

RESHAPE SERIES - FIVE CORE VALUES – RELATIONSHIP OVER TRADITION

A few weeks ago, I spoke about how we have renovated and upgraded our church facilities. At the last leadership team meeting we asked the property committee to set out a plan for the next few years – there is still work to be done. But here is a more important question: what kind of church will we put inside this building? I've entitled this series of four messages 'Reshaping the Church'.

The Japanese word for 'crisis' has two words: danger and opportunity. This is exactly where we find ourselves, a time of danger but also a time of great opportunity – to rebuild, reset and reshape church. How we do this now will affect who we will become in the years ahead. It will come as no surprise to you that the new senior pastor that we thought might have come to this church by now has not yet been found. But I wonder if God has a purpose in this? As I prayed and pondered this over recent weeks, I've come to the conclusion that this is not a time of treading water but in fact a time of reshaping and transition where God does some things in us to get us ready for the future he has for us. I think we need to turn our thinking from being disgruntled with God to asking the question 'God what are you doing'? How can we learn what we need to do so we can be ready for the next season?

Roy E Disney – Is perhaps lesser known than his famous uncle Walt Disney, but it was Roy who took the Disney characters created by Walt and then shaped them into full length movies in the 1990s – like Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, and Fantasia. What Roy bought was a skill to maximise something his uncle had commenced. One of his famous quotes is 'It's not hard to make decisions once you know what your values are'. Over the next four Sundays, I want to speak about five core values that I suggest need to underpin our relationships in church.... Five markers or five measurable indicators that might show us how well we are fulfilling the 'one another's'. They are like the airport runway lights that help the pilot land. They provide direction and the path to safety.

Our Beliefs and Values (put on screen off our website)

- *We will always put the needs of the pre-Christian and young Christian above our own.*
- *The hope of the world, Jesus Christ, is primarily communicated through the local church.*
- *Every church group/activity must have a kingdom purpose and kingdom fruit to justify its existence.*
- *Rather than finding people to fill positions we will be guided by people's gifting's and passions and run only ministries that 'the Church' creates.*
- *We will not fear letting some established ministries cease if people aren't called by God to run them, or if there is no kingdom fruit.*
- *We believe that 'we' are the temples of the Holy Spirit (not the church buildings).*
- *We need to become a church that will reach our grandchildren. This will constantly challenge our comfort zone.*
- *We encourage the church family to meet regularly on a Sunday and during the week. We have a number of care/home groups operating throughout the week.*
- *The local church should be a place where leaders are honoured and all who minister often are affirmed.*
- *We believe that God has primarily called us to be a mission station to reach West Auckland for the Kingdom.*

- *We believe God is at work drawing people to Jesus Christ and so we expect a good kingdom response to our sharing our faith with our friends!*
- *Time is short. Christ's return is imminent. The hour to act is now.*

The first Core Value RELATIONSHIP OVER TRADITION - READING Mark 7: 1-9

Every culture has its traditions, even our Kiwi culture which is only 150 years old. Travelling to Europe, Africa, or Asia you are immediately confronted with cultures which have traditions spanning millennia. Traditions are *'the way we do things – passed down over time'*. You might remember the famous song 'Tradition' from the musical Fiddler on the Roof. But they can also be teachings which are held by a particular group, business or organisation.

This morning though I want to speak on how tradition can go awry when it is valued beyond that which it was meant to be. Where tradition might be elevated into obligation and legalism that kills and smothers rather than brings life and freedom. And it is exactly this that Jesus condemns in this Mark 7 story.

We humans find ourselves protecting the past and the 'culture' of the way we do things'. When it comes to faith and faith communities some churches prefer their traditions over life, relationship, and growth. And when we do that, those relationships turn septic. Tradition becomes legalism, law, rules and judgement of others. This is what Jesus condemns in Mark 7.

Mark 7 is one example of many, where tradition goes awry. What started out as a good practice (like hand washing before eating) became an outward observance without the right inward heart. It was the heart Jesus was after and where the spiritual people of the day failed. Jesus wasn't against hand washing – there were very good hygiene reasons for it. But somehow this became a rule, then a regulation, and something for show on the outside that didn't reflect true authenticity within.

We belong to a movement of people called Baptists.... who stood for this very value that relationship with God and each other and the dynamic of God leading and guiding in ways of life and truth was possible through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. That together we can discern the mind of God.

