it feel for them, I wonder, whether it was like no one had been listening? How can you sustain the weary, if you don't listen? When we listen, the nation is built.

Music for Reflection:

Reflection: Rage, hope and vision

On Sunday 13 August 2017, I preached a sermon about the prophet Elijah (another person of spiritual insight, like Isaiah), retreating into a cave where he lamented at all the prophets had been killed by an evil empire, and he alone was left - feeling defeated and lonely. I critiqued Elijah's situation and mood in the light of various people of faith in America lamenting what their government was doing. At the end of the sermon, I left the pulpit, returned to the "moderatorial chair", where I picked up a glass of water. I spilled the water

onto the floor, because my hand was shaking with rage. My shaking hand surprised me.

When the same person who caused that rage was re-elected last year, I found myself thinking "I've got to come up with a way of shielding myself from the upset he's bound to cause again". I resolved to give proper energy to ignoring him - for the sake of my mental health. I wonder, though, whether you might call that strategy a "lagging in zeal", a "failing of spirit", a "dying of hope". I really don't know.

I suspect that hope (or zeal or ardent spirit) is an essential for those who would build - build a church, build a city, build a country, build a world. If there is no hope for something good, something better, something that is full of mana, then we won't build anything - we'll only destroy, or make sad little boxes in which there is no light. Wreckers, rather than builders! It's back to that famous phrase from the Book of Proverbs: without a vision, the people perish.

So maybe, to feed the hope, we seek a vision of a community where love is genuine, where everyone is held in affection which is mutual - received but also given, so something of a sustainable symbiosis. A vision of a community where people hold fast to what is good - and are impatient with what is bad. A vision of a community in which cursing is met by a cheeky smile and a word of blessing (like that's going to infuriate the cursers - stealing the ball, running off into love and freedom). A vision of a community where the greatest competition is between those wanting to outdo others in showing honour (mana). A vision of a community where we take account of what is noble in the sight of all - noble, dignity won (mana, mana, mana).

If a vision like that was given to a people who were not defeated in spirit, but still had Christ-given hope, zeal, spirit, and if the vision enabled people to notice and celebrate the good things - what kind of country might be built!

In our late-summer Season of Caring, we end this sermon with a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Reading: Romans 12: 9-18