

7 February 2021

Isaiah 40:21-31  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1:29-39

Early this week we heard the news of the death of Captain Sir Tom Moore<sup>1</sup>, an English World War Two veteran who became a British national hero and mascot during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic as he raised millions of pounds for charity by being sponsored to do laps of his garden on his walking frame in the days leading up to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. As he rose to totally unexpected prominence, a TV presenter asked Captain Tom to provide the nation with a reassuring message. His response became something of a mantra over the following months:

“Remember, tomorrow is a good day. Tomorrow you will maybe find everything will be much better than today.”

His fame, and the astonishing success of his modest charity campaign, led to some people carping and making suggestions of ulterior motives. But, as *The Telegraph's* obituary writer pointed out, what these people missed was that Captain Tom was simply “the right man at the right time”. The right man at the right time.

I learned about another Sir Thomas More (albeit spelled differently) at secondary school, when we were assigned to read Robert Bolt's play *A Man For All Seasons*. I remember being captivated as I watched the film version of it. The play is based on the life of Sir Thomas More, the 16th century Chancellor of England, who refused to endorse Henry the Eighth's wish to divorce Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, and refused to acknowledge Henry's claim to be supreme head of the church in England. The latter refusal led to the charge of treason, for which he was beheaded on 6 July 1535.

Bolt borrowed the title of his play from Robert Whittington, a contemporary of More, who fifteen years before More's death wrote of him:

"More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvellous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons."

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<sup>1</sup> The following draws on the obituary of the Telegraph Group, “War veteran won nation's heart with his backyard fundraising efforts for the NHS”, reprinted in *The Dominion Post*, Thursday February 4, 2021, p.28.

The phrase "a man for all seasons" literally means "suited to all hours, times, occasions."

In a sense Bolt's play is about two kinds of men for all seasons: on the one hand, Thomas More whose flexibility has an unyielding core of integrity; and on the other, a number of other men who yield to the demands, any demands, of the moment. More was a man for all seasons, but not of the kind who are ready to compromise their principles.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that this man, active in his opposition to the Protestant Reformation which was to give birth to our Anglican Church, is nevertheless honoured in our calendar of the saints. He is honoured especially for his integrity, his resolute steadfastness to holding to what he believed to be true. A man for all seasons.

Paul uses a similar phrase in 1 Corinthians 9, when he says he has "become all things to all people."<sup>2</sup>

Paul describes the ways in which he has happily curtailed his own complete freedom for the sake of the gospel. And this matters because God has invested everything in the gospel, including his own very self in the person of Jesus his son. Now God wants to gain something back from that investment: namely the people of all sorts and conditions whose lives will be 'won' through the gospel.

We may be astonished by the way Paul begins, describing himself as becoming 'as though a Jew to Jews'. Was he not already a Jew? Elsewhere, we know, he made quite a point of his Jewish heritage and adherence.

But, you see, Christianity could not be regarded as simply a sub-branch of Judaism. It is a new thing, a fulfilment, and it is no longer bound by ethnic or geographical identity. It appears though that Paul has continued to go to the synagogue and take part in the prayers and liturgy, using the opportunity to tell them about Jesus as the Messiah. He has thus acted as a Jew to the Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> The following draws heavily on Wright, *Paul*, pp.115-117.

Paul goes on to say that ‘to those under the law, I became as one under the law, even though I am not myself under the law’. This is a little more focussed and specific than his first statement. It means that as he went about presenting the gospel to Jewish people and groups he was prepared to observe customs and key commands of the law, keeping the Sabbaths and the food-laws.

Paul knew that his standing with God didn’t depend on these observances. This is really important: Paul’s standing with God (and our standing with God) depends solely on what God has done for us through the dying and rising of Messiah Jesus. But once that is clear, Paul is ready to submit to restrictions on his liberty in the Messiah if it would bring the gospel to more people.

And in the world in which Paul lived, there were many people – indeed the majority of humanity – who were without God’s law, without these Jewish regulations. And so when Paul lives alongside them, he does so without regard for the regulations of the Jewish law that would have marked him out as someone different.

Paul’s “I have become all things to all people” has been sometimes understood to mean that Paul was a mere pragmatist, a spin-doctor, twisting his message this way and that to suit different audiences. But that’s not what Paul’s saying at all. The *message* and *purpose* remain constant. It is the *messenger* who must be prepared to change, to swallow his or her pride; it is the messenger who must give up his or her rights, who must change his or her freedom into slavery in service of the message.

Paul’s rights, his freedoms, are as nothing. What matters is only whether people are being won for God, being saved from the corrupting wickedness around and within them, being rescued from darkness and brought into the light.

Two books I refer to often are *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, and *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes*. Both are by Kenneth Bailey, a Bible scholar who has spent many many years living among the peoples of the lands in which Jesus and Paul lived. The two books challenge us to recognise that the context in which the gospel was embodied, preached, and brought to life is so completely different from the culture we inhabit.

And that is always and everywhere the challenge: to discern and to hold fast to the essence of the gospel, while remaining flexible in how it is expressed in word, action, and symbolism. In the culture of *this* city in *this* century, we may find we need to submit to social customs that seem foreign to us; even perhaps some that seem to be to be not Christian. We submit to these customs while we are among these people, not because our salvation depends on whether we do or don't, but because their salvation may. If we fail to relate and to communicate in a way that is intelligible to those of a different race, or social group, or age-group, then we fail to convey the gospel. It is easy for us to assume that the way we are familiar with is the only way. But traditions and practices and words that are meaningful to me and to you may fail to speak to someone else; or worse, may even speak of something other than what we intend.

