

Locating Ourselves – People (1st Feb) Mark 9:38-41, Gal 3:27-29, Rev 7:9-12, Eph 3:10

What's the most common question asked when two people meet for the first time? "What do you do?" It's a question shaped by the Machine – the anti-culture that has dislocated many of us from our sense of rootedness to place, people, past and prayer. But in cultures that remain more rooted, the question is different. In Māori culture, the primary 'locating' question is "Nō hea koe?" Where are you from? Who are your people?

A people is 'who a culture is.' Yet the question of peoplehood is a loaded one in our cultural moment. Around the world, much of our news revolves around issues of culture and immigration, of competing identities – who belongs where. We see rising nationalism and fear-driven responses to the flattening effects of globalism: in Europe, India, the US, and elsewhere, including here. The US, which has always been a melting pot of cultures, seems to be tearing itself apart through the current administration's recent violent anti-immigrant actions. The tribal mindset is a sign of a deep human longing for belonging that has been distorted by fear, power, and the loss of rootedness.

Closer to home, we've had Destiny/True Patriot protest a Sikh celebration, yelling at them to assimilate or go home. I confess, I had only read the articles and seen images, I hadn't watched footage of the event. So, this week, I made myself sit through a video of their protest. I struggled to get to the end. It was truly vile, and confronting. I had to go for a walk to decompress afterwards.

And yet, while we reject and repudiate Destiny's actions, the question of what it means to be a people in this place remains. Questions of what it means to be pākehā, or Kiwi, or New Zealander, and whether these are problematic remain. Also this week, I read an article in the paper about some immigrants who are strip harvesting rock pools, and the clash of cultures and values this represents. I heard responses to this, that to even make such claims is racist, but do we not want to protect and conserve our sea life? Beneath these tensions are real questions about shared values, stewardship (kaitiakitanga), and what it means to live together as a people.

So how do we locate ourselves within a people without becoming tribalistic? Tribalism narrows belonging through fear, exclusion, and superiority. We see this when religion and conflict intertwine from Christian nationalism to militant Buddhism to Hindu nationalism. So, another live question for many in the Church is how we hold ethnic or cultural identities with our identity as Christians. I have talked with fellow students at theological college about their wrestle with their place as Chinese Malaysian, or Kenyan, or Pasifika ministers in the tikanga Pakeha Anglican Church. We lived with a couple when we were in Island Bay, he is half Cook Island, and she is half Samoan, both born and raised in New Zealand, and hadn't really questioned their place in the church until a visiting Pasifika minister came and said to them *jokingly*: you're in the wrong tikanga! This was perplexing to them

but raised some interesting questions. Complicated by the fact that her Pentecostal Samoan mother said that her culture wasn't Samoan culture, but Kingdom culture! (Whatever that is exactly...).

There are many other ways we define ourselves and determine who are "our people." For many people today, politics has become the default marker of who 'our people' are. **Increasingly we live in a world where 'our people' have become those who agree with us.** Certain issues become identity markers that we can use to place others to determine are they with me and my people, or are they against us.

Of course, the Protestant church, we've been doing this for 500 years. You are one of us, if you agree with these doctrines or theological principles. However, Jesus didn't say: "people will know you are my disciples because of your theological positions on x,y,z." Rather, he said, "people will know you are my disciples for you love for one another." We've narrowed down who are 'our people' along denominational or theological lines, but Jesus keeps pointing us back to a much simpler marker: love. The distinctions God sees are those that love one another and love their neighbours as themselves, and those who do not.

We must always be on guard to resist the temptation to narrow down who is our people. This is the lesson from Scripture on this topic of people.

In Galatians 3 Paul reminds the people of Galatia that their various identity markers do not have any bearing on our status and participation in the body of Christ. When he says, "there is no longer Jew or Greek," he does not mean to erase cultural or ethnic realities. These are gifts to be celebrated. But they do not make us any better than anyone else. Paul's Hebrew-ness is not something he boasts in. Rather, he boasts in Christ who is always breaking down the dividing walls of hostility between peoples: across ethnic lines, social status, class and gender. Our sense of belonging or worth is not in any of these things, but that we belong to Christ.

