

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles.

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Facing our fears: Māori authority and our Pākehā way of life

Last year I returned to Aotearoa New Zealand after nine years away. During my time in South Africa, I missed much of what made the news here and how the issues played out in this land of my birth. These last months I have followed up and tried to understand some of these issues and this article is an attempt to unpack one I see as vitally significant for our future.

In November 2014, the Waitangi Tribunal ruled that the rangatira who signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi did not cede sovereignty to the British Crown. They did not cede authority to make and enforce law over their people or their territories. What they did do was give the Governor the authority to control British subjects in New Zealand and thereby keep the peace.

My interest in returning from years overseas is the failure of the New Zealand Government and the majority of Pākehā to listen, to engage and to take seriously this Tribunal ruling. The then minister overseeing Treaty negotiations, Attorney General Chris Finlayson, said that the report did not change anything. There was no question that the Crown had sovereignty over New Zealand. His words echo and reinforce what we have been told for many years. The official narrative has been that the Treaty gave Britain sovereignty and the Crown, through the New Zealand Government, was the legitimate authority over all of this land.

In dismissing so quickly and effectively the Waitangi Tribunal ruling, what are we,

Pākehā, in fact, doing? Why are we unwilling to engage and take seriously this correction to the dominant narrative we keep repeating? Are we afraid?

I think there are many fears. There are implications for us in engaging and taking seriously this 2014 ruling. There is much at stake. Therefore, I feel it would be helpful to look at what we are afraid of. I feel that in looking at our collective Pākehā fears around this issue we might then have the courage to face them and respond to the huge historical injustice done to Māori.

Most writing about fear comes from psychology. Fear is named as an appropriate response when there is a perceived threat. Fear is a very powerful emotion that often overrides reasoning and leads to defensive actions. One strong fear concerns change and the possible loss of the control that we feel we need or expect. We are deeply afraid of being vulnerable. Fear is also a response to perceived attacks on our sense of identity and our taken-for-granted ways we live out this identity. Our Pākehā cultural formation sets guides for what are acceptable fears and legitimate ways of expressing these fears. These guides are continually shaped by changing cultural and historical ways of naming what is a threat. We know that fear can also be manipulated. It doesn't take much time looking at news programmes and newspapers to see how easily fear can dominate public imagination and discourses.

In understanding a little more about fear, I then need to ask what are we afraid of in the

context of this 2014 Waitangi Tribunal ruling. Are we afraid that the history we have been told is not the truth? Do we not want to hear that our forebears, therefore, must have forcibly imposed sovereignty? Do we fear that we might be descendants of conquerors and invaders? Do we not want to admit that our forebears led wars to impose their will and to forcibly take Māori land? Do we fear the implications of all this to our nation's structures and our Pākehā identity in this land. And do we fear that if indigenous Māori regain their traditional authority our Pākehā way of life is at risk?

While I was in South Africa, I looked at some of the formative factors that have contributed to Pākehā ways of thinking and acting. One significant conclusion is that our culture prioritises the need for a level of control over our individual lives and thus to have institutions in place that facilitate this. Home ownership, doing well materially, insurances and retirement plans are all ways of assuring some hoped for control over our lives. We praise individuals who achieve these levels of control and even demonised at times those who have failed to achieve.

Alongside this, we, Pākehā, have wanted to be in control of the historical narrative of our founding. This control has, thus, named the good intent of colonial settlers and the gift to Māori of the coming of our forebears. It has persuaded us that Māori did cede sovereignty and that we legitimately can be secure in the knowledge that we are good people and gained governance in a responsible fashion.

Yet the Waitangi Tribunal tells us our story is based on a lie and our control mechanisms do not want us to hear this. We are afraid. Our way of life and our self identity is at risk if we take seriously the fact that Māori did not cede authority over themselves and their lands and our current sovereignty was acquired through war, theft and injustice.

To take seriously this injustice of the past, is to accept a vulnerable, even fragile, new status. This is deeply threatening. Yet we do need to face the truth and to face our fears. Not only is the future of our nation at stake but also our Pākehā moral integrity at home and abroad.

One helpful theological insight from Philippians 2 is that out of love God let go of security and control to be with us. Emmanuel, God is with us, is named theologically as the fruit of a letting go, a kenosis, for a larger purpose. Of course the security and control conferred in biblical times to God was as mighty king and lord and this is now challenged fiercely. It is the kenosis, the choosing to be powerless, that is how many theologians now name what is of God's very nature. God therefore is no longer perceived and experienced as mighty king and lord but vulnerable alongside those who are poorest and those most treated unjustly. Kenosis is now how we name what is God-like and what we are called to live. For us, then, to let go of our desire for control is to follow the way of God. This can help us face our fears and face the truth of the injustice of the past.

Another theological insight arising from the Genesis creation stories is that God was present and at work in this land long before missionaries ever arrived. Evidence can be seen in the deep sense of holistic spiritual interconnections and practices of Māori. Of these, their practice of manaakitanga, of care of the visitor, has been time and time again shown to us and our forebears. This manaaki has been extended to us with the sole request that we respect traditional hapu and iwi authority. Yet historically we have not done so.

Our way of life is at risk. No question about that. But to face our fears and to engage with Māori so that their traditional authority is recovered is a work of God, a work of justice. The Waitangi Tribunal has given us a gift. It is now our task to respond to it.