



Singularity As Gospel Witness

The Blessing of Integrated Difference in Tension

The transcript of a presentation to “The Church as an Evangelising Community” webinar hosted by Churches Together in England via Zoom on April 18, 2023.

In this presentation Jay identifies from the New Testament that the Church’s primary witness to the world is for believers in Christ to live as an “integrated singularity”, by which the world will believe and know that the Holy Parent lovingly sent the Son, the peace-giver.

Kia ora koutou (life and wellbeing to you all). A special greeting to our hosts Reverend Trey Hall and Reverend Dr Benjamin Aldous, along with my co-presenters: Dr Alison Kolosova, Reverend Mawethu Ncaca, and Reverend Dr Jeff Conklin-Miller. It is my great honour to be contributing with you all today.

Introduction

There is a proverb among my people, the Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand, that became very popular as we responded to the global pandemic as a nation... “He waka eke noa”—we are all, without exception, in this canoe together. It was a rallying cry for our nation to collectively hold fast to a national strategy to eliminate COVID-19 until we were well vaccinated and had good stocks of antivirals, and therefore ready to open up again, having mitigated the risks as much as we could.

It was, by world standards, a successful strategy. But we couldn’t maintain he waka eke noa for much longer than 100 days in lockdown. Unlike, say a war, with more obvious physical impact on society, the pandemic was subject to much conspiracy theorising and distrust in the State’s so-called “draconian measures” to keep us safe. The convivial unity or peace in the nation soon broke down as people, particularly the individualists, began looking again to their own interests. For Māori and other collectivist cultures in our country, following the wisdom of our leaders was less of a problem.

The Gift of Peace

“Peace I leave with you,” Jesus says in the NIV translation of John 14:27. “My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Jesus’ peace isn’t gifted the way the world offers peace. It’s not peace by force of law, control, military might or wealth, and it’s not a baseless wish for a life without struggle. Yet, Jesus’ peace is so compelling and tangible that it causes fear and anxiety to cease.

What is this peace? Well, it is God’s eternal presence with faithful followers of God to be sure, but John is very savvy in the way he constructs his writings. Through John, Jesus goes on to explain this peace in the passages that follow. In sum, I believe it is the gift of inclusion in an integrated singularity that is recognised in Scripture by many metaphors, like a kingdom, a city, a body, a family, a sheepfold, a bride or, as Jesus explains immediately following his offer of peace, like a vine. We commonly refer to these metaphors as examples of unity in Christ, local expressions of which we know as ‘churches’ or ‘fellowships’.

I perceive a climax in John 17:18-26, which I call The Great Commitment, and I believe this expresses the central aim of the purposes of God. As the Holy Parent sent the Son into the world, so the Son sends us into the world. Unlike John 20:21 where Jesus leaves his sending of the disciples without further explanation, here in John 17 Jesus explains in prayer exactly how the Holy Parent sent the Son into the world. We do not need to speculate. God sent the Son in integrated singularity, to do the will of God. And so the Son sends his disciples—then, and throughout all time—into the world to do the will of God.

The Will of God

“And what is the will of God,” I hear you ask? It is that we love one another. This is prevalent within John’s writings and evident throughout the whole Scripture. That we love one another so intimately that we are seen by the world as an integrated singularity in Christ—or,



Jay Mātenga

Dr Jay Mātenga is the author of “Mutuality of Belonging: Towards Harmonizing Culturally Diverse Missions Groups” and co-author of “Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization”. Jay is the Executive Officer for Missions Interlink NZ, the Director of the World Evangelical Alliance’s Global Witness Dept. as well as the Executive Director for the WEA’s Mission Commission, which sits within the Global Witness Dept. Jay maintains a blog and publishes his articles on his website: <https://jaymatenga.com>.



as they would see it, because of Christ, but Christ is much more than our exemplar or moral compass. The Parent in the Son, the Son in the Parent, and those allegiant to the Son as a covenanted community integrated into the heavenly Community, like a beautiful endless Celtic knot. Eternal. No beginning or end discernible. A unified whole, empowered by the third person of the eternal common unity—that is, the Holy Spirit who, as we know from elsewhere, must be present but is obscured here in Jesus' prayer. Although, perhaps, included via Jesus' reference to glory.

That is the ideal. And by this ideal the world will believe—that is, find credible—and the world will know—that is, actually experience—that the Holy Parent lovingly sent the Son to show us what love is and to enable us to love. Our love for one another, as an integrated singularity by our faith in the Son, empowered by the Spirit, is our sure and certain witness to the world of the reality of... the Kingdom of God, the authority of Jesus the King, and the power of God through the Holy Spirit to achieve what this world cannot: to reconcile relationships. In other words, to bring peace. When the world sees that, they see a miracle begging for an explanation. Because, as my nation's example through COVID-19 testifies, the world cannot achieve it, not for long anyway.

