

SERMON – PROPHETS – GOD’S STORY – OUR STORY

Let me start with this. Every time we do a sermon series, whatever the chosen theme is. There is always a dominant question that we should be exploring. We can do it in many different ways, but we should always be exploring this core question

How does God’s story speak into our story?

How does the will and the way of God inform and shape our human story?

And this includes every micro detail of our lives. because the whole purpose of our faith journey is that we live, and move, and have our very being, informed and inspired by God’s story. It’s why we are here today.

So let me ask you a question about our story to get us all thinking.

If you had to pick one word that you think most captures the dominant spirit of the human story and these cultural times, what would you pick? I’m sure there’s a number of words going through people’s minds. But for me it would be this word –



‘division’.

I personally think that the sin of our human story that has most grieved God, is the sin of discord and division. A failure to live as One in a peace-filled unity.

Has anything caused more blood to flow and tears to be shed, than our willingness to live by the way of the spear and the sword as way to settle our disputes and differences?

And now, in small ways and big we are living in increasingly divided cultural times.

Be it in the micro of our immediate family and friends - in public and political life, and increasingly as nations - there’s a polarising divisive spirit at work. And the fruit of this is never good.

In the first week of this series I offered the example of seeing my family in the UK having a very heated debate over a contentious issue that’s dividing many in the UK. As I said then, nobody in our family actually fell out ... but it clearly resonated, because I received a number of emails from people saying that ‘heated discussions around contentious issues’ has led to a ‘falling out’ among their family and friends.

The fruit of this, is that they are now feeling reluctant to even voice an opinion on a contentious issue for fear of being criticised. And sadly, they are feeling increasingly isolated and lonely. And I know this story is more common than we may think.

It was these emails and other things that have happened this past week that’s made me want to explore this question... **How does God’s story speak into our human story?**

How can God’s story help to guide our own responses and actions in these divisive times.

So what is God’s story? Well, this is where the prophets are important.



‘The prophets remind us of the people God created us to be and the world we long to see.’

The prophets were messengers of God reminding people of their original God created purpose and holding up a vision for a more just world.

They help us to see beyond our immediate circumstances and give us an inspired big picture perspective of God's unfolding plan for humanity.

And there's a theological word that encompasses all of this.

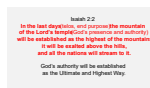


It's the Greek word **'telos**. Meaning "the end goal," or "purpose'. In a Christian biblical context, "telos" refers to God's ultimate plan and purpose for all humanity and all creation.

'Telos' reminds us that the bible isn't **just** a series of individual stories and inspired wisdom sayings. The Bible gives us the big picture Divine story to which we belong and are called to participate in. And this is important because as Jeremy reminded us in Week 2... what defines this cultural moment is that we have become untethered and unrooted from this bigger God story. It's why there's a crisis of meaning and so many people feel a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. As Hayley reminded us last week - at the heart of our Christian story is the spirit of Hope.

So today I've picked two passages from two of THE most prophetic voices of scripture.

And both of them paint the picture of what this 'telos' of God's story looks like. Gods ultimate plan and purpose for humanity.



Firstly, the O/T prophet Isaiah. In the last days (the telos, the end purpose) the mountain of the Lord's temple (God's presence and authority) **will be established** as the highest of the mountains; it **will be exalted above the hills, and all the nations will stream to it.**

This is a beautiful poetic and symbolic vision of a time ... when ALL the peoples and nations of the world will gravitate as ONE to the highest mountain of God's truth and presence. God's authority **will be established** as the Ultimate and Highest Way.



Isaiah gives us more. **4 God will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.**

This is the consummation of God's story. A time of peace-filled unity where the spirit of dispute and division is settled. And all the instruments of division that take away life - are turned into instruments that bring life.



And in the final book of the bible, (the book of Revelation) John of Patmos echoes this prophetic vision from Isaiah. **"Behold, a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, are standing before the throne and before the Lamb."** Standing before the Risen Christ. This is the 'telos' of God's unfolding purposes. All the peoples, of all the nations, coming before the throne of God in a Great Oneness. This is God's ultimate desire for God's story and our story.

So how does this story- God's story speak into our story for these cultural times?

The question matters because as you and I try to navigate these fractious times of contentious issues and heated divisions ... we (as people of faith) are called to live out the telos of God's ultimate desire for unity, **in the here and now**.

But this is where the rubber hits the road.

- As the temperature of the cultural moment continues to heat up,
- As the fires of discord and division continue to be stoked by all sides, often by those in leadership –
- As people join their own ideological tribes and position themselves behind the dividing walls of hostility...

How do we (the Church) resist any influence that separates **us** from God's desire for unity within our God-given diversity? How do **we** live as a people whose main aspiration is the same as God's? Especially, when we could not get a more powerful reminder of our Christian calling than this heartfelt prayer from Jesus Himself in John 17:20.21

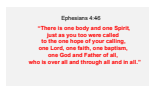


20 "Father I pray for all those who will believe in me ... that *all* of them may be one. Just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be one in us ... so that the world will believe that you have sent me.

Our Christian calling for these times could not be more clearer.

If the Church of Christ, is to be the prophetic voice of Christ in the world, then we (more than anyone) must be the answer to Jesus' prayer for unity. So that the world will believe that we have a different Kingdom way to show them.

And no-one recognised the truth of this more than St Paul in his declaration to the Ephesians.



There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We should remember that Paul lived In his own time of division and disunity.

