

Waka Wahine Hui – Saturday, 14 November 2020

A presentation by Michele Ness.

Haere mai e te Whanau, tena Koutou Katoa a kia noho te Ariki kia koutou.
Tena Koutou o nga uri o tipuna nei o Te Whaea Tapu o Kapiti.

Welcome, family, greetings to you all. May the Lord be with you.
May Mary our Holy Mother be with us.

Tena Koutou Tena Koutou Tena Koutou Katoa. Ko Michele taku ignoa.

Hello Everyone. I am Michele.

Today we continue the theme of pilgrimage which we began in February at Pukekaraka. There, on sacred ground, we looked at where we had come from personally, and as a faith community. We looked at what it means to be a pilgrim people of God.

Today our pilgrimage will be looking at Transition – that muddy time when we are neither here nor there, on the boundary between the old and the new. During our journey we change subtly or profoundly, always inwardly.

Have you ever been aware of transition – one foot in one place, the other somewhere else? In jest we may reply: “Most of the time that’s me!”

Maybe all of us could honestly say: “Well there was this one occasion....”

Maybe it was a death, a job loss, or a teenager leaving the nest. We had to adjust. What is it they say “find the new normal”?

How do we transition? Adjust to change on our journey? How long does it take? What do we need? To get to the other side.

Since our hui at Pukekaraka we, and our Parish, and indeed the World have known profound loss and change.

Are you familiar with the term looking back to look forward? Just like a long jumper takes a run up to jump further that is what we are doing today.

We won’t travel too far..... just back to the Israelites, our ancestors in faith!

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In 1960 my Grandad took me to the pictures – that is what we called the movies back then. Grandad was born in 1890 and hadn't bothered with the "talkie" before. Hard to believe isn't it?

Well he chose to take me to "The 10 Commandments". It was actually quite terrifying to me to see slaves being whipped, people stoned and abused, the palpable fear of mothers and midwives trying to save their babies whose lives were in danger from the Pharaoh's decrees. Grandad had lived through two World Wars and found the cruelty of the Egyptians quite believable. So what captivated him at the talkies? He just kept saying: "How did they do that?"

He was referring of course to the parting of the Red Sea.

It was dramatic. Much more so in real life I expect. Imagine swirling, towering waves with a dry channel between. Flocks of sheep, laden mules, children running, mothers juggling all sorts of paraphernalia, men tending to carts drawn by oxen, elderly sitting atop of shabby furniture.

All racing, racing to get through that dry canal. Maybe it took an hour for each person to get to safety.

Who was in control?

Haste, noise, fear and coming ever closer the army of chariots of horses, of gleaming swords, soldiers and blood lust.

Again I ask, was anyone in control?

Quite aptly transition is the term given to the time during a birth between the dilation of the cervix and the babe entering the birth canal. Usually no longer than 30 minutes but could be an hour. IF I remember rightly, and the medical folk here can correct me, this is the time when women most often feel out of control, even panicky. Forces beyond the mother have taken over.

It could be said the **birth** of the new nation of Israel began not in 1947/48 but with that passage through the Red Sea.

The flight from Egypt also began a pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

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The Hebrew people, after leaving captivity, had 40 years of delays, unexpected events which affected their progress profoundly. During this transition they changed. Their expectations changed, their world view, limited as it was, changed.

For some their pilgrimage, like that of Moses, ended during transit.

These “people of the book” grumbled constantly about the conditions in which they found themselves. They complained about the lack of the familiar, a changed diet, a different workplace, different routines. They dwelt on loss. They demanded different.

Not too hard is it to identify some of our recent experiences?

The Hebrews, not yet Israelites, were in transition for 40 years! Uncomfortable years. Hardships. Hunger. Thirst. People on the move. People in temporary camps.

Again it is easy for us to make the mental leap to the reality of refugees today, in transition camps around the world. Persecuted, sick, lacking clean water & education. No doubt they are angry, depressed, and at the very least, in poor health!

During Covid lockdown we learned a little of what it is to be uncertain of the future and to feel powerless. There was so little we could control. There was danger few of us had known before. Everyone I knew had, or still has, family or friends they could not visit.

Reading the Gospels the most powerful miracles of healing: of lepers, of the blind, of the marginalised of the Roman soldiers and their servants; of children, of raising the dead (the widow’s son and Lazarus) you will think of many more examples. These miracles seem to have been in the transition areas – between countries, on the borders, on the margins of towns and villages in transition situations – when people were travelling or were seeking, or had no certainty of a future. Facing bleakness, sadness and even hopelessness – when people were seeking God – remember He fed 5000? Not even counting all the women.

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It is in transition then that Jesus worked powerfully and allowed himself to be vulnerable and close to those who were afraid.

Likewise our God worked powerfully in the Old Testament stories. Sending his Holy Spirit and gifting our Ancestors and saving them.