The ceremonial hand washing was *one of many stories* – there are many others like healing someone on the Sabbath, or picking up grains of wheat off the side of the road, or trading in the temple forecourt.... Why don't your disciples follow our traditions?

To which Jesus replied. "You hypocrites, you ignore God's law and elevate your traditions in its place. You put your traditions above God's Law, and you speak of them as though speaking as God himself".

And Jesus went on to say – breaking Laws is not about hand washing or picking grains or healing someone on a Sunday – it's a matter of the heart, from what comes inside your lives. You have elevated laws and traditions above the value of a heart relationship with God and each other. Here is where I want to come out on this today. We need to place higher value on relationships than we do on tradition. If I need to choose between a tradition or culture and relationship – I will always prefer a relationship. One of the things that I have observed is how our Māori and Pasifika really value relationships. You saw it last week when those brothers being baptised brought along their families – and the first thing they did was to acknowledge family.

So why did Jesus condemn what the Pharisees were doing?

- 1. Because it does not allow for the dynamic of God to activate in relationship** within the lives of His followers.
- 2. Because it assumes there is a way to do things that is set** – which cannot change or be modified...kind of outward obligation. And when you comply outwardly that is what matters. And Jesus says no – it's the inwardness that matters.
- 3. Because it asserts that the way it is to be done is superior** to any other way. So the people who command these rules see themselves as 'keepers of the faith'.

Where commitment exceeds your enthusiasm, you will always end up with obligation. That's toxic religion – of the kind that Jesus condemned - I'm not much into religion.

Now please notice what I have NOT said today. I say the word tradition and what people hear is 'traditional' - which implies that new is better than old – contemporary vs traditional. I'm not saying that. The very scripture 'Jesus the same yesterday, today and forever' implies that some things don't and should never change! The Nature of God does not change, The Person of Jesus does not change, the Gospel message does not change. Some things about faith are certain, continual and unchanging. But what does change is the way those truths are presented, the way they are packaged, the contextualising of those truths. The mistake the religious people in Jesus' day made was to assume that the way they had understood God, and the way truth was packaged. And could not be modified or changed. And the whole religious order they had built around that was sacrosanct. There was something to be protected at all costs. And when people did not measure up – they were judged and discarded on the basis of an arrogant culture under the guise of religion.

We worship a God who says – behold I will do a new thing. We worship a God who breaks into our world in surprising ways. We worship a God who has something to say today, about daily life, relationships, business, church, government, environment, money, poverty, marriage, morality, ethics, - there is a Kingdom perspective that we are supposed to understand and reflect.

We worship a God who wants a relationship with us, and says to us - Put aside your assumptions and cultures of doing life, faith, and worship and allow me to challenge the core of your hearts to see what's really there.

"Don't try to box me into a predetermined way of working, responding or acting, for I move outside those dimensions to fulfil my purposes in the world".

We value relationships over tradition. Where the Spirit of God empowers and fills the people of God to understand and live out the Word of God in relationship with God and each other.

Revelation Churches - I want to show you. From scripture an example of relationship over tradition. And it's an example I believe of the kind of interaction and relationship that God seeks with communities of faith today. You know the stories – there are seven of them. Churches in Revelation, each church had a special custom-made message. Sometimes they were commended, sometimes rebuked, but most times they were given clear direction and choices to make that would determine their futures. That is the kind of relationship God wants to have with his churches today. Dynamic, alive, interactive, participatory and for that to happen we need to value relationships over tradition.

Ephesus – you don't love me like you used to. But I love your patient hard work and endurance and your discernment of those who speak truth.

Smyrna – You're going to go through suffering and opposition – don't be afraid. Remain faithful, the suffering will pass after a time.

Pergamum – you're tolerating false teaching but if you deal with it, I promise you a new name and a victory stone of the overcomer.

Thyatira – You're allowing a spirit of deception to lead people astray but hold fast to my teaching and you will reign victorious.

Sardis – you're not alive like people think you are, you're dead. Wake up, return to what you first believed. If you do, I will clothe you in white and you will be mine.

Philadelphia – I have an open door for you, I have protection for testing that is coming to you, hold fast so you don't lose your crown and your name.

Laodicea – You're not hot or cold but I wish you were one or the other. You think you're rich but you're poor. You are really needy so come to me and get what you need, a fresh start and a fresh vision. If you do, I will seat you in the victory lane.

Deficit, then a warning, and a hopeful promise of a future!

Dynamic, participatory, interactive, confronting, hopeful – but there is no tradition in there! Just Kingdom relationship!