In Europe Harvest Thanksgiving can be accompanied by feasting in celebration of the abundance; in the southern hemisphere this has to be navigated differently as the autumn harvest occurs during our Lenten time of fasting.

In one church I know there are hatchments on the walls, depictions of the coats of arms of colonial regiments associated with that parish. To one group in that parish they speak positively of a sense of heritage; to another group they speak negatively of militarism and invasion.

Cultures vary from place to place and time to time, and what makes sense in one context may have to be reconsidered in another. We have to be thoughtful about what we are conveying.<sup>3</sup>

Yesterday was Waitangi Day, and it prompts me to reflect on the gospel's place in New Zealand and to suggest that we would do well to recognise several things:

- First, we need to recognise that the gospel has had to be interpreted and embedded within Te Ao Maori (the Maori world and its worldview) and within this

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<sup>3</sup> In fact this task of relating the gospel with the culture of a particular time and place is illustrated by commentary on the readings from Mark and 1 Corinthians today. In relation to Mark: for some a barrier goes up when they hear that Simon Peter's mother-in-law, newly healed, embarks on waiting on the men: it expresses a subservience and subjection of women quite foreign to 21<sup>st</sup> century New Zealand. In relation to Corinthians: It may be pointed out that when Paul speaks of adopted the position of a slave he does so from a position of privilege; and so this could be seen as an appropriation that is not sensitive to the plight of those who truly are slaves. [I owe this point to Howard].

Now we can make a reasonable response to both of these issues; but my point is that cultures vary from place to place and time to time, and what makes sense in one context may have to be reconsidered in another.

whenua (the land) with its characteristic shape and seasons, and its particular history.

- Second, we need to recognise that the Maori expression of Christianity is not some secondary or watered-down expression of the true gospel, as if the European expression should be privileged because it is truer: the fact is that the gospel had to be enculturated for Europe too out of its original first century middle-eastern roots.
- Third, we need to remember (or perhaps *learn*) our history:<sup>4</sup>
  - It is a history in which for three decades leading up to the signing of the Treaty all Christian activity focused on seeing Christ expressed *in and through* Maori;
  - It is a history in which “Maori evangelised their own people with Christian ideas, stories and principles that were a catalyst for powerful moral and social change...”<sup>5</sup>;
  - It is a history in which the genesis for the Treaty came from Christians concerned to see that “British exploration and trading should be edged with a sense of responsibility ... for the people they encountered in far off lands”<sup>6</sup>;
  - It is a history in which Christians wrote the Treaty, seeing it as something of a sacred covenant, a relational rather than a contractual document, and translated and interpreted it to both its Maori and Crown covenant parties;
  - And it is a history in which the Crown betrayed the intentions of the missionaries and the Christians who had sent them, a betrayal that led to a mass exodus of Maori from the Church.

As we learn and remember our history, we have to learn to live with something of the tension represented in our honouring of the earlier Sir Thomas More – in one sense an opponent; in another sense a hero to us.

A few years ago Jay Ruka, now co-dean of St Mary’s Cathedral in New Plymouth, wrote

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<sup>4</sup> The following points are drawn from Lucas.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Newman, *Bible & Treaty: Missionaries Among the Maori – A New Perspective*, Penguin, 2010, p. 312; cited in Lucas p.2

<sup>6</sup> Newman, p.23; cited in Lucas p.3.

Christians must re-engage their missional call to this land and the people of the land to discover and apprehend a way of doing life that is not just unique to New Zealand, but offers hope to a planet of worldview dissonance. New Zealand has experienced the collision of civilizations, the merging of Western and indigenous worldviews. In the midst of that meeting stood Christian leadership that held high hopes for the union of Maori and Pakeha. We must humbly relocate ourselves in that place again. This entails a leadership approach that is not elite, but is as simple as sitting with Maori and, through relationship, learning new ways of living via worldview osmosis filtered through the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Tom Wright has remarked that “Being loyal to the gospel seems to mean being prepared to appear disloyal from time to time to what seem to others like principles.”<sup>8</sup> But first we need to sit alongside, get to know, ask questions so that we understand the cultures into which we take the gospel. What do we understand of the culture (or cultures) of the neighbourhoods in which we live?

With Jesus in Capernaum we may see the temptation to stay on in the town either because it was easier and more restful to remain in one place, or because of the adoration of the crowds. But no, even for Jesus the gospel took precedence over human stability and human success.

Underneath it all we find the unshakeable trust of both Jesus and Paul in the purposes of the one true God. Human traditions, structures, cultural norms are as nothing compared to the sovereignty and supremacy, and therefore the gospel work, of God; a gospel work which it is intended all will hear. We are called to be “right people at the right time”, we are called to be “people for all seasons”, we are called to be “all things to all people” for the sake of the gospel, for it is through the gospel that we can have genuine hope that “tomorrow will be a good day”.

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<sup>7</sup> Lucas, p.4

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Twelve*, p.29

## Sources

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