So on our pilgrimage from February until today we discovered or created coping mechanisms. We have recognised our vulnerability, our mortality, and we are coming to terms with the fragility of our lives, our precarious mental health.

Life is complex and complicated. We can mostly take control of our health and treatment for ill health. We choose our educational opportunities. We can choose to marry – a bit difficult with social distancing and no travel. I don't think that zooming would have worked for me as a teenager though my dad would have thought it was great! We can choose the single life. Suddenly we needed the closeness of others. Of course back in November 2019 the retreat team planning these days of pilgrimage had no forewarning of the cataclysmic events 2020 would bring.

When we talked of pilgrimage and its stages, I remember one of the team saying: "Transition to me is more about waiting and stillness than about movement and change". She went on to say "I have spent a lot of time in transit lounges!"

I have thought about this since and my response now would be: "We often get great clarity when we are still and waiting" – these are NOT wasted times even if I feel powerless. It is wise to build into our year a period of retreat or an actual pilgrimage. Let it be our resolve to take advantage of such opportunities; even daily a time of silence. We talked of this didn't we at Pukekaraka?

The Hebrews had, as I said before, unexpected hiccups. I don't mean to trivialise these by that word – I just can't think of the right one.

When I set off on a pilgrimage I am often not entirely sure of my goal in doing so. Is it to discern God's will in my life? Do I start with a specific desire? Do I simply wish to journey to a place meaningful to me or my faith?

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If I leave it to God, He may well, while honouring my hopes, may well surprise and delight me.

This year our major hiccup was lockdown. For the most part I want to shut my ears and stop my mouth at the word Covid. And yet there is a compulsion still to listen to news bulletins, to read statistics and to watch via the media the deadly progress of the disease around the world, and the race to find, and distribute, a vaccine.

Two weeks ago, Nan Lewin and I shared briefly some thoughts about Covid after we had been praying in the Chapel. Her opening comment was: - “look at all the joy that has come out of our experience; we feel closer than ever; people ring me just to say hello; I got used to having a lovely rest each day”.

What gifts can we give thanks for today?

As we chat and share stories during our day; as we reflect or write down some of what we have lived this year we will be processing how we have changed. At the end of today we may be able to gently lay down any remaining anger, fear, sadness or uncertainty. We may again be able to say, in the words of Julian of Norwich; “All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

I would be very remiss not to mention other events which occurred this year.

Some of you will remember the Dominican Sister Margaret Butler who led our retreat at El Rancho two years ago. Margaret often writes and talks of holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

We ignore at our peril significant matters around us, and further from home.’

We were to meet on 22nd August for this hui. At the time the “Black Lives Matter” movement was swirling and flowing through the world. It led, and is still leading, to emotional responses. Possibly some of you may be struggling with this. All of us are impacted to a lesser or greater degree by racism and discrimination.

I find myself watching my words before speaking – just in case I unintentionally cause offence. I certainly believe I have not a racist word or thought in my consciousness. I wish I could be so sure of those in my sub-conscious.

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I was talking with Catherine Carruthers some 2 or 3 years ago and jokingly quoted an old nursery rhyme “Eeny, meeny, miney mo” containing a most inappropriate word. I was mortified when out of my mouth it came.

A Samoan-Pakeha cousin of mine who just happens to be an ex-Silver Ferns captain – just dropping Bernice’s name in here! Bernice spoke in an interview of being put into a “Brownies” team at school. Her first realisation at the age of 6 or 7 that her skin colour supposedly mattered, closed or opened doors, and dictated her identity, her future.

All our lives we have been encouraged by our forebears in faith to be brave, to confront injustice, and especially to honestly acknowledge our own, and societies’ prejudices.

Prejudices within and without are nothing new. You will know the story of the Dominican Saint, Martin de Porres, who was unkindly referred to as “Mulatto” – a despised illegitimate mixed blood son of a freed slave and a nobleman.

Kotahi te koao
o te ngira
E Kahuna ai, Te miro ma
Te miro pango
me te miro whero

There is but one eye of the needle
through which must pass the white threads,
the black threads and the red threads.

This is a renowned proverb by the first Maori King “Kingi Potatau”
It refers to equality of people irrespective of colour, creed or ethnicity. In death there is but one place that we must all pass.

Many Christians similarly express the equality of all peoples with the saying “the ground at the foot of the cross is flat.”

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On October 14th our Father Michael preached in a weekday Mass that; “the sin of racism comes from the heart;”

We still have a long journey to social justice as a community and as individuals in Aotearoa – New Zealand.” He was articulating his thoughts after seeing the movie “The Australian Dream.”

Again, as you share your stories today and in the days to come, we will find telling our stories helps us to become aware of subconscious prejudice. Listening to others helps us to walk in their shoes.

