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8th October 2023, 19th Sunday after Pentecost,

Sermon: Shalom by Rev Sharon Ross Ensor

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20 - The Ten Commandments

Matthew 21:33-46 - The Parable of the Tenants

I want to focus in this sermon on the biblical concept of shalom, which I think both of our Bible readings point towards in different ways.

But first, a story to help us think about what shalom is. Before we moved back to Auckland in March this year we lived in Hamilton for 4.5 years. Being Aucklanders, we didn't know a lot about Hamilton...other than it being a place you drove through on the way to somewhere else. We had always thought of it as being a very flat place. We did not know about the Hamilton gullies! We were very fortunate to live in a house backing on to one of those gullies, the Mangaiti gully which extends for some kilometres around north-east Hamilton.

Caring for the gully area below our house was a particular interest for my husband Brian. The land is owned by the city council, who were very happy for interested neighbours to take care of it...one of those happy, all care-no responsibility arrangements.

Our part of the gully had been neglected for many years. Previously used as farmland, large parts of it had been left to become completely overgrown with blackberry, honeysuckle and climbing vines which had strangled the life out of many of the native trees. Willow and privet trees had grown in abundance.

Over the years we were there, Brian slowly but surely worked his way around and removed the vines, releasing the native trees...he kept the weeds at a manageable level. Along with a neighbour, they removed two large willow trees and planted a lot of native trees and grasses.

Brian discovered that the stream, as uninspiring and choked with weeds as it seemed, actually harboured significant life...long-finned eels, some a couple of metres long, native kokupu/trout...so he took to feeding the eels...quite a contemplative activity clearing blackberry out of the stream to help them get about.

We discovered pretty early on that there was a local gully restoration society...a wonderful group of volunteers who do a great job of taming the weeds, creating walkways, planting native plants and trees and lobbying at Council level for gully maintenance. There had been a very effective predator tracking and trapping programme there for many years...and it was wonderful over the short time we were there to see native bird populations growing.

A couple of years ago the City Council committed itself to a major restoration of the gully...investing \$2 million for the next few years. They've put through a series of well-built walkways throughout the gully along with actively maintaining the area with weed control and planting. Instead of being inaccessible and overgrown, Mangaiti gully is becoming something wonderful...where life is being restored...enabling the native flora and fauna to thrive...adding to the life of the wider Hamilton community as a place to come and be refreshed and re-created in.

I find that experience of the gully restoration a helpful one when I'm thinking about the biblical concept of *shalom*. We've tended to reduce our thinking about shalom to being a greeting of peace...but it is a much richer concept than that. In the Bible *shalom* refers to something that is complex with lots of pieces, that's in a state of restoration, being brought to a place of wholeness and completeness. Think of a wall which needs rebuilding, or a gully freed of weeds and contamination, thriving and restored back to its original state by a community working together with everyone playing their part...something that becomes a healthy eco-system that sustains life.

To bring *shalom* means to make complete or restore. You take what's missing and restore it to wholeness.

Shalom can refer to an individual's wellbeing...we all know that life is complex, it's full of moving parts, relationships, situations. When any of those is out of alignment or missing...your *shalom* breaks down. Life is no longer whole. It needs to be restored and made whole.

Shalom can apply to human relationships...to heal a broken relationship is to bring *shalom*.

Those of you who took part in the recent Community Wellbeing Initiative run by Presbyterian Support Northern here at St Heliers were learning something about that work of building both individual and relational wellbeing through that programme...recognising that we can each play a part in building a community's wellbeing.

Shalom can apply to the relationship we have with the environment and the way in which we are showing respect and care for our interdependence with nature.

Shalom can apply to the relationship we have with God, turning towards and shaping our lives in response to God's love for us found in Jesus Christ.

Israel's kings were meant to cultivate *shalom*. It didn't happen much...the prophets were constantly disappointed in the kings in that regard and looked forward to a future king

whose reign would bring *shalom* with no end...when the relationship with God would make all things right, the broken things would be healed and restored.

Jesus' birth in the NT was announced as the arrival of *eirene*...the Greek word for peace....equivalent to the Hebrew word *shalom*.

In his words and actions in the gospels we see Jesus enacting that vision of God's that people might be fully restored...in health, in their spirit, in their relationships with others and with God. Jesus' work on the cross is described in Ephesians 2 as Jesus breaking down the walls which divide and restoring broken relationships between us, with God and within ourselves...

