

Sweetness and bitterness in partnership

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Nā, ka tango ahau i te pukapuka nohinohi i te ringaringa o te anahera, kainga ana e ahau; ā, i reka anō ki tōku māngai, ānō he honi. Nō tāku kainga kua kawa tōku kōpū. (Whakakitenga 10.10)

So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. (Revelation 10.10)

I runga i te ingoa o te Matua, te Tama, me te Wairua Tapu. Āmine.

Last week, Bishop Te Kitohi and I went to visit Prof Kuni Jenkins in Tokomaru Bay. I'd never been up the East Coast before and I was blown away by the beauty of the coast.

When we sat down with Prof Jenkins, she and bishop reminisced about her life and work, and her long and committed involvement in Te Haahi Mihingare. One of her recollections came from just over twenty years ago, when Wikitoria, Queen Victoria School, was closed.

Prof Jenkins and a group of friends came and occupied the cathedral — this very building, in fact. I believe that Archbishop John Pattison had to rush back from Lambeth to help sort the situation out.

I mention this story for three reasons. The first is that Prof Jenkins acknowledged the kindness and hospitality of everyone associated with the cathedral, even in the midst of the tension of the take around the school closure. The second is that her recollection reminds us that the friendship and fellowship we enjoy now has come from a history that has included pain and brokenness, often around schools and resources — and while my focus this morning is on God's goodness to us in our partnership between Amorangi and Diocese, I want to acknowledge those who have stood for justice in the past and made possible our present.

And thirdly, some of you might be feeling a bit nervous with talk of occupation, so I merely wish to reassure you that we have no intention of occupying the cathedral this time round, partly because we hear that an excellent kai is being prepared for lunch and we have already planned an orderly exit in that direction after our korero.

In our text from the Revelation to St John, we encounter both goodness in the sweet taste of God's word, and the bitter after-effects of an indigestible meal.

I imagine you can all remember the craze on social media towards the end of our first Level 4 lockdown, when people were salivating about the idea of getting KFC again. Don't get me wrong, I love McDonald's, but to me KFC is the ultimate sweet and bitter food combo. KFC tastes delicious when I eat it, but it turns my stomach when I'm trying to digest it.

This experience of a churning stomach after a sweet-tasting kai was apparently known even in the pre-KFC ancient world. We find it first in Ezekiel 2 & 3, where the prophet is instructed to eat a scroll with God's word written on it. Ezekiel finds God's word to Israel sweet in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach. The sweetness of God's word "like honey" is a theme in Psalms 19 and 119, but the indigestion is an innovation in Ezekiel.

In Ezekiel's case, the bitterness comes in two ways. The first is that he's instructed to bring words of "lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezek 2.10). The second is that God warns Ezekiel that the people will not listen. Despite, this Ezekiel's task is to be "a sentinel for the house of Israel" (Ezek 2:17). He is to warn people, so that if they continue to do evil, the fault is theirs. God holds out the hope that the people will stop sinning, and tells Ezekiel that if this happens, "you will have saved *your* life" (Ezek 3:21) — in other words, it is so essential for Ezekiel to carry out this task, that he should pass on and embody God's word as if his own life were at stake.

In Revelation, this striking image is picked up and given a renewed and wider force, lifting the arena from Israel to the whole world — to "many peoples and nations and languages and kings" (Rev 10.11).

But while the arena of the prophet's message has taken on a cosmic scale in Revelation, St John is resolutely maintaining not only the vision but the vocation of the prophet Ezekiel.

Like Ezekiel, John is presented with the joy of proclaiming God's words of warning and rescue, the sweetness of the hope of victory for God's people over the power of evil. But alongside that, John has to digest God's words himself.

As Tom Wright puts it in his commentary on Revelation,

'Eating the scroll' is a vivid metaphor for the way in which the prophet, then or indeed today, can only speak God's word insofar as it has become part of the prophet's own life. It may be nourishing; it may be bitter; it may be both. This is part of what it means to say that God desires to act in the world through obedient human beings. Prophecy — speaking words which bring God's fresh order to the world — is one specialist aspect of the larger human vocation, and here John shoulders that responsibility. What will follow, not least in chapters 12— 20, will be God's word, spoken through him, bringing about the terrible judgment and the

glorious, victorious mercy in which ‘God’s mystery would be completed’.¹

This challenge to both speak God’s words faithfully, and to embody them in our own lives, is a challenge for the church in her prophetic vocation. As Tom Wright goes on to put it, speaking the written word of God “will bring God’s purposes into reality”,² but this takes effect as we embody the prophetic call in our own shared life.

As I alluded to earlier, the pathway for our church in a shared life and commitment to justice has had its indigestible moments. In today’s society, it’s easy to talk about partnership and reconciliation; there’s a sweetness in virtue-signalling on social media; but embodying God’s justice is a more difficult and sometimes bitter process.

So this morning, I am so pleased to be able to celebrate the ways in which you, our brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Auckland, have embodied a living response to the word of God in your fellowship with us.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippian churches, gives thanks for the way in which they faithfully and generously supported him, on multiple occasions. This morning, we thank you and we praise God for the way that you have supported us, faithfully and generously, on many occasions.