The Reality Check

That is the ideal. But what is the reality? What does the world see when they look at visible manifestations of Christ's body that we call the Church. Well, if my Twitter feed is anything to go by, it's not too dissimilar to the world really — factions, self-interest, control, abuses, ideological differences, polarising extremes, manipulation, exploitation, self-righteousness, judgementalism... division. The world will see what they want to see, and they can usually find it. But it doesn't often look very much like the peace of Christ.

Unlike our nation states, organisations and institutions, the unity Jesus prayed for is not meant to be enforced by hierarchy or bureaucratic rule. It is not created through adherence to a mental creed or moral code. Although the ancient creeds of our common faith are helpful in reminding us of our *raison d'être*. It is also not found in the diplomatic confederation of faith communities that intersect primarily on socio-political matters. Furthermore, even though we are all enlivened by the promised Holy Spirit, 'followers of the Jesus way' (as some indigenous Christians like to say) do not share a hive mind. So, if our most sure and certain witness to the world, our most powerful evangelistic tool, is to be a lovingly integrated singularity, how on earth is that supposed to be achieved?

Unity Through Mutuality

By every one of us, within our mutually committed fellowships of faith, sitting in the tensions of difference and tuning them by merciful loving kindness. By persevering in the faith in spite of the differences in our inherited genetics, upbringing, personalities, preferences, propensities, strengths, weaknesses, giftedness, skills, or visions of what the good life looks like.

Unity is not agreement or even agreeing to disagree—at least as it relates to the so-called 'secondary issues' of our faith. Unity is not forced conformity, we know this; but it is also not just a live and let live avoidance—'you do you'. It is being willing to submit our perceived rights, privileges and power in loving service to others, first to or within the 'family of faith' (cf. Gal 6:10). To yield, to give way and to give a-way. As living sacrifices. Not passively, but with a deep curiosity to understand where those who are getting under our skin are coming from—and, God willing, to allow such encounters to mature us little bit by little bit into the fulness of Christ. To be transformed by the renewing of our mind in such communal encounters. As we see in Romans 12:1-2.

To borrow Paul's terminology in Philippians 2, where Jesus knowing who he was, chose to lay it aside. This sacrificial love in action, our being living sacrifices, is a kenotic exchange. And it is supposed to be reciprocal. We are mutual servants of one another within our communities of faith, extended out into our societies. And, furthermore, the greater the diversity in our midst, the greater the maturity we develop.

James tells us (James 1:2-4) that we should consider it joy when others within the faith cause us trouble, because if we sit in the tensions of difference (holding to the faith), persevering, we will mature. This is our perpetual state of being, requiring perpetual reconciliation. Perpetual because relationship-making is an eternal pursuit. It will continue on the other side of eternity, but without the nasty sin-effect getting in the way. And it is precisely in the embrace of relationships of difference that we live contrary to the pattern of this world. In these relationships we are ALL transformed.

Transformative Tension

This perpetual interrelational state of Holy Spirit-empowered mutuality is where we come to know and do the good, pleasing and perfect will of God, which is the pursuit of an integrated singularity—harmonious relationships. And harmony, my dear brothers and sisters, can only be produced with tension—tuned tension, but tension nonetheless. We need to normalise tension, instead of trying to dissolve it, resolve it, ignore it, or avoid it. Tension is transformative.

Harmony, shalom, peace is dwelling together in Holy Spirit tuned tension with one another, willing to surrender, seeking to understand, and being changed in the process. It doesn't happen at world councils or global consultations. It cannot be defined and constrained by grand totalising strategies. It is the stuff of daily life with one another as a covenantal community in Christ. In local fellowships, right in the midst of the mess of life. It requires us to be sensitive to the needs, motivations, fears, passions, of others and being willing to vulnerably confess our own, so that we can remain porous to the

possibility of a co-created future rather than digging in to our own idea of what is good, pleasing or perfect and remaining buffered from the influences of others. Mutually vulnerable sharing, considering, co-learning and co-labouring are core to the process of inter-personal transformation and are among the prerequisites for peace. Time and space must be invested for this to become our lived reality in-Christ. If we are willing to do so, the returns in terms of people responding positively to the gospel will be manifold.

Conclusion

By this level of supernaturally loving mutual commitment in the midst of the tensions of difference, by this manifestation of integrated singularity in our parishes, suburbs and neighbourhoods, people will know that we are Jesus' disciples. By this, the world will believe and know that there is a God in heaven who sent the Son to earth, so that we might be reconciled to God and one another, to form a new creation by the power of the Spirit who counsels us through the tensions, trial, troubles, and testings with one another. This happens as we abide, remain, persevere, clinging to Christ our Source as branches cling to the vine.

And then evangelism simply becomes the explanation of this demonstration of the power of God and an invitation to come join us, saying, "Peace be with you", because there is no fear in this agape kind of love.

Arohanui ki a koutou — loving kindness to you all.

1. In te reo Māori (the Māori language) we do not have gender-specific terms for parents. *Matua*, the word translated in the Māori Bible for Father, can be male or female depending on the context. This frees us from relating to the Sender of Jesus solely in patriarchal terms.