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Sermon

Including Strangers and Aliens

Genesis 23:1-9,16-20; Ephesians 2:11-22 ; Matthew 12:18-21

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This is the weekend of Waitangi Day. Yesterday was the 181st Anniversary of the Signing of Te Tiriti – the Treaty. My theme today is the Inclusion of Aliens and Strangers. It is a Biblical theme as we shall see which goes all the way back to Abraham.

Abraham buying the Burial Cave

Abraham you will remember came from the city of Ur and followed God's call to him to go to the land which he would show him. So although God promised him the land of Canaan, he was a stranger and an alien there.

In the passage we heard from Genesis, Sarah had died and he wanted a burial place. So he opened negotiations with the local landowners to buy a cave for a tomb. He acknowledged he was a foreigner. What follows is a typical Middle-Eastern negotiation with extravagant compliments and wildly varying prices. Abraham negotiated openly, transparently and generously. After the initial flowery offer of the cave as a gift, he repeated his desire to buy the land. According to research into transactions of the era, the owner proposed a wildly inflated price. Abraham accepted this and insisted on paying it. Some commentators suggest that had he accepted the free offer or paid a lower price there would have been the possibility of their reclaiming the land later. He wanted permanent possession. I was startled to find that in this negotiation there are underlying complexities.

There is talk of gift and of purchase and the language can be translated either way which could allow ambiguity of tenure later on. Secondly, under the Hittite law code there were taxes and duties to be rendered to the King which went with the ownership of land. Abraham only wanted the caves at the end of the field, but the Ephron insisted on selling the fields as well. Had Abraham bought only the caves, Hittite Law said the taxes and duties to the King remained with the owner of the field. By selling the fields as well, Ephron passed that responsibility over to Abraham.¹ There were subtleties in the negotiation below the obvious agreement. As it was then, so today.

The upshot is that Abraham bought the burial site permanently for a high price. However he was a wealthy man and he set an example of generous and honourable dealing with other people. It seems the missionaries in NZ generally dealt well land purchases. CMS missionary Henry Williams, for example, paid twice the going rate for 11,000 acres of land he purchased. Sadly, other Europeans were not so honourable and nor as careful

¹ <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/38401/why-is-abraham-so-adamant-to-pay-for-the-land-to-bury-sarah>

as Abraham to bargain well with the local communities with a proper agreement and witnesses. We too have had a problem of different cultural understandings of words like sell and gift!

Ephesians – Citizenship and One People

In the New Testament the language of alien and stranger is picked up again in our Epistle reading. This is an important reading for Waitangi Day as it is understood that it was in Henry Williams' mind as he helped with the negotiations and the drafting of the Maori version of the Treaty.

What Paul is talking about in this passage is Gentile believers relating to Jewish believers. Now we are not talking about nationalism but inclusion in the covenant people of God. As Gentiles, the Ephesians had not been citizens of Israel or within the covenant. But in coming to faith in Christ, the Lord included them into the body of Christ, the household of God. Now the Jewish believers and Gentiles who had been separated and hostile had been brought together and Christ had made peace between the two making the two into one.

There are amazing resonances with the situation in Aotearoa-NZ.

On the one hand, the missionaries had brought the gospel to the Maori. In that sense, there is a parallel between what Paul had said of the gentiles and Maori being brought into the knowledge of Christ. Even as we heard in the gospel reading, "In his name the nations will put their hope." (V21) They had once been far away but were now brought near through the blood of Christ. A Maori chief, Eruera Kahawai of Rotorua is quoted in "Te Karere – The Maori Messenger" newspaper of July 1860:

It was the introduction of the gospel that put an end to all our evil ways. Yes, my friends, it was Christianity alone that did it. It put an end to thieving and many other sins. We have abandoned our old ways. The rule is now kindness to the orphan, charity, peace, and agricultural pursuits.

Pakeha believer and Maori believer already had access to the Father by the One Spirit.

In Treaty terms, there was citizenship. Some voices are cynical about the original intentions here. But we should remember that the missionary hopes were that NZ would not be colonised. In the 1820s discussions began regarding opening NZ for limited colonisation.

In Britain, the Clapham Sect petitioned against colonisation of NZ. This was a group of committed evangelical Christians founded by John Newton who sought to change society for good according to Biblical principles. They were extraordinary effective being responsible for the end of slavery under British rule, prison reform, prevention of cruel sports, challenging child labour, improving the lot of factory workers and far more. They started Sunday schools to teach literacy, the Church Missionary Society, the RSPCA along with a total of 260 societies.

The Clapham Sect at home and missionaries from NZ petitioned British parliament against colonisation, citing its disastrous consequences for the native peoples of other lands, and pleading for the preservation of the Maori people, their lands, language and culture. They were only one amongst many competing voices on the issue of colonisation. However, the overall effect of the debate in Britain was the realisation that the government needed to enter into a formal treaty with Māori that would protect indigenous Māori rights over land, bush, river and seas in exchange for British protection and sovereignty. Lt-Governor William Hobson was therefore sent from Sydney in January 1840 to achieve that end. He had a mandate written by Lord Normanby of the Colonial Office that expressed that the goal was to 'overt this disaster' (of colonisation) if possible – but if not 'to mitigate it'. Lord Normanby's permanent undersecretary was James Stephen a member of the Clapham Sect and brother-in-law of William Wilberforce. He prepared instructions for Hobson which included:

- All dealings with Māori must be conducted with sincerity, justice, and good faith.
- They must not be permitted to enter into any contracts in which they might be ignorant and unintentional authors of injuries to themselves.

