

Synod Sermon  
6 September 2018  
St Mary's in Holy Trinity Cathedral, Auckland

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

### Introduction

Just over 200 years ago an Englishman, stood up in the mid-day sun to tell a story. He'd travelled the length of the world, so convicted was he by its message.

He probably should have chosen a better story:

- Sheep and shepherds to a group of people who had never seen one and no concept of shepherding
- Talked about a town called David that no one had heard of
- Talked about a census – compelling stuff
- The audience would have understood the reference to a baby
- ... but placing the baby in a feeding trough?

Of course we know him as Rev Samuel Marsden. He recorded in his diary that night:

*“In this manner the Gospel has been introduced to New Zealand and I fervently pray that the glory of it may never depart from its inhabitants until time shall be no more.”*

Great academic debate as to what was translated. Some think Marsden preached much of his sermon in te Reo with Ruatara assisting. Others suggest that the original message was lost in the translation - Ruatara's translation was simply this:

- Good man
- Don't steal his goods
- Tell you later what he said
- By the way it's called a horse

And yet in spite of the possible mistranslation, Marsden's words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, helped ignite a movement that continues to touch each one of us here this evening.

But 200 years later I fear a **Marsden moment** where our message of the good news is being lost in the translation.

### **NZ Faith and Belief Study<sup>1</sup>**

A recently published study of New Zealanders attitudes to faith and belief in NZ found:

- 16 % community are regular church goers (ie attend once a month)
- 9% attend weekly
- 56% population know little about their local church
- 57% population think their local church has a negative or no impact at all on their community and wider society
- NZers struggled to name a single Christian in public square they admired.

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<sup>1</sup> [faithandbeliefstudynz.org](http://faithandbeliefstudynz.org)

- Many respondents, while complementary about individual Christians they knew, were scathing in their assessment of the church.

### Paradox

Each one of us in this room every day is faithfully:

- Preaching the word
- Training leaders
- Caring for the sick
- Bringing healing to communities
- Advocating for others

But whatever it is we are doing – it is getting lost in translation. The widespread perception by New Zealanders of the church is that at best we are largely irrelevant to their lives and at worse, manifest attitudes and behaviours deeply at odds with what they value as being NZers.

### Tipping Point

With levels of church attendance as low as 9% every week, this could go one of two ways:

- **Faith is seen as increasingly irrelevant ('God has left the building')** to be replaced by a self-actualising blancmange of spiritualities, where truth is sacrificed on the altar of relevance;
- **Faith reimaged** – where the good news is 'seen and heard' as good news indeed:
  - for the young man experiencing suicidal thoughts;
  - for the solo Mum grappling with how to put food on the table each night;
  - for the student wrestling with how their faith and their studies integrate;
  - for the father estranged from his children;
  - for the young woman asking is this as good as it gets?

We are at the tipping point. The jury is out regarding which way it will go. But there are two things that suggest it is about to get a whole lot worse. The same study asked people what were the major belief blockers or attitudes that stopped them engaging with Christians and the church:

- **Church teaching on homosexuality** – about the only topic on which the church is guaranteed to get a headline these days;
- **Perception of wide spread church abuse** – with an Inquiry launching into abuse of children in state owned facilities, it is inevitable we will be confronted with some particularly ugly truths, committed by so called followers of Christ.

We know our bibles – the question is not about where this will end up. Life started in the garden and it was good. The culmination is in a city when all things, including heaven and earth will be "renewed". This 'renewal', the author of Revelation tells us, "will see the old order of things pass away" and the new world transformed into a place where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

The question is not how does it all end up? We know that answer.

Rather, how are we going to be 'seen and heard' in the messy middle between the opening chapter in the garden and the final chapter in the city. Closer to home, how we are 'seen and heard' in this

lovely/ugly, beautiful yet broken muddle - the 'old order' will largely determine the extent to which the Anglican church in Aotearoa plays a significant part in that final chapter.