I must acknowledge first of all the constant and powerful support that the late Bishop Jim White gave to us all, and in particular in his personal commitment to being a friend to our Bishop, Te Kitoi. For his kindness and fellowship, we thank God, and we will not forget.

Bishop Ross, I mentioned a school issue at the start. I want to acknowledge you for the work you are doing to restore and heal ancient wounds inflicted by the church, which of necessity is a quiet and careful, and often invisible process. For your redemptive work, we thank God, and we will not forget.

I also want to acknowledge our deep gratitude for the financial generosity the Diocese of Auckland has shown us this year. In our time of need, you answered, giving us far more than we had asked for. This is a long-term way of life: you have gifted us buildings and resources over many years. For your example of Christian generosity, we thank God, and we will not forget.

Even more significant than these things, though, are the ways in which we share ministry and mission on the ground.

We rejoice to see growing links with our social agencies, the Auckland City Mission, the Anglican Trust for Women and Children, the Selwyn Foundation, and Te Whare Ruru hau o Meri. I treasure the opportunity to meet regularly with the Diocese’s Archdeacons. We also rejoice to see growing links in church ministry: people such as Brent Swann, Brendan

1. NT Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, New Testament for Everyone (London: SPCK, 2011), 94–95.

2. *Ibid.*, 95.

Wilkinson, and Jacynthia Murphy going from us to serve in ministry in the Diocese. We hope you too share in our rejoicing as we see cross-pollination from the Diocese and Polynesia among us, with the ordinations of Nathan McLellan and Sapati Tima in a few weeks.

We will not allow ourselves to fall prey to separatism, a narrow insularity, or an instinct to protectionism. I rejoiced to be at the induction of Joel and Hinemoa Carpenter at St Mary's in Point England a few weeks back. (Even if I did confess before the bishop and all the people that I had a covetous thought in my heart a year or so back, and desired to capture them for tikanga Māori!)

It was a privilege to be at St Paul's in Symonds Street earlier in the year as they began their amazing project to renew the building — in partnership with Ngāti Whātua, recognising their history as the place where Āpihai Te Kawau used to worship, paddling his waka round the bays on a Sunday morning to the reo Māori service at St Paul's. We look forward to partnering with St Paul's in re-establishing te reo Māori in worship, giving thanks for the legacy of Rota Waitoa, who at St Paul's was the first Maori to be ordained in this province.

I want to tell you briefly about the ministry of Mark Barnard at St James in Māngere Bridge. Mark is Pākehā, a fluent Māori speaker, and has bridged a 160-year-old divide between Māori and Pākehā and the place of the church in Māngere Bridge. St James is the oldest remaining Māori church in Tāmaki Makaurau, founded and built by Tāmāti Ngāpora, an Anglican lay reader. As tensions in the Waikato rose, Tāmāti fled to Taranaki. Mark has re-established ministry among local Māori, and last night was down at Te Puea marae along with another of my colleagues, Keri-Ann Hokianga, leading a new, Māori evangelistic course called Moko-ā-Rangi. That course has come from another point of partnership, between Te Takiwā o Manukau and St Augustine's. We have cross-pollination of people, of ministry, and of work together, at grassroots level.

When we look at Mangere Bridge, we can truly say that we have begin to embody Justin Martyr's words:

We who formerly hated and murdered one another now live together and share the same table. We pray for our enemies, and try to win those who hate us. (Apology 1, §14)

We are finding that in openness to sharing together, across the divides of tikanga and culture, we have found life in grassroots ministry partnerships.

We thank God for you, our dear brothers and sisters in Christ, and we will not forget what you are doing.

Instead of coming to you today to hold out our hands to beg, we want to celebrate with you our stories of how you have opened your arms to us in the awhi, the embrace, of shared mission and ministry.

I believe that our focus must remain on ministry above money; on people above property. This was Jesus' highest focus, and it must be ours to, if we are to fulfil our prophetic vocation as a church.

Jesus subverted power with his incarnation, when he emptied himself. To respond to our oppression as Māori *only* with a word of judgement would be a failure of Christian imagination, which could lead us to buy into the falsehood that if only *we* were in control, we would bring justice. Our role as Māori, following in Jesus' path and pattern, ought not to be to limit our ambition to merely replicate or control the very same power structures and wealth that have been used in both church and society to oppress us. When human beings impose justice, without an invitation to share the humility of experiencing mercy, we impose a graceless moralism.

As Jesus modelled in his incarnation, the prophetic vocation is always to be at the margins, to stand outside, to speak a different word, and to call into being a different way of life.

Our role as Māori is to stand secure in our position of powerlessness and poverty, and to invite you and call you as our brothers and sisters in Christ to join us in that state — to imitate Christ in emptying ourselves, in order to embody the word of God which Christ calls us to proclaim.

In a few weeks, we will be singing that wonderful hymn of the incarnation, "Thou who wast rich, beyond all splendour, all for love's sake, becamest poor."

As you share in ministry with us, our hope is that we will *together* choose to embody the story we proclaim in our words and songs: the story of our wonderful saviour, "who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom 4.25), and whose grace we seek in the Holy Communion we are about to share.

Āmine.

References

Wright, NT. *Revelation for Everyone*. New Testament for Everyone. London: SPCK, 2011.