And Paul was very aware of the 'telos' of God's story to which we belong.

Paul knew just how important it was that the church live up to this calling from Jesus Christ to be ONE. He knew how important it was for the Church to be the prophetic voice of healing and reconciliation in a broken and divided world.

But there's a reason for our divided times.

It's not easy to walk in unity with someone you fundamentally disagree with.

How many times have you felt torn about making a stand for what you believe is just and right, but you're trying to find the wisdom of how to do it in a way that honours our Christ calling doesn't let you become part of the problem. You don't (unwittingly) become another instrument of the discord and division. **I personally find this an ongoing challenge.**

And just this week, I've experienced three conversations that speak into this truth.

On Tuesday we had our Staff meeting and Jeremy told us about his moving and inspirational time on the Gt Barrier. As he says in today's Newsletter *"The church on Aotea (Gt Barrier) is a remarkable witness to unity, with four partner churches (Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist) all working together to support the local church.* Jeremy told me that he's felt a palpable movement of the Holy Spirit in this desire for Unity in the bond of peace.

And we both felt that the timing of this was very telling. On that same weekend came the announcement of a significant schism of division in the worldwide Anglican Church.

Now let me say right off the bat that I'm not going into all the machinations of this. I know that most people here aren't even aware of the schism that's taken place.

But I think it can offer us a wider wisdom about everything we've explored today and the challenges before all of us to make our aspirations the same as God's.

Like many of the contentious and divisive issues of today, at the heart of things, are mostly good people making a stand for what they truly believe is the 'right' way. Yes, there are people more concerned with power than truth but mostly people are trying to do the right thing by their beliefs. A guiding wisdom for me, are the words of Jesus Christ from our 2nd Gospel reading Matthew 7



15 "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. 16 You can identify them by their fruit and the way they act. 18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit.

Now I know that when we hear these words we all have a default response!

We usually see the person we disagree with as the false prophet. It's how we roll.

But I think we need to pause - and have the humility to recognise that we can **all** have the false prophet within us.

Think of the false prophet as any influence that can separate us from God's story and God's desire for unity. And a good wisdom is to recognise the 'bad' fruit that comes when we go against God's desire.

With this wisdom from Jesus, let's ask – what has been the fruit of the many schisms that have taken place throughout Church history since Jesus prayed for his followers to be ONE?

Well at the last count we now have the fruit of around 45,000 different Christian denominations. Not all of these are because of schisms they're just different cultural expressions, which is natural and great. But too many are the bad fruit of divisions caused by a claim of being the one true church of God.

Where Christians have put their 'own claim of purity' before Jesus' prayer for unity.

And just to amuse myself – I did wonder about the scenario Isaiah gives us about when the last day comes.

As God's church streams up the mountain into the Temple of God's presence, will God want a quiet word with His Church... Will he say to us... did you not hear the prayer from my Son that all His followers be ONE.

I also wondered whether half the people who've spent countless years arguing with each other over who has the right interpretation of scripture... will look across and see that they're walking up the mountain together.

And God will say to all them ... why didn't you just trust in the words I gave you.

There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

I Am Your God and I am over all, through all, and in all

Why didn't you just trust that I didn't need you 'O mortal' to defend Me.

All I required of you... was to act justly, love mercy, and walk HUMBLY before Me your God

I'll begin to conclude with this.



At that same Staff meeting Stan told us about his moving experiences on the Waikato pilgrimage last Saturday organised by Peter and Sarah Bowden.

The day was centred on hearing the inspirational story of **Wiremu Tamihana**, A Māori leader with a deep Christian faith who was known as the **Prophet of Peace**.

I first heard about him when I arrived here in 2010 and spent a year at St Johns college learning the history and story of this country. But listening to Stan prompted me to revisit and be reminded of his story.

What struck me immediately was how Wiremu Tamihana's story speaks so prophetically into today's cultural times and the challenge before all of us.

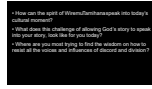
He was the leader of his own Ngāti Haua iwi- tribe ... at a time (just like today) where there were many voices from **all sides** who were quick to stoke the fires of discord. From both his own people and the British there was often a desire to seek the way of conflict as a way of settling disputes and differences.

But as a committed Christian, Wiremu Tamihana always deferred to the ways of Christ as the **highest good** and the **highest authority**. To let the Lord's temple to be established as the highest of the mountains.

He still held onto his own tradition, and he still made a stand for what he believed to be right – but he never lost sight of **the biggest truth** - that God's ultimate desire is for Unity within our God given diversity. Not uniformity- but unity.

In spite of immense pressure from all sides of the contentious issue, he resisted the way of the spear and sword. He always sought to be the Blessed peacemaker.

And he aspired to live the wisdom of St Paul... **“In the ways of humility and gentleness, with patience, and putting up with one another in love - make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Be a people that builds bridges, not walls.**



- **How can the spirit of Wiremu Tamihana speak into today's cultural moment?**
- **What does this challenge of allowing God's story to speak into your story, look like for you today?**
- **Where are you most trying to find the wisdom on how to resist all the voices and influences of discord and division?**

It doesn't have to mean that we compromise making a stand for what we believe to be just and right. But perhaps we have to pay more attention **to the fruit** of our own words and actions.

Whatever our strong convictions may be, how do they sit within the conviction of Jesus Christ that we be as ONE?

And do we sometimes just need a little more trust – that God really is - **in all, through all, and above all.**

I don't know about you – but I often find that God is WAY bigger than all of my opinions.