

He Come Down From the Glorious Kingdom
19th Sunday, Year B
9 August 2009

As the Maori cultural renaissance got under way pakehas began attending learning sessions on Te reo. Often the first thing they were taught was how to introduce themselves. It was rather different to what they were used to. First of all you said where you came from, often-mentioning significant landmarks and topographical features. Then you started on a run down of your family origins, sometimes going back several generations. Next you laid out where your family came from originally.

This was quite a challenge for some pakehas who often had only the haziest of notions of their family story beyond their grandparents. And New Zealanders whose families had been in these islands for several generations often didn't know, and didn't much care about, what part of the Atlantic Islands they had come from.

Of course all that has changed now with lots of people writing family histories, compiling family genealogies, and going back to wherever they came from originally to try and track down their bloodlines. That is why many of the calls and the visits Robyn fields in the parish office are about what I call ancestor worship, as people check up on the residents of our graveyard, and the documents held in the archives.

Jesus came from a people who were as interested in their family and regional origins as Maori. His Galilean accent would have made him as instantly recognisable as a Southlander would be to us. If challenged as to who he came from he could have laid out a proud story of his origins stretching back

into the Jewish past, indeed his genealogy is to be found at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. But there was something else he wanted to say about his origins, but finding the right time and the appropriate way to communicate it was going to be quite a challenge.

Much biblical criticism argues that Jesus could not have known that he was the Son of God, but that is not the view taken by the author of John's gospel. Increasingly I wonder if New Testament critics aren't too suspicious of the material they are working with. Certainly Jesus wouldn't have gone around saying to himself, "I am the second person of the Trinity," since those ideas just weren't available to people then. But I think that working within the religious ideas and images available to first century Palestinian Jews, Jesus knew within himself that he, in the words of the Negro spiritual, "come down from the glorious kingdom."

Obviously getting this stupendous personal disclosure across was going to be quite a problem. Yet this is precisely the agenda Jesus is working too in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. Finally the crowd has turned away from its fixation with miraculous signs, and is now ready for some serious theological reflection. How then will Jesus set about getting the secret of his personal identity across?

He starts from a story well known to his audience from their beginning times as the people of God – the one about the manna from heaven that day-by-day fed the children of Israel in their wandering across the wilderness. He would also be picking up on other stories of miraculous feedings, such as the one we heard about today from that folk hero Elijah. This story is of course very topical for his audience

because Jesus has very recently fed his listeners with the banquet he engineered for them on the mountaintop.

So while they are focused on the topic of bread from heaven he now introduces and introjects his understanding of his Divine origins and God given mission to the lost sheep of Israel. "I am the living bread that comes down from heaven, Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever," is a very Jewish way of expanding the manna from heaven story to take on board this greatly enlarged understanding of who Jesus is and where he came from. As we shall hear at a later date this will turn out to be too tough a call for some of the audience, as it is in every generation.

The creed that we shall recite as soon as this sermon is over has more to say about Jesus than it does about the Father or the Holy Spirit. This long middle paragraph lays out where he came from, whom he came from, what he did for our salvation, and how we will come to experience him in the future. Most of its content was devised at the Council of Nicea in 325, it was added too a little at the Council of Constantinople in 381, and it was confirmed decisively as the faith of the Church at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Some of the ways the creed expresses its faith in who Jesus is are unfamiliar to us. They are expressed in the thought forms of contemporary Greek philosophy, an intellectual world the Church had to make sense too if it wanted to convert the Mediterranean world. And these are faith statements born out of intense controversy as the Church struggled to come to terms with the immense significance of who Jesus was and is for its

life. To put it really simply, most Christians before the Council of Nicea in 325 were subordinationist in who they thought Jesus was. In other words they thought he was close to God, God's decisive helper and agent, but they had yet to acknowledge him as being equal to God, on a par with the Father, as being someone who combined within himself a fully human and a fully Divine nature. Nicea laid out this agenda, and the Church spent the next 120 years struggling to come on board with it, and to work out all its staggering implications. Out of this intense theological debate emerged the confirmation of the Holy Spirit as also being of equal status to the Father and to Jesus, and the emergence of the fully-fledged and developed doctrine of the Holy Trinity, to which this Church is dedicated.

Sometimes critics decry all the conflict that surrounded the acknowledgement of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as being on a par with God the Father. To which I would reply that I couldn't imagine a subject more worthy of having a really good row about. This was bound to be a source of controversy, just as it was for that Jewish audience listening to Jesus' bread of life discourse.

What we need to get our head around is the fact that the Holy Spirit leads the Church into all truth. God loves the Church, he wants to see it do well, he is active behind the scenes directing its developing life through his providential designs, he is not going to allow it to fall into an abyss of deeply mistaken faith notions about himself. That is not say that the Church hasn't made terrible mistakes in its past – it is not to understate the ability of fallible and frail and sometimes malicious Christians to really stuff things up. But in the important things – in the outcome of the Church ecumenical Councils of the

first five centuries, the Holy Spirit guided the Church to life giving conclusions, through all the shouting, and the exiling, and the knocking of heads together that went on.

I don't underestimate just how brain stretching some of the ideas that the creed uses to talk about Jesus can be. What I can say is that in my own struggles to come to terms with them I have always come away greatly rewarded, even if a little mentally fatigued. Maybe at some stage in the future I should have a series unpacking and explaining some of these key concepts.

I also think that every generation of Christians has the challenge of explaining the significance of Jesus in a way that its contemporaries can understand, in terms of the concerns and interests that people have at the time, yet without selling short the fact that Jesus is of the same Divine being as the Father. Coming to terms with this is a big ask for anyone new to the faith in any generation, and we need to put our best foot forward to help them make this decisive leap of faith. Being able to do that means that we will come to believe this and understand it to the best of our ability, within the limitations of our nature, and the stock of ideas available to us at this time. In that sense we are in the same position as that crowd surrounding Jesus in the bread of life debate – we are straining with every particle of our brain power, faith experience, and religious imagination to really get it, as he patiently explains in images and concepts that are familiar to us how he is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to us – and that he came down from the glorious Kingdom.