

## Sermon 24 March 2019 'Christchurch Massacre'

### Genesis 1:26-31 Matthew 7:1-5

I have been so very heartened by the response of New Zealanders to the awful tragedy in Christchurch. It fills me with tremendous hope for our nation. I said in the newsletter that the response has been 'if not Christian in name, certainly Christian in character.' What I meant by that is that the vast majority of people who have responded with so much love and generosity would not call themselves Christian but the way they have responded has been very much in harmony with the values we subscribe to as part of our Christian religion.

That is not altogether surprising as the values we hold dear in our society have their origins in our Christian religion. What is so reassuring is that so many people, when confronted with evil, really do believe in those values, and put them into practice.

This brings me to my next point. What part does God play in all of this? Firstly, on a very obvious level, the victims were singled out because they believed in God but it so happens that they worship God in a way that is different to the Christian way. They have an understanding of God that differs to our understanding of God, not hugely, but there is a difference. Let's be clear here – we are talking about the same God. We believe, as Muslims do, that there is only one God. The difference lies in the interpretation of that God and in the way we approach him.

I want to refer to our Genesis reading, and in particular, verse 27: '*So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them.*' I look around this church, I look around our community, I look around our country, and in fact, the world, and I see that we are very different – diverse cultures, different skin colours, shapes, sizes, personalities etc. Therefore it naturally follows that if we are made in God's image, God himself is diverse.

God is very personal to each and every one of us, we each have our own relationship with him based on our own experience and our own perception of him. That's great and that is very important. But equally important we must be ready to acknowledge and accept that others will relate to God differently to us.

There is the story of the man who went fishing. Every time he caught a big fish he kept throwing it back into the water, and each time he caught a small one, he kept it. A mystified by-stander, observing his peculiar process of selection, asked him what on earth he was doing. The man replied, 'I have only a 20 cm frying pan and so the larger fish won't fit.' God is bigger than our own personal experience of him, so let's not restrict our discernment of him to our narrow world and so reject the God of other cultures and personalities. God transcends the categories of space, time and culture. He is omnipresent, all things to all people. The vastness and complexities of creation reflects just who God is.

There is no doubt that when we reject or find fault with another culture or religion, there is a strong element of judgment at play. In our gospel reading Jesus makes no bones about the issue of judging others. We need to make sure our own house is in order before rushing into judgment, and the bottom line is that invariably our house is not actually in order.

The second point with regards God's place in this tragedy lies with the amazing response of so many people. We say that God is love. Well, let me tell you, there is a huge amount of love being outpoured by the people of New Zealand right now. That tells me God is alive and well. A 19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi wrote, 'Human beings are God's language. When you have been hurt by life and you cry out to God, how does God respond? God responds by sending you people. God comes to you in the incarnation of caring, loving people. We need people. We need to know that we are cared about.'

In our pain and anguish there is always hope, and that hope lies in love. You want a definition of God? I will give you one. God is the spirit of love, working in people, through people. Yes, there is certainly a significant degree of pain and sadness in the world, and we are experiencing that right now. But I am uplifted and encouraged by what I see and what I experience in the love of God as expressed through the kindness, compassion, the love, I see in so many people.

Speaking of pain and anguish, I believe this will prove to be a catalyst for significant growth for us as a nation. It is an undeniable fact that we grow through adversity, through pain. My mind goes back to 1981, the year of the Springbok tour when the country was deeply divided. There was no loss of life on our shores but there was huge social upheaval and great pain felt throughout the country. We learnt a lot about ourselves during those months and our character was further developed as a result.

There is no doubt that right now we are discovering more about ourselves as we dig so very deep in coming to terms with our pain; as we become very aware of our priorities. Our souls are more than touched, they are jarred in a way that exposes our sensitivity, and so we are inevitably reshaped, remoulded accordingly. Without pain, we just don't grow and develop. A man found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared; he sat and watched

the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could go no further.

The man decided to help the butterfly, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shrivelled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time.

Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its short life crawling around with a swollen body and shrivelled wings. It never was able to fly. What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings, so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom. Struggles are exactly what we need in our life. Only through our struggles do we learn about ourselves; do we discover strength that we possibly never knew we had.

I believe we are discovering all sorts of things about ourselves as a country right now, so in that sense alone, we will never be the same.