

Talking Cents

April 2019

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the 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. This issue is contributed by Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Coming Together in Grief and Peace

Any plans I had for my contribution to this month's Talking Cents had to be put aside or at least seriously modified with news of the attacks on the mosques in Christchurch. This event is so traumatic that it challenges us to address almost everything we have believed about our country and what it purports to stand for, so in response, I will try to modify my original topics.

I had been tossing up between comments on either of two pieces of writing which had taken my attention. The first was an article by Michael T. Klare entitled "War with China? It's Already under Way" under the TomDispatch heading (<http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176528/tomgram%3A>). Klare explores the developing stand-off relationship between China and USA. He claims that alongside growing military tensions in the South China Sea and periodic sabre-rattling between President Donald Trump and his Chinese equivalent, Xi Jinping, "both countries are plunging into what can only be thought of as a new kind of war that could prove hot indeed before it is over." Currently, we in New Zealand are caught between our role in the Five Eyes alliance with USA, Britain, Australia and Canada and a mutual eagerness for trade between ourselves and China.

The second focus of my reading was the recently-published series of essays included in "Listening to the People of the Land - Christianity, Colonisation and the Path to Redemption" edited by Susan Healy (Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand 2019). Here, we are exposed by a group of authors to the links between colonisation and Christianity in the

subjugation of indigenous people and their right to self-determination in their land and culture.

In both cases, we are faced with the outcomes of different forms of the same white supremacy which drove the Christchurch assassin to his shocking crime. I can recall learning of the theory of Manifest Destiny in my history studies at university. This was the theory developed in the 1840s to drive European settlers in the United States across the continent in the belief that it was their God-given right to take over the country, not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of the displaced indigenous. Versions of the same belief have been noted as being present in the colonisation of Aotearoa: "... the indigenous people were written off as savage and pagan. This provided a powerful justification for colonial governments to adopt policies of assimilation aimed at conforming the indigenous to the mores of western society ... Christian instruction was seen as an important contributor to the assimilating process." ("Listening to the People of the Land", p 10).

Our involvement in the Five Eyes Alliance commits us to Western European ideals, many owing their origin to theories of political, cultural and economic dominance traceable back to Christianity's assimilation into secular power systems under the Roman Emperor Constantine. Such theories have given us the belief that our way of life is so superior that it has to be imposed on other peoples, often by force. Conversion to Christianity has been part of conversion to forms of governance under Western democratic ideals which exemplify

forms of white supremacy.

The Christchurch assassin is an extreme white supremacist but he is different only in terms of degree from any of us who considers that our form of belief, governance or life-style is the ideal by which all must live. Such a position contradicts the moral value of tolerance which is defined as the capacity for accepting and understanding the truth in the values, beliefs and customs of others, something of which the Christchurch assassin and his kind seem incapable.

At another level is the belief that the political, cultural or economic practices of another nation or people are so much of a threat to ours that they must be opposed by violent military means, including the use of ultimately destructive nuclear weapons. It is this that Michael Klare discusses in his article and this which underpins the Five Eyes alliance and all such forms of military preparedness. It is this same intolerance which consumes billions of dollars in military expenditure which could be better spent on addressing the kinds of differences between haves and have-nots in resources and relative power which lead to conflict and the threat of conflict. Perhaps we need to question the morality of our presence in this grouping of colonised nations.

There can be no doubt that the events in Christchurch represent an extreme of intolerance, where one man seeks to obliterate as many as possible of those he cannot abide in his life and society, whose beliefs are counter to his. The presence of many others, who though not as extreme, would rather have our society comprising those who think and believe as they do, presents us with a continuing threat to peace.

But the response across our wider community and nation has been equally, perhaps more impressive. Differences in belief and culture, between Christian and Muslim, Maori and Pakeha, religious and secular, have been put

aside in a show of unity which declares for tolerance, claiming that we all have a right and duty to find ways to live in peace and common prosperity in this land. There has been a massive “No” to both armed violence and to intolerance of the other and a “Yes” to the kind of generosity which moved the Maori of Christchurch to open their marae for the displaced. This reflects the historical generosity of their ancestors who opened their land to the Manuhiri (guests) who wished to share it in peace 179 years ago.

The sacrifice of 50 innocent lives is, of course, too great a price to pay for the rest of us to learn a hard lesson in tolerance. But having occurred, it imposes on us the greater duty to move across our differences in belief, to embrace our sisters and brothers of all faiths or none and to determine that any acts of intolerance will be opposed. Hopefully, it will move us to question any tendency towards belief in our own supremacy.

For all their tragedy, the events in Christchurch have moved us to talk, to share sympathy and to walk and pray together in response to a common disaster. In Ponsonby, Auckland, there is a Christian church on one side of Vermont Street and a Mosque on the other. A few days after Christchurch, Christians, Muslims and people of other and no faith met and prayed together in the church then moved across the street to meet and pray in the mosque.

Christchurch can be seen as a “wake-up” call, a reminder to share what we have in common whenever the occasion arises, to find time to do together what we can, and to do separately only what we have to. As a nation, we have to question anything which divides us into Us and Them, not by overcoming or by-passing our differences but by being open to dialogue and discussion across them. In that way, we can become the common Us which Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern perceived in our common grief at what happened in Christchurch, a more tolerant and loving Aotearoa-New Zealand.