

Sermon 26 January 2020 – Epiphany 3

Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-41; Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

The Kiwi Christ - FSHS

In the season of Epiphany we celebrate the ‘coming out’ of Christ, or the revelation of Christ to the world.

In the Isaiah reading we heard that great Christmas Phrase: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” ...

In the Corinthians reading , we hear that wonderful phrase of St Paul, “ The foolishness of the cross...” how God’s spirit transformed the tragedy of the crucifixion into a triumph over sin and evil

And in the gospel reading, we read about the spreading of the Light/Gospel as Jesus called his first disciples, sending them out to be ‘fishers of people’.

What I want to do in my short reflection today, is interest you in a search for the Kiwi Jesus. I know that I can’t do justice to such a search in a short sermon, but I will talk about one or two places where I have met the Kiwi Christ.

I am foolish enough to believe in the incarnation. That is to say, I believe that Christ is in the people we meet, and Christ is in each of us despite our shortcomings (whatever they may be). Christ is the light or the Goodness in us. The gospel of John calls it the ‘Logos’. Maori call it the, ‘Mauri’, or ‘Wairua’- the benevolent life-force ...

So where do we find the Kiwi Christ? (and I don’t mean Richie McCaw or any of our national heroes).

Back in the 1970s, James K Baxter, published a poem called, ‘The Maori Christ’.

I’m not going to recite the whole poem; it uses language and is deliberately provocative and deliberately irreverent, as Baxter tries to move away from the image of the ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’. The poem is James K Baxter’s attempt to see Christ, and depict Christ, in the context of our own Kiwi culture. Baxter saw the image of the Kiwi Christ in the disadvantaged and especially in the Maori people. In my opinion I think Baxter stereotypes Maori, but it is an honest attempt to expose/uncover a Kiwi Jesus.

I saw the Maori Jesus

Walking on Wellington Harbour.

He wore blue dungarees,

His beard and hair were long.

His breath smelled of mussels and paraoa.

When he smiled it looked like the dawn.

The Maori Christ, by James K Baxter.

In 1998, John Bluck, the then Dean of Christchurch, a former professor at Knox College, and later Bishop of Waiapu, wrote a book called, 'Long, white and Cloudy'. It was a book that attempted to look at New Zealand Spirituality from a Kiwi perspective. A kind of search for the Kiwi Jesus.

Shirley Murray, and many other New Zealand hymn writers, have written hymns in a similar vein. Earthing their songs in New Zealand soil. We were sad to hear of Shirley's passing, yesterday at aged 88. I believe that many of her hymns express the Kiwi Jesus. And will continue to do so for many years because they are so grounded in the Kiwi appreciation of Christ.

Coin McCahon. One of his better-known paintings is of a bare yellowing landscape, much like the Hawkes Bay landscape in drought. Reminds me of hills around Peka Peka and Waipukurau. Superimposed on the landscape are what seems like random Bible verses. What was McCahon saying through his paintings?: Was he saying that the land, even after human exploitation, speaks with a Biblical power: Feel it's majesty! Feel its permanence! Feel its spirit! The Holy speaking to us through the land, sky and sea in Aotearoa New Zealand.

During my time as a Defence Force Chaplain I was fortunate enough to spend two winters in the Solomon Islands, with the New Zealand Peace Keeping Force. After taking my Sunday chapel services on Base, I'd often go to a local church to experience local worship. I mainly worshipped in either the Methodist/Anglican churches as there were no Presbyterian churches. And outside the Anglican Cathedral of St Bartholomew, in Honiara, was the statue of a Solomon Islander dressed in traditional dress with his hands upturned, and arms reaching up to heaven. And the plaque below the statue read: 'The Solomon Island Christ'.

That statue was saying a lot of things: Firstly it was saying to all Solomon Islanders, 'Jesus/Christ is one of us!' The second thing it said (to me) is: "We don't need a Western European version of the Christ". A third thing it said (to me) was "Christ is universal and is manifest in all cultures".

I also believe there is a 'Kiwi' Christ, who is clearly visible in those moments when Kiwi culture celebrates justice and compassion.

I think we saw the Kiwi Christ in ourselves, last year, following the March 15th Mosque attacks in Christchurch. A tidal wave of goodness, empathy and compassion

swept over the country, as we tried to distance ourselves from the evil of that attack, and the dark thoughts behind it.

The Kiwi Christ in us was declaring: 'That is not us!'

There are also less - spectacular times when the Kiwi Christ appears.

I remember being a Uni student in Auckland and getting a holiday job at the then thriving, 'Vita Shoe Company' in Auckland. It was the most mind-numbing, most boring jobs in the world at the time. And if we weren't getting paid for that tedious job, we would've lost the will to live. I had the mind-numbing job of standing next to a conveyor belt and putting a blob of glue on thousands of shoe soles as they came past. For eight hours a day, including lunchtime and 'smoko' breaks. Mind-numbing!

A couple of days into the new job, I forgot to take my lunch and didn't have enough money to buy some lunch and still have some bus fare. So that lunchtime, I sat in our section of the factory watching the older men eating their lunches. And I've never forgotten this. One of the older men named 'Noel' began slicing his cheese and tomatoes and placing them on the fresh bread. And then he turned to me with this huge sandwich and said: "Get that down you mate. You can't work on an empty stomach!" That was one of the best sandwiches I've ever tasted. And I've never forgotten it.

Here was I, 19 years old, a stranger in the job. And someone had shown me some compassion for no other reason than his sense of compassion. Noel was like a Kiwi Christ!

You'll remember the parable of the Good Samaritan where Jesus asks the Lawyer, 'which of these was the man's neighbour?' And the lawyer replies: "The one who showed him mercy (or kindness)".

Wherever we see an act of mercy, or kindness we are seeing Christ.

And there are lots of acts of kindness going on every day. Neighbours helping neighbours. Kiwis welcoming strangers. Strangers welcoming strangers. I've experienced so much kindness in the 11 months since I've been here. The Kiwi Christ. And the Christ of those who have come from other places to live in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I've also seen the under-belly of Kiwi society where Christ is not obviously present. When I worked as a Policeman, we saw mostly the negative side of the Kiwi society. People hurting others. People ripping others off. People who were victims themselves - passing the abuse on to the next generation.

But what has stood out for me, as a first-generation New Zealand-born Samoan, is the goodness of the Kiwi people like Noel in the Vita Shoe Company.

I'm not proposing that we erect a statue of a Kiwi Christ in front of the church, But if we had to make a statue of the Kiwi Christ and place in front of St Columba Church, what would that statue look like?

I know I'm treading on dangerous ground here, requiring a lot of prayer. But I believe he would have to be like my friend Noel. A bespectacled, man or woman, preparing for retirement, arms outstretched – wearing a beautiful korowai - handing out sandwiches to passers-by

I'll probably be shot for proposing that image of the Kiwi Christ. **But I do believe we should always be looking for the Kiwi Christ and seeking to be that Kiwi Christ to others.**

FSHS Amen.