As followers of Christ we're called to model that same peace and restoration in our relationships with others and with the world as we take part in the life of Jesus Christ....working for human flourishing, wholeness and restoration for everyone, including the environment.

Our two readings this morning help us to reflect on shalom...what it does and what it doesn't look like:

Firstly from Exodus 20...the 10 commandments...we've tended to reduce this to a series of rules to be kept. But when you're looking at them through a shalom lens, they create a framework within which shalom can be lived out....the first three commandments reflect on our relationship with God, the fourth focusses on our relationship within ourselves in taking Sabbath rest, the final 6 commandments focus on our relationship with others in our care and respect for their humanity....working for human flourishing and wholeness.

Then, our gospel reading from Matthew 21, the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. At the beginning of the chapter we hear that Jesus has entered Jerusalem...he's on the road to the cross. He's been in the temple and driven out the moneylenders...he's healed the blind and the lame...he's been questioned about his authority by the religious leaders who are angry with him...who does he think he is, saying and doing these things in the name of God. In response Jesus tells three parables, and the one we've heard this morning is the middle of those three parables.

The parable is set in a vineyard...perfectly set up by its owner, everything in place, able to work as it should in the context and culture of the time. So there's no problem with the vineyard...the problem is with the tenants...it's a version of un-Shalom we might say...where instead of working for things to be healed, restored, brought to completion, everything is undone, relationships are violated and trust is broken, things are falling apart. Jesus is taking aim at the self-interest and grabbing for power, the violence and brokenness of relationship which happens as a result, along with the risk for the wellbeing of the vineyard itself. It's a system experiencing Un-shalom.

Jesus talks, using violent language himself it has to be said, of the re-ordering, the restoring of relationship, the bringing of life in all its forms that will happen when people align themselves with the life of God he embodies, which he talks of as the Kingdom of God...he quotes scripture, from Psalm 118 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes.'

Some of you already know that I work for Presbyterian Support Northern, a large social service agency with its four services of Family Works, Enliven, Shine and Lifeline.

Last time I led worship here at St Heliers I talked about Communities Feeding Communities at Mt Roskill...I wonder if any of you saw the piece on TV One's Breakfast on Thursday morning featuring our community garden and the cooking classes we hold out there...CFC is a beautiful illustration I think of bringing shalom to a community...working for restoration, bringing things together.

We also do some really significant work in other areas of our region, which I think also contribute to the building of shalom...restoration of relationships, bringing communities together in life-giving ways.

For example, in Whakatane we have given active support to the Mahi Kai programme. The programme focusses on at-risk children, mostly Māori, aged 7-14 years old in the Whakatane region....young people for whom life is pretty tough.

Mahi Kai was started by a local Whakatane resident, Rangiaho Taipeti, who saw a need for local young people to reconnect with a sense of belonging to the land...Rangiaho wanted to share his knowledge about food hunting and gathering, learned from previous generations.

The vision of Mahi Kai is to instil a sense of whanaungataunga, a sense of belonging, to help grow happy, healthy, well-fed whanau by training the next generation of kai gatherers to be self-sufficient, to learn about food gathering and then to share that knowledge with their whanau.

The programme runs during the school terms and is based on 12 tikanga values in order for the participants to have a clearer sense of Te Ao Māori and their connection with it.

There are wonderful stories about the difference that the Mahi Kai programme is making to the lives of those children and their whanau...restoration, building shalom in a community.

And for you here at St Heliers Presbyterian? What might your role be in building shalom in your community...in working for restoration and bringing things together?

I'm viewing things from a distance of course...but it is impressive to see the many ways in which you work to connect with your local and wider community, recognising that there is a lot you can do by way of sharing your resources and supporting others, engaging with the important issues for our lives today in your gathered worship like the focus you've had over the last month on the Season of creation.

I love too that you focussed on 'kindness' last month...such a great thing to focus on in order to make real how our following of Christ is expressed in our everyday conversations and actions.

These things might feel small in the face of the pressures and challenges we are facing today, but they all matter, they all contribute to that work God calls us to of being builders of shalom in God's world...working to draw all things into the circle of belonging and love, justice and peace...the dwelling place of God's restoration and wholeness.