Recently New Testament Scholar N. T. Wright has been promoting a new book on Ephesians. I have listened to a couple of interviews with him, and his main thesis is that the core of Paul's desire was to see a radical unity across differences in the body of Christ. He highlights a key word in Ephesians 3:10.

His intent was that now, through the church, the **manifold** wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...

The word manifold is πολυποίκιλος, meaning many-coloured, many splendid. Kaleidoscopic. This verse is saying something profoundly radical. That God's purpose is for the Church to reflect God's multi-coloured, multi-faceted wisdom, and to display it for the rulers and authorities, both earthly and heavenly. That this is God's eternal purpose accomplished through Jesus Christ. Again, the Church is to be a new People, not at the expense of erasing our diversity. The mystery of what God is doing is

bringing people together across different cultures and backgrounds. Wright argues that Paul would be most shocked, not only that we are not unified, but that we don't seem to care.

This theological truth aligns with St John's Revelation of heaven, where he glimpsed "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" This is the vision of the Kingdom: every tribe, tongue, nation, language.

This means that for each of us, there will be people in the Kingdom that we are surprised, even angry that they are included. People from cultures we don't understand. People with very different theology. People who voted differently. People who worship differently. This many-coloured people of God is beautiful, but it is also hard work, it comes at a cost. It requires humility, listening, and dying to our own preferences and comfort.

I wonder, how might you be tempted to narrow who is included, to narrow who you consider are "your people" simply because it is hard?

And then finally, we come to the gospel, and this little interaction between Jesus and John. Perhaps an interaction that would go on to shape John's heavenly vision. The disciples of Jesus see someone delivering and healing people in Jesus' name. So they try to stop him because he was not one of them. He was not part of their group. What Jesus says is remarkable. **"Don't stop him. Whoever is not against us is for us."** This saying appears to be a maxim of the time, and was used by Cicero and other thinkers. Jesus seemed happy to apply it to his followers.

How often have we inverted what Jesus says here: if they are not explicitly for us, they must be against us. If they are not waving our flag, they must be our enemies. When the disciples tried to stop the outsider, Jesus widened the circle. And he keeps doing that still. (PFJ v JPF).

In a world, where as Kingsnorth wrote: "We find ourselves rootless, rudderless, unmoored in a great sea of chaos; confused, shouting at the world and each other." We must learn to be that unified people of God who love across our differences. To live into that purpose of God: to witness to the many coloured wisdom and beauty of God. To not narrowly define who 'our people' are based on those who agree with us, or look like us. Again, Kingsnorth wrote: "the correct quality of attention paid to the place we inhabit, to the people we inhabit it with, and to the culture it generates is a radical move."

I don't know what to do with the big tensions and issues. But bringing this question into our own sphere of influence, and our own community, I wonder what this means for us.

(Divisions in Acts 6, culturally Greek Jews widows overlooked by the Hebraic Jews). I wonder if for some us, we are not paying enough attention to the people sitting around us in the pews. People from all over the world, who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Is there someone around you whom you have not really seen? Not paid the correct quality of attention to them and to the gifts they bring to this community. This is a question that myself, and Josh, and the staff team also must ask ourselves.

I wonder what we can do, as individuals, and as a community at St Georges, to become more aware of the people around us, in this little corner of the Kingdom. This body of Christ we find ourselves a part of. God's answer to a fragmented, rootless, tribal world is not isolated individuals, but a new people in Christ united across difference, reflecting the many-coloured wisdom of God.

Reflection

- How might you have narrowed who 'your people' are?
- How might God be tearing down the dividing walls we have put up?
- How might we as a community better express the "many-coloured wisdom of God"?