- You will not, purchase from them any territory that would be essential, or highly conducive, to their own comfort, safety or sustenance.

The Treaty that resulted was only as it was because of the efforts of bold and visionary Christians amongst the British Parliamentarians and their CMS friends here in NZ. The Treaty expressed the highest Christian ideals of its time – trying to protect the Maori people from disrespect, and the loss of their lands, language and culture. It was an attempt at justice – though unfortunately before it's time.

It offered mutual rights of citizenship. For the Pakeha, there was the agreement that they might settle and a means to buy land. For the Maori there was the grant of being British subjects under the protection of the Crown.

The words of Ephesians 2:19, "... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household..." parallels the welcome of Maori as British subjects – no longer foreigners but fellow-citizens. Simultaneously, it prefigures the acceptance of Pakeha as citizens of Aotearoa-NZ.

Just as Jew and Gentile were brought together and Paul could say "[Christ's] purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace ..." (v15) so at the time many Māori believed the Treaty enabled Pakeha and Māori to be one people in both a spiritual and societal sense. This was affirmed by Hobson's words to each Chief as they completed their signing of the Treaty at Waitangi "He iwi tahi tatou" (now we are all one people) – words selected by Henry Williams loosely based on this verse of Ephesians.

Recently at New Wine, I met Howard Karaka, a Maori, CMS missionary to South Auckland. A man came up to us and asked Howard a question about his own belonging. He said he was of Scottish, Irish, Shetland and Orkney forebears. He felt that he didn't belong there but he wondered if he belonged in NZ. To my amazement, Howard said to him, "You do belong here – you are Tangata whenua." I was astounded at his generosity. Yet Howard's statement is in line with that declaration made at Waitangi 181 years ago – "He iwi tahi tatou"- now we are all one people!

Citizenship in Heaven

We have been following this expression "aliens and strangers" through the Bible. For the rest of the New Testament writers it was used of our being true citizens of heaven and so we are aliens and strangers in this world and in our cultures.

In Hebrews, it is applied to God's faithful ones down the ages. Their direction and goal was heavenward and so whatever their natural citizenship, they did not really belong in their societies.

Hebrews 11:13, 14, 16 They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ... ¹⁶ they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one.

Paul and Peter use the same idea – as Christians, we are citizens of heaven and have become strangers to our culture. Paul says in Phillipians, "... our citizenship is in heaven." ² Peter says that we Christians are a royal priesthood, a holy nation called by God out of darkness. Therefore as aliens and strangers we should abstain the sinful desires that wage war against our souls.³

When Helen and I first lived in England, we expected to be there for only six months. We went with a suitcase each. We had no desire to shop for things, because whatever we bought would be abandoned in six months unless it could be fitted into an already full suitcase. Not being a citizen has obvious disadvantages in terms of acceptance and rights. It also has a freeing quality since you don't belong so you can live to a different code and loyalty.

² Phillipians 3:20

³ 1 Peter 2:9-11

So now citizenship is to do with relationship with God which was made by another treaty as Christ gave his life for our salvation. That treaty or covenant was sealed with the blood of Christ.

So we are left with two challenges:

The Treaty of Waitangi. NZ is special in being a nation founded on a treaty. It was the church which was the midwife of this nation. Dr Laurie Guy wrote, “without missionary influence there would have been no Treaty of Waitangi and no New Zealand as we know it today.”⁴ The Treaty is not perfect and interpretations have not been clear, but it was made with good intentions. Where we, as a people, have failed to live up to it, there needs to be work to restore and rebuild trust. Some of that continues with the Waitangi tribunal; some, I suspect, must happen at an individual level eventually leading to a societal change. Can we individually work for good in this way?

Citizenship of Heaven: We have heard how the Biblical writers took Abraham’s statement that he was an alien and a stranger and applied it eventually to our status as Christians. Where are you with that statement? Do you know you are a citizen of heaven and a member of the household of God? You are granted that ‘passport’ by coming to Christ and asking for forgiveness for your wrong-doing, for being subject to a different spiritual-master and by trusting his death on the cross deals with the death penalty you have earned. Then you give loyalty to Christ as Lord and Saviour.

If you are not there yet, I think you would find the Alpha Course a useful place to explore such questions. It is intended to present good material about Christianity and allow space to ask questions and explore in the context of food and fellowship.

Maybe faith in Christ is established in your life. Are you aware that you are a citizen of that heavenly country? How should that change your values, your conformity, perhaps the use of your money and your buying choices? Those are big questions for us all to ponder.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁴ Keith Newman, *Bible and Treaty*, 2010, p. 159