Secondly an event which may have left some of you quite bereft was the result of the recent referendum about assisted suicide.

Let us be courageous in our response and make this decision and the resulting legislation redundant, unsought and unnecessary in our community. Let us speak often of the need for the best palliative care we can provide in Kapiti and throughout the country.

Let us be alert to advocate against any further unsafe and harmful legislation.

Let us give our medical profession every support to resist the use of euthanasia.

A third unsettling event this year was the extensive delay between Palm Sunday, the planned opening of our parish church, and Pentecost Sunday when we could bless our new church. Then we had the aggravation of waiting even longer to freely enter and worship here regardless of numbers.

On 10th May in his on-line homily Father Michael said this:

“When we face change, we do not need knowledge so much as to be reminded of the basics of the past.” He went on to say: “We are bound together in Christ. Loss is only temporary.”

Then, specifically in reference to the delayed opening of the church, he added:

“Our pilgrimage is not finished.” He went on: “This time of waiting has helped as the shape of our Mission has changed radically.”

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My own thought is: Delays can be useful, giving us time to gradually accept the future. Back to Father Michael.

He explained this: “The mission”, “our mission” is still to serve. We have new questions to consider in the light of shutdowns. How do we continue to serve the needs of the elderly? Will their lives still be valued? How do we explain to the dementia patient our not being able to visit? How do they feel they belong in our new community? How can we be the practical calming voice to the unemployed? To the single parent? The welcoming voice to the migrant?”

He finished by saying: “Do not forget that practical charity and social justice came out of the (Great) Depression. The physical and spiritual became interwoven.”

His final word? “It is love that makes God visible.”

This year of pilgrimage has opened our eyes anew to the gifts and the love of those around us. We have found quiet, giving, loving folk to honour. Let us acknowledge Anna today who gathered thoughts and ideas and prayers and jokes and communicated them through the internet.

We are not entirely sure of who and how we received the on-line celebrations of Eucharist. We are grateful. Thank you for the music, the flowers, the balm for our souls. Thank you, Father Michael, our celebrant.

Cathy was and is an essential worker. Thank you to all our front-line medical folk. Are there others here today? Thank you to the educators, Linda Mayie and Jennie, freight deliverers and the supermarket workers and the public transport workers.

And thus, through our new heroes and heroines, friends, internet, modes of entertainment and means of reaching out we found coping mechanisms this past year.

Let us return to the Red Sea once more. Who were the heroes? There was Moses and Aaron. Let me introduce their sister, Miriam.

Having witnessed God’s wondrous and awesome power in their escape, the children of Israel, Moses & Miriam, expressed complete trust in God, raising their

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voices and uttering these words: “I will sing to the Lord who has triumphed gloriously; the horses and drivers have been hurled into the sea.” This is found in Exodus Chapters 14 & 15.

Through the darkest time of captivity Miriam, a prophetess, continued to bring hope to the women, to resist despair.

“Act against logic” she told them. “Go ahead, fall in love, make babies, and imagine you will watch them grow up and have rich lives.”

When Miriam reached the far shore of the Red Sea she put down the timbrel she had carried out of Egypt. This is what she heard on the journey:

You will be safe
You will be free
You will have a home
You will celebrate
You will never forget
You will be grateful always
You will live each day in holiness

The women trusted Miriam and they paused too considering what they had just lived through. Like Miriam they resisted the natural impulse to collapse and cry. They too reached for their timbrels which Miriam had pleaded with them to bring and slowly, one by one, and then as many they began to dance and sing as Miriam sang her song.

Miriam recognised their fragility and how tentative was their joy. She too would have been worried about their future yet she refused to be overwhelmed.

The dance of Miriam and the women would have been the celebration of a fantastic transition from slavery to freedom.

Miriam would have heard the men singing.

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Gradually their songs to the Lord would echo harmoniously with those of the women.

Miriam in her tradition would then have turned to a spring of fresh water washed her hands, her face and drank deeply in preparation for the journey to the promised land. The journey through the barren desert, a good place to grieve, pray, repent, fast. A lonely place BUT God would not have left his people. A place with no distractions so it was a place of spiritual intensity.

Nor does God leave us. He is NOT absent in our desert time.

Enjoy today. We are together. Dear friends let us eat and drink have fun, share our stories.

Let us be refreshed and prepare for our onward journey as women, as a parish, as a pilgrim people.

Take my hand
That I may not be left behind
Let us go forward together

Anei taku ringa
Kei mahue au ki muri
Haere rangapu taua

Take my hand
That I may not be left behind
Let us go forward together

Kia Kaha, May God who is with us bless us.

Thank you.

Reference:

1. Dr Vanessa L. Ochs; "Sarah Laughed"; The Jewish Publication Society; 2005 pp 26-27