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STORIES OF THE LAND

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THEOLOGY IS CONTEXTUAL.

I remember the story of a friend holding a Bible study for some young adults. The passage was Matthew 5: the Beatitudes. They began by reading the passage together in a café over flat whites and lattes. “Blessed are the poor, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst...”

Afterwards, they walked to the Wellington Night Shelter and read it again. The passage took on new meaning and life in proximity to the poor themselves. The words of Jesus were no longer abstract, but deeply confronting. This is because all theology is contextual. Where the scriptures are read and who reads them has a huge impact on our understanding and interpretation. Think of how you read the Bible.

Often we explore the accounts of the exodus and liken ourselves to the Hebrews being released from slavery in Egypt. We long for that liberation, and we find an affinity with their story. And yet how would we read that story in light of knowing our colonial history here in Wellington?

As a predominantly Pākehā community, how would we read Exodus on Bond Street, where Māori whenua was made a commodity to be bought and sold? How would we read Exodus at the Z service station on Vivian Street, where the intermingling waters of sacred rivers have been buried under the asphalt? Might these contexts cause us to see ourselves less as the slaves, and more like Pharaoh? Might God

say to some of us, “Pākehā New Zealand, let my people go”?

In Chris Budden’s book, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*, he says, “Any effort to confront the history of colonial invasion and racism in this country will challenge our lives at the deepest level of identity and bodily practice. It is to walk a very fine line between the need to write theology out of a deep encounter with Indigenous experience and the need to be responsible for this theology as a form of self-examination” (4). Budden talks to an Australian context, yet the message is the same. The scriptures, read in our context, lead us to a profound self-examination of what role we

play in God’s unfolding story in Aotearoa.

It’s time for a deep self-examination.

This seasonal guide will place the promises of Jesus – good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed – in our local and colonial context. As Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana said, holding “the Treaty in one hand and the Bible in the other.” Our hope is that we will know the truth and the truth will set us free through honest wrestling with our past, repentance for our present complacency, and renewed commitment to reconciliation in our future.



WEEK ONE | STORIES OF THE LAND

BOND STREET

————— Matthew 6:24 —————

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

REFLECTIONS

Situated in downtown Wellington, Bond Street was one of the areas in the city that became a place of commerce and trade when it was settled by Pākehā in the first half of the 19th Century. This was driven by The New Zealand Company's investment in banks, shops, and bonded warehouses that served the port city.

Bond Street was part of a fraudulent land purchase by The New Zealand Company. The land was 'bought' off two chiefs, Te Puni of Petone (called Pito One at the time) and Te Wharepouri of Nauranga (currently where the Nauranga Gorge is). As it turns out, neither of those chiefs had the right to sell Te Aro.

Following this, Bond Street became a hub of economic activity. Land previously stewarded by the people of

Te Atiawa became one of the centre points of industry in Aotearoa. What was once a Pā gave way to a slaughter house, a bank and a retail strand. Soil that once grew crops was paved over. The carved wood of wharenuī and pātaka were replaced by buildings of iron. The houses of colonisation and capitalist expansion rose over the whenua on Bond Street, and the colonial narrative of civilisation became the new god.

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Jesus' harshest critique was reserved for those who trampled others underfoot in their own pursuit of power and wealth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautioned the people that "no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other."

REFLECTIONS

The story of Bond Street is a familiar one. The paths of righteousness are paved over with injustice, just as our hearts of flesh have become hearts of stone and asphalt. So often we forget

and neglect the stories that lie beneath our feet. Our ruthless hunger for efficiency, wealth and progress has stolen from Māori, and continues to do so today.

QUESTIONS

- 01 How do the words of Jesus speak to you alongside the story of Bond Street?
- 02 How is the story of Bond Street also your story? How does this legacy of injustice affect your life now, for good or for bad?
- 03 What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?



OLD BANK ARCADE

————— Matthew 7:24-27 —————

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

REFLECTIONS

The Old Bank Arcade has stood imposingly on the corner of Lambton Quay and Willis Street since 1901. It formerly housed the Bank of New Zealand, and is now the home to chain stores such as Starbucks, Mojo, and Lush.

Over the past two centuries since colonisation, Māori have undergone a rapid upheaval from a non-monetary, collectivist, and subsistence society. Self-sufficiency and Tino Rangatiratanga over their whenua has been swept aside, and the imposition of a Western value system has created mass alienation from land and the values connected to it. The Old Bank Arcade stands as a cathedral of this corrupt legacy.

In 1997, during renovations, the remains of an old shipping vessel called the Inconstant (also known as ‘Plimmer’s Ark’) was discovered underneath the

building. It had been buried there since the Wellington earthquake of 1855, seemingly forming part of the foundation for the bank.

If you stand at that corner and look up, newer buildings appear to grow out of the colonial structures and, like the discovery of Plimmer’s Ark, ask us to question what we have built our foundations on. New Zealand society is built on this violent colonial legacy, buried deep within our consciousness and needing to be exhumed.

In the parable of the wise and foolish builders, Jesus speaks about a person who built their house, dug deep and laid the foundations on a rock. When floods came, it could not shake the house. Yet another built their house on sand and it was washed away.

