

# Talking Cents

July 2017

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. This article is contributed by Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

## At the Still Point of the Turning World

In his 1935 poem, “Burnt Norton”, the first of his “Four Quartets”, T.S Eliot reflects on the interaction of time and action in a way which captures the search of each of us for a constant, or at least some kind of certainty, in a world which borders on the frenetic. In part today, this can be ascribed to the barrage of information which streams from every media outlet, defying analysis or contemplation. Battered by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, we yearn to take cover, to escape, to take time out and find a raft to cling to, a haven in which to make sense of it all.

Associated with all this information, is a violence which threatens our peace, of mind as well as body. The media confronts us with bomb-blasts in places where people gather for sport or prayer; with vehicles being deliberately driven at people going about their ordinary business; with knife-wielding assassins in market-places, all brought into our living-rooms and convincing us that insecurity rising to terror is the ruling emotion of our lives, that we should trust no-one, that we could be the next to confront the unthinkable.

All this recalls two Irishmen who wrote at the height of the bloody conflicts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in their country. In his poem “The Second Coming” (1919), William Butler Yeats says:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and  
everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned”.

Dramatist Sean O’Casey, in his 1924 play, “Juno and the Paycock” puts it more crudely:

“Th’ whole worl’s in a terrible state o’ chassis” (usually ‘translated’ as ‘crisis’). Both are looking for something solid, constant, “true, good and beautiful” in order to make sense of the chaotic world which confronts them. Most of us are at times driven by the same need, for ‘a still point’ in a tumultuous world.

For some, this may be an escape from the world, a retreat into the wilderness, far away from the turmoil and certainly from the attention of ubiquitous fear-inducing media. I can well remember the numbers of American teachers who appeared in New Zealand high school classrooms at the height of nuclear testing carried out in their country and the fears induced by Cold War sabre-rattling. We in New Zealand are still seen as being far away from most of the flash-points of conflict, remote and insignificant enough to not attract the attention of those striking back against perceived oppressive power.

For others, religion offers a rapturous ascent into another world, a promised heaven. In contrast, current suicide figures show that too many descend into despair, finding the burden of living in loneliness, betrayal or pain too much to endure.

Where then is ‘the still point’, the beacon of hope, the challenge to confront the temptation to insecurity and fear?

A few examples lead me to believe that some kind of firm engagement with the source of fear and insecurity provides a focus and a ‘still point’ from which to face the challenge and violence of natural and man-made disaster.

While browsing in Facebook (who can resist forever?), I came across a story of a 65-year-old woman who had stood up to the bullying of ISIS invaders of her city and ended up by being valued by them for teaching them some English before she managed to escape to safety. She felt that she had enjoyed a good life and was prepared to bravely put it on the line rather than to show fear or compromise her principles. True or not, the story did show a readiness to engage with what threatened her, prepared to take the consequences in order to preserve her integrity.

Other examples come from closer to home. The massive destruction and turmoil of the Christchurch earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011 gave birth to the Student Volunteer Army. A group of students, led by 21-year-old Sam Johnson, created a Facebook group to facilitate the provision of transport, food and logistical support for the victims of the first quake. When the second quake occurred, the group was able to provide thousands of volunteer hours to cope with the results of the disaster. The group has continued to engage with community crises by providing a platform for organising volunteers to address disasters such as the devastating fires which raged in the Christchurch hills earlier this year.

A few nights ago, I was talking with my daughter-in-law who had managed to escape from her home village of Castaneira de Pera in central Portugal when ferocious bush-fires descended upon it. Still traumatised by her perilous drive with two young children through dark, hilly roads as the fire raged behind them, she was adamant that we have become too dependent on central authorities to address such situations and must focus on the development of strong local communities to confront and engage with natural disasters like these.

In the course of his recent book, “New Treaty, New Tradition: Reconciling New Zealand and Maori Law” (UBC Press, 2016), Professor Carwyn Jones of Victoria University sets out

some fundamental basics of Maori philosophy/spirituality which could provide the foundation for re-developing strong communities, able to face and survive the kinds of disasters and threatened disasters perceived to confront today’s world.

These principles are:

- whanaungatanga - the centrality of relationships (between God, Land and People)
- mana – the importance of spiritually-sanctioned authority within limited forms of leadership
- tapu – respect for the spiritual character/dignity of all things
- utu – the principle of balance and reciprocity
- manaakitanga – nurturing relationships, looking after people and land and being very careful how others are treated.

These principles can be the ‘still point of the turning world’, a guide towards developing just and peaceful relationships between:

- individuals
- communities
- the individual and the collective
- past, present and future generations
- people and the divine
- people and the natural world.

They are also found in the philosophy and spirituality of indigenous peoples throughout our region and in one form or another at the heart of all cultures. They draw us away from the competition and selfish consumerism at the heart of the market-led economy into concern for the common good of people everywhere and our shared environment – the ‘still point’ in *our* changing world.

They draw us into engagement with the reality of life on a fragile planet, fraught with danger and uncertainty but also provide the possibility of real fulfilment in the service and support for all that shares that life.