

Sermon: Being Presbyterian: Continuity and Disruptions

for Cashmere Presbyterian Church, 15 September 2019 Silvia Purdie

1 Timothy 4: 6-16

I recently went to a hui about the church and the Treaty of Waitangi. The organisation leading it has as its bi-line the phrase *'Know the story you are part of'*.

I like that. Know the story you are part of means knowing our history, where we come from, what has shaped who we are and what we take for granted.

Maori language describes us walking backwards into the future, facing the past. The past is in front of us, the future behind us.

So, today folks you have a history lesson. Hopefully more than just history, but history seems as good a place to start from as any. Presbyterian ministers in the past were expected to be good historians, so I'm standing in a good whakapapa.

Our history this morning is Scottish history, a subject about which, to be honest, I know very little. I'm sure many of you here know far more than I, but perhaps I draw some threads together.

Running through our Presbyterian history is tension between continuity and disruption.

Let's begin at the beginning ... which would be the planting of the church in Scotland, way way back in Roman times. The first Christians in Scotland were Roman soldiers, but early churches struggled to outlive the Roman empire. This was the Celtic land of the Picts, of druids and legends, ancient stones, a religion of local people and local places as spring followed winter and moons waxed and waned. Into this land came the Christian faith in the person of St Columba in the 6th century, and the monks of Iona. Monasteries were planted by hardy, passionate religious men and women, who challenged the power of the druids and disrupted pagan practices. But as the church became established it kept some of the essence of Celtic spirituality. The festivals of the church year absorbed and continued some of their pre-Christian flavour, the symbols of the church incorporated celtic symbols, such as the circle behind the cross, the prayers kept the sense of immediacy of place and season, home and hearth. Popes came to recognise the church in Scotland as a particular entity, with its own quirks and style, a 'special daughter of Rome'.

Into the continuity of the medieval church came the disruption of the Reformation. In burst John Knox fresh from Geneva, his head full of Calvin's teachings, his soul ablaze from reading and understanding the Bible in his own language. Others caught the fire of experiencing God in a whole new way, able for the first time to hold a copy of the Bible in their own hands and be able to read it for themselves. For the first time people asked 'why' of every aspect of church life, and consciously set about trying to align life and faith to the teachings of scripture. Faith was for the living, not for the dead, they decided, and so threw out prayers for the dead and buying indulgences for the dead. Faith was about getting as close to God as possible; Mary and the saints were no longer needed, and their statues and paraphernalia were thrown out of the churches. Church buildings became much more simple inside and the pulpit replaced the altar as the focal point. Faith was about faith, informed, convicted, so men and women were taught to read, to study, to learn. Universities were born