REFLECTIONS

The example of Plimmer’s Ark stands as a metaphor of our forgetfulness and the failure to examine the things our society is built on. In doing so, our foundations become built on the

sand that is money and a history of injustice. God calls us to examine these and replace them with the strong foundation that is Christ’s reign, his justice, his reconciliation, and his peace.

QUESTIONS

- 01 How do the words of Jesus speak to you alongside the story of The Old Bank Arcade?
- 02 How is the story of Old Bank Arcade also your story? How does this legacy of injustice affect your life now, for good or for bad?
- 03 What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?



GREY STREET

James 1:22-25

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

REFLECTIONS

Named after Governor George Grey, Grey Street forms the main link between the city and the sea, from Lambton Quay to Queen's Wharf. Grey is a famous figure in the history of Aotearoa. He is commemorated in the names of our towns (Greytown and Greymouth), our rivers, our streets, and even an infamous Auckland cat. However, his legacy of injustice is just as potent.

Grey was governor of New Zealand during the New Zealand Wars. One of his first acts as governor was the arrest of Te Rauparaha without cause. Perhaps most notable was the raupatu (land confiscations) following the wars in Taranaki, and the subsequent invasion of the Waikato. As a form of retribution or punishment, Grey confiscated more than 1.2 million hectares of land. The Waitangi Tribunal has found that these

confiscations were a breach of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and its effect was not only to acquire land but to establish a greater and more oppressive control over Māori.

Despite this, Grey has retained a positive image within the New Zealand public. Our education system has defended and perpetuated an image of the "Good Governor." As a society, we have failed to reckon with the devastating legacy of Grey, and instead recast him as a hero. After all, history is written by the oppressors.

On Grey Street now stands a sculpture named 'The Invisible City.' It features two large metal plates with braille impressions that write out a poem by the blind New Zealand poet, Dr Peter Beatson.

The installation represents the hidden and unseen things in life in the city; how fitting it is for

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this street. The forgotten true story of Grey lives invisibly under the surface of our city, the pain unacknowledged. As we walk to the bus or the pharmacy, we walk blindly. As Jay Ruka writes in his book *Huia Come Home*, "God is constantly imploring his people to hold on to their memory."

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In our passage from James, he explores his audience not to be people of big talk with no action. He says it's like someone who looks in the mirror and

immediately forgets what they look like. Interestingly, when Pākehā first arrived in Aotearoa some called them "the people who forget themselves."

The Western memory is short-lived and vain. We are goldfish swimming in a small bowl and calling it an empire. The prior history of Tangata Whenua in Aotearoa asks us not to forget ourselves, to forget what we have done, and to forget our responsibility as Tangata Tiriti.

QUESTIONS

- 01 How do the words of James speak to you alongside the story of Grey Street?
- 02 How is the story of Grey Street also your story? How does this legacy of injustice affect your life now, for good or for bad?
- 03 What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?



WEEK FOUR | STORIES OF THE LAND

THE WAIMAPIHI STREAM

———— Revelation 22:1-3 ————

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

REFLECTIONS

The Waimapihi Stream is one of many freshwater streams that flow through the city.

‘Waimapihi’ refers to the waters of Mapihi, who was a rangatira of Ngāi Tara, an older iwi of Te Upoko Te Ika.

Just as in the worldview of Jews at the time of Jesus, te ao Māori is intimately concerned with whenua. The land is not a commodity to be bought and sold, we are in relationship with it. The land breathes and moves, it sustains us and so we must be kaitiaki to it – we must be stewards.

Fresh water sources hold great importance for Māori. They provide kaimoana and sustain plants that were, and still are, used for traditional food. Tangata Whenua have great respect for these elemental and natural forces, treating them with all the

dignity and respect of a person.

Like many of Wellington’s natural streams however, the Waimapihi Stream now flows through a series of pipes underneath the city, down Cuba Street and out into the harbour. Pākehā colonisers saw these waterways as disruptions to the cultivation and development of the land. Rather than respecting the stream, they interrupted it, channelled it, and removed it. Now we walk and drive above these waterways every day.

To find the original source of the stream, you now need to walk to the Waimapihi Reserve in Brooklyn. The only sign of its presence in the central city is a small monument by the Z service station on Vivian Street. On the service station forecourt we have extracted oil from below the ground to fuel our cars, and

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buried streams beneath the earth to accommodate our industry. It’s a sad juxtaposition.

Several times in the scriptures, the vision of God’s final and fully restored Earth centres around a stream. You can see it in our passage from Revelation 22, but also in Ezekiel 47. The vision here is water that runs above ground through the city, and

it sustains the life of trees and fruit that brings healing towards global division. This is how John’s Revelation said a world under Christ’s rule and reign would look.

And yet that is not the city we live in. Our waterways are redirected and moved for our convenience. The way of reconciliation is swept aside for the way of progress.

QUESTIONS

- 01 How does John’s vision speak to you alongside the story of the Waimapihi Stream?
- 02 How is the story of Waimapihi Stream also your story? How does this legacy of injustice affect your life now, for good or for bad?
- 03 What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?
- 04 What is a step you need to take to begin to bring the streams above ground again? What could you do to begin a journey of cultural reconciliation?

