

What Is New Zealand For?
Epiphany, Year C
Isaiah 60: 1-6
3 January 2009

In 1948 the state of Israel came in to existence. For the Zionists who had pressed for its creation since the late 19th century it was the nationalist home for Jewish people they had always believed that they deserved. For European Jews fleeing the misery of the holocaust it was, they hoped, a safe sanctuary to run to.

But the coming in to being of the new nation raised a larger question. Given their past, given their religion, this could never be just a pragmatic bolthole, where its inhabitants could just major in material prosperity, and deal to their enemies. The Scriptures read out in Israel's Synagogues Sabbath by Sabbath held out the vision of this as a nation that was supposed to be a light to lighten the gentiles. This morning's opening reading from Isaiah is a case in point as it speaks of the peoples living in darkness coming "to your light, and Kings to your dawning brightness." As Israel becomes a more and more divided society, that operates externally almost totally from the point of view of hard boiled real politic, the gap between founding idealism and present reality becomes more and more painful.

But what about us, our founding myths, and residual idealism – what is New Zealand for? At St Peter's, Willis St I would keep Aotearoa Sunday, inviting various luminaries to preach that day, asking them to give a God's eye view of where our country was up to. Perhaps the most promising combination was Richard Prebble, then MP for Wellington Central, and Tim Barnett, MP for Christchurch Central. But Richard Prebble just ignored the careful briefing instructions, and talked about what it had been like to grow up in the St Paul's Symond St Vicarage, a shrewd thing to do in a Church of old lefties who might vote for him at the next election. That morning as Tim Barnett broke away from a party gathering to come to us, and was questioned by fellow MP's as to where he was going and what he would be doing, they told him, "If you are lined up against Richard Prebble in Church then you really are doing God's work."

Yet the frustration was that time and time again our guest speakers could not rise to the challenge of giving a God's eye view of New Zealand. So in the absence of anyone else doing a satisfactory job of it, I will try this morning.

For several decades now historians have been trying to write God out of the history of New Zealand. It all started with Keith Sinclair in his cultural nationalist version of our national story, and has been continued in our own day by James Belich. In this way of looking at the past, our ancestors came to these islands to get away from the

traditional institutions of the Atlantic islands. The more they became authentically themselves in their new setting the more they stopped aping English customs and attachments, including church membership. Kiwis had never been churchgoers much, and apart from odd aberrations like the temperance movement, the churches had little cultural or political impact.

Recently the view that New Zealand has always been a secular society has come under critical review from Professor John Stenhouse at Otago University, and from Dr Peter Lineham, who probably knows more about New Zealand Christianity than anyone living. They point to the fact that women's fellowship organisations spread Christian influence through a wider membership than the congregations that gave birth to them. Also Sunday Schools were widely attended by the children of non-church going parents, and together with the Bible in Schools movement, spread a basic Christian knowledge to a considerable proportion of the overall population. While it is true that all these organisations and movements have shrunk in recent years, Church Schools are more popular than ever, often with long waiting lists, and of course the children and teenagers who attend them have to attend chapel Services, and to receive religious instruction. And the burgeoning aged care industry is obliged to have spiritual services providers to take on site Services, and to provide pastoral care. And if Christianity counted for nothing in the corridors of power then what about Arnold Nordmeyer, Prime Minister for a time in the 1950's, a Presbyterian Parish Minister, and member of a Christian socialist section of the Labour party.

There is also the fact that some New Zealand cities were founded by powerful Victorian ideas that were expressions of idealised Christian community. Dunedin in its origins was a settlement modelled after the wee free version of Presbyterianism. Today it is a city dominated by arguably the best university in the country, testament to those founding Fathers of the Kirk's belief in the power of education to transform lives. It also has the best theology department and the best theological library in the country.

Canterbury tried hard in its early years to be a model gentry and yeoman society of traditional Anglicanism. Even today the Church Property Trustees owns large chunks of land in Canterbury, and this is the most well endowed Diocese in the country. The two local Anglican institutions that get lots of media attention are the City Mission and the Cathedral. The Cathedral is so much the iconic symbol of the city, and is such a tourist attraction, that the Christchurch City Council unblushingly gives it large sums of money for its annual upkeep.

It is true that the mainline denominations have downsized in recent decades, but that development has been paralleled by the rise of

Pentecostal churches, new paradigm churches, and home grown affairs like the Destiny Church. The jury is out on whether they will go the distance in future years, but they have been successful in attracting the interest and affiliation of young people, the group least seen in churches.

A powerful myth we tell the outside world about ourselves is that we are a kind of unspoiled Garden of Eden at the bottom of the world. We might not be able to manage that much longer, since Nick Smith admitted publicly at Copenhagen that, given our modest emission targets, we really don't deserve to be known as a clean, green land. It is all very well for the Diocese of Christchurch to have ecological sustainability as part of its audit targets in the Diocesan Strategic Plan, but the awkward political fact facing New Zealand society is who is going to pay for it all. Originally the polluters who caused the problem were supposed to – now we are all going to have to, and the goals are rather more modest than originally planned.

In my humble opinion, for what it is worth, what New Zealand stands for, what it has to give the world around it, is a culture of competence. We are acknowledged to be one of the least corrupt societies on earth. By and large you can rely on the civil service, local government, the police, major business organisations, the health system, and essential service providers to get things done on time at a reasonable cost in a reliable way. French people who have come to live here tell me how great it is that you can apply for official permission to do something without drowning in paper work and waiting for ages. Rumanians tell me they like living here because you don't have to offer bribes to officials to get things done.

Why this matters is because to the north of us is what political scientists call the arc of instability. From Fiji to Papua New Guinea to the Solomons, democracy has struggled to take root, and corruption and incompetence dog the institutions that ought to be supporting it. The sinking of the Princess Ashika is a dramatic example of how dangerous life can be in a society where things don't work properly. When the institutions of a free society break down, and you can no longer expect reliable, predictable, and consistent standards of public service, then the strong man takes over, which is the way things have tended to be done in indigenous societies anyway. This is what has happened right across Africa, as almost every country in the continent has descended in to a mire of corruption, incompetence and cruelty.

What our ancestors brought with them from the Atlantic Islands was a system of checks, and balances, and audits, and accountability standards, that produced this culture of competence, in which we are held to account for the trust placed in us by others. We may moan and groan about the performance we have to go through at the Parish AGM, or at the Westminster rules of operating at Synod, but they are

what keep us honest. And it is a great blessing to live in a society where this is the way things are.

That is the blessing that we have to offer other societies, if they are open to receiving it. By infectious example, by persistent persuasion, and by local rebuilding efforts we might be able to re-export the culture of competence in to the arc of instability. You could argue that the New Zealand army reconstruction team in Baniya province is trying to do this in a limited way in an Afghanistan where war lords rule, where religious militias prowl around, and where officials are expected to be on the take.

This is the particular blessing that we received from our past, and from those who came before us. It is the blessing that helps to make life good for us now in these Islands. And it is the blessing that we have to offer others.