### **John the Baptist – Are you the one?**

This question of a message lost in translation is not new.

John the Baptist – now imprisoned, increasingly alarmed by what he is hearing about Jesus ministry, sends his disciples to ask Jesus “are you the one or should we look for someone else?”

Jesus response – tell him what you have “seen and heard”:

- Lame walk, Deaf Hear, Blind See, Lepers are healed, the dead are raised and the good news is preached
- John’s question was a question of confidence and a question of identity. Are you the one?
- Critically the people Jesus references, as proof of his Messiahship are those who were excluded from the temple – the marginalised, the unlovely, the awkward – this is our tribe. These are our people.

### **Begs the question how are we being seen and heard in Aotearoa today?**

#### **Are we being seen?**

The *Faith and Belief study in NZ* highlights that NZers are most admiring of **lived religion** where we are seen to be caring for the homeless, feeding the poor and giving hope to those without hope.

- Our City Mission – Chris Farrelly and the team are reporting a 22% increase in food parcels in the past year
- Highest ever in the Mission’s 98 year history
- Helped 51,000 people – equivalent to the population of Napier city
- 85% were asking for the very first time

Many other stories:

- Selwyn Foundation, working to address social isolation and caring for people outside of hospital
- Parish level ESOL classes, youth ministry, community outreach, parish visiting etc

Of course we can always do more, but we are being seen and seen with some of the most vulnerable in society.

#### **But are we being Heard?**

Jesus response to John’s question “are you the one” was to tell his disciples to tell John what is being ‘seen **and** heard’ – that the “good news is being preached.”

I suspect temperamentally we prefer our deeds rather than our words to do the talking. Many of us latch on to Assisi’s statement “preach always and just occasionally use words” as a validation of our reticence in engaging in conversations about faith either in the private sphere or the public square.

This reticence diminishes us all, particularly at a time when society desperately needs to hear our voice.

Never more have we needed to hear a message that offers hope, in the face of:

- inter-generational poverty,
- an epidemic of domestic violence sweeps our nation,
- third world diseases in our public hospitals,
- near world leading incarceration rates is our response
- world leading rates of youth suicide.

### **So what explains our reticence to speak up and be heard?**

I fear we have lost confidence in our own story – that like John the Baptist – in our darkest moments we are left wondering is He the one? Overwhelmed by the:

- Complexity of life
- The bewildering rate of change
- By our own insecurities,

Slowly, bit by bit, our confidence is whittled away and we have allowed others to tell our story for us. It partially explains why we have been complicit in allowing our story to seldom leave the bedroom and only enter the public square when it threatens the bedroom.

Secondly we have stopped listening deeply and thus have lost the words to engage meaningfully in society. We have become adept at talking past each other and don't even notice.

Thirdly, stories live when they are told and retold. We do it each week when we meet in church, but how often do we, the clergy and lay leaders of the church meet outside of business meetings simply to retell God's story?

And maybe for some of us the story of our own personal transformation is now like a long lost melody – we hear it just occasionally and we are left wistful.

**No wonder NZers are confused if we ourselves are confused and struggling to recount our story.**

### **So what must we do to be heard?**

What must we do to be invited back into the public square or indeed the private sphere of people's lives.

**Learn our voice - it is a humble voice** – Micah speaks of justice, mercy and humility. In this sense it is a very kiwi voice. We acknowledge we can't do everything but we can do something. We acknowledge that nothing that we do is complete, rather that:

- It's a start, enabling God's grace to enter and to do the rest.
- We are the workers not the architect.
- We are broken people seeking to rebuild a broken world - and it is out of our very brokenness that the light shines through.

