

GA25 Closing Message

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Readings

Job 19:23-27

Hebrews 13:1-9

Have I told you before that I am a Christian? I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and that God raised him from the dead. That is not a statement that most New Zealanders would in their wildest dreams say. Why do I make that confession? Because I read and exegete the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament's. I used to read a lot of Christian books when I was young, the popular easy to read ones out of America that convinced me, for example, that the Church was going to be raptured every other day. At one stage Henry Kissinger was the anti-Christ and then Barak Obama. I got bored with the speculation and dodgy dispensationalist theology.

I began reading, as I began my ministry training, thicker books than Hal Lindsay's "The Late Great Planet Earth". You maybe too young to know that one. Find some other bedtime reading is my advice. Bed time became John Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion" and Karl Barth's "Church Dogmatics" and many others across the theological spectrum. I learnt New Testament Greek enough to make it still useful. But the most important aspect of my ministry training was the science, the art, of biblical exegesis. That meant that when I read the writings of others I had a constant reference to compare what authors wrote. Did they write within fair parameters of biblical interpretation? In my library I have a heretics shelf of those who, by my reckoning with many others, got lost and made up stories and strange teachings. One thing I discovered was that while books were mostly interesting reading with a wealth of information I could digest and ponder upon, it was the Bible that was transformative with its ability through the illumination of the Holy Spirit to change my outlook in an instant.

An example of this was when I was preparing for a sermon a number of years ago. One of the readings chosen by the family was the Job 19 passage Rev Makesi read to us. I was reading it and a thin place opened, you know where heaven and earth meet. Here is one of oldest, if not the oldest book in the Bible, speaking about resurrection. Job is in deep lament about his deteriorating physical condition when suddenly and briefly this is written down:- *"But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! Yes, I will see him for myself. Yes I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!"*

I have always been open and believing in resurrection, but belief in resurrection shifted from thoughts in my head and words spoken from my lips reciting a credal statement to - I suddenly knew in my knower with a deep belief and understanding that God the Redeemer resurrects mortals like me.

Knowing in your knower becomes part of your being. It becomes unshakeable, and when a Church makes a "we believe" affirmation about the resurrection knowing in its knower its authenticity, the gate of gates of hell have no power over us. We become sensitised to the truth of the gospel and super discerning when it comes to those who teach otherwise. Those who teach otherwise in the Church should be challenged. Remember that diversity

is not a basis for claiming unity. The person of Jesus Christ and our complete faith in him is when "we believe".

Knowing in our knower. A miracle of God in our lives, a revelation that is so deep that when a Christian community believes together that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead, it creates the climate for miracles. Remember the twenty-one Coptic Christians massacred by Isis on a beach in Egypt in 2015. They were all construction labourers, ordinary folk. Twenty of them were from the same Egyptian village, the other one was from Ghana. The men were dressed in orange jumpsuits and were led onto a beach. An Islamic State spokesman announced that they would be beheaded, having refused to renounce Christ and convert to Islam. In the moments before they died, each of the men cried out Ya Rabb Yesua! "–O Lord Jesus!" Matthew Ayariga from Ghana, was the 21st victim. He was asked if, unlike the others, he would renounce Christ. He responded, "Their God is my God" – and he too was killed. All recorded as a promotional video for ISIS. Those 21 men knew in their knower that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. On that beach they could see through the veil to glory itself.

Knowing in your knower creates the climate for miracles and wonders. Martyrdom is a miracle of faith. In Cairo there is what is called the Cave Church. Google it. It is a Church inside a cave that sits 30,000 people. There are videos of the revival that sparked following the death of the martyrs that saw the Cave Church packed out night after night, a renewal movement that swept through the Coptic community like wild fire backed and encouraged by the Coptic Church leadership including the equivalent of the Pope. The Christian faith is not words, it is a life transformed by revelation and presence.

So here we are at the end of GA25, leaders and upcoming leaders of the braided river Presbyterian. Most of us are Ministers and Elders who have taken our ordination vows and signed the formula where we declare our faith in God and dedicate our lives to serve Christ through the Presbyterian Church. I go back to Monday's opening service to remind us what it means biblically to say that we believe in God and will follow him. Deuteronomy 6:5-6: *5 And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. 6 And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today.*

Let us consider some instructions from the New Testament, or are they commands. These are for a "we believe" community. Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Show hospitality to strangers and make sure angels sign your visitor book. Give honour to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery. Do not love money and be satisfied with what you have. Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules about food, which don't help those who follow them.

So what's your reaction to those statements. We agree with the writer to the Hebrews and will love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and body, and submit to the authority of Scripture as the Word of God. Yeh - Nah. I can live with some of it but not other parts. When I was a young Minister I followed the practice of preaching from the lectionary. I still do for a season like Advent or Lent. I found it good because out of the readings for the day I could always find the passages I was comfortable with and use them. For years now, I spend most weeks going through at Book in the Bible section by

section. You know what? You cannot escape passages or verses that bring a blunt challenge to belief and practice, reinforcing that Christian living is disciplined and these days is counter cultural and revolutionary. That's right, the Christian faith is not stuck in the past, the Bible is not an archaic statement of past belief and practice from cultural understandings of eras that are no more. Our fundamental doctrines, those "we believe" statements of our Church are today's statements of belief. The teaching of Jesus and the Apostles is teaching for today, not yesterday. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of that in verses 8 & 9, *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas.* There is consistency in our belief and practice from the beginning of the Christian Church.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, Ministers and Elders, we are accountable to Christ and the Church. What is expected of us is to be under the discipline of Christ, the fundamentals of our faith. Go and read them and contemplate what they say one by one. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are described in our fundamental doctrines as The Word of God, our supreme standard of faith and life. Watch and pray. Hold each other accountable. And the hardest part for people of God's grace, is to love the people in the braided river who are Yeh - Nah.

The Christian life is one of disciplined freedom in Christ. The Christian faith of this Church is revolutionary and counter cultural in the broken world of 2025 with the ability to transform once broken and sinful lives into lives of freedom and beauty. I have seen that happen hundreds of times.

Dear Presbyterian leaders, dare to be people of the "we believe" Church.