In a just released documentary the Pope when asked what must the church do to re-engage with society comments:

“Talk little, Listen carefully, Say just enough, Look people in the eye”

**Facing up to our past** – to our somewhat chequered history as a church. There have been many moments of magnificence. Today for example we are celebrating the life of the Rev Charles Elliott Fox – the revered missionary, historian and anthropologist who served the Anglican church in Melanesia for 70 years. Similarly we can be justly proud of Henry and William Williams who, among

many things, translated the gospel into te reo – arguably the most subversive act imaginable to stop the creeping colonialism.

But we have also been complicit in robbing Maori of mana and autonomy. In many parts of society no matter how good our intentions we simply will not be heard until we confronted our past and sought reconciliation.

### **This Synod**

In a few minutes you will start your Synod deliberations. It is one of the few times we come together. By necessity your agenda is dominated by the business of the church. But even this business should be reflective of the bigger story.

Listen carefully over the next two days:

- What does our business tell us about our story;
- What conversations are we having and as importantly what are the conversations we are not having;
- What does our voice sound like? Is it a
  - Is it a humble voice – “this is what I think but I may be wrong”
  - Is it a confident voice –?
  - Is it a connected voice?
  - Is it a courageous voice – willing to speak truth to power?
  - Is it an accountable voice?

### **Reasons for Optimism:**

But let me return to the beginning and answer my own question about which way will this all turn out.

I am optimistic that the Anglican Church has the potential to, once again, play an **increasingly significant role** in the emerging Aotearoa:

- a) **Hyper individualism and self-interest has reached its limit** - deep desire among millennials for community – a place to call home. Many are abandoning the big and the glitzy for the small and the intimate. We call it parish – we are incarnational people, we live in the neighbourhood, we are salt and we are light;
- b) **At our best we know how to hold diversity together** – perhaps this will become our greatest witness to a divided and increasingly sectarian world, where tribes rule and walls are being built. Unity in the midst of diversity requires a deep humility, a desire for mercy and a profound sense of justice;
- c) **Our courage** – it’s not a word we often associate with the Anglican Church, but unlike others, we were willing to have the conversation about sexual identity, as messy and mucky and as brutal and bruising as the debate has been. We came to a collective view shaped by Scripture, informed by tradition, influenced by science and, we trust, inspired by the Holy Spirit. We had the grace to acknowledge that for some this was a step too far and offered a way for them to be in community yet stand true to their beliefs;

- d) **We have a depth of theological understanding and history** reflected in our fivefold marks of mission which beautifully articulates a mission to the world which embraces teaching, telling, tending, treasuring and transforming. A theology that recognises we are not being asked to save the world but rather to join God in his remarkable mission to mend a broken world;
- e) **Quality of the new leaders emerging** – we are blessed by the young leaders emerging out of our Bold programme and from St John’s – young leaders, talented, passionate, reflecting the emerging face of Aotearoa;
- f) **But the real reason for my confidence is in our story.** - It is the good news. It is the news that God is active in this world, that He is mending his world and remarkably asks us to be a part of that great project. It is a story which emphatically shouts “it does not have to be this way” that personal and societal transformation is possible. Marsden got it wrong in one important respect. He believed he brought the gospel to NZ. We believe in a God who was active long before the arrival of Marsden. God was already at work in NZ. The Holy Spirit was brooding and active. He is still active today.

### Conclusion

Let’s return to our Englishman who travelled the world and stood up in the midday sun to tell a story and to his journal entry praying that the glory of the gospel might never depart New Zealand.

It’s quite possible that Marsden was mistranslated, yet despite this, his story ushered in an act of love that is seen today every time a child is comforted, the oppressed are released and people know freedom.

1800 years earlier the subject of the very story told by Marsden stood up, picked up a scroll, opened it and read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me  
Because he has anointed me  
To preach good news to the poor  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for captives  
Recovery of sight for the blind  
To release the oppressed  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour*

His story introduced us to a love which is as wide as the ocean, as high as the heavens above as deep as the deepest sea and as small as our very beautiful but broken hearts.

That kind of love is never mistranslated.

This is our story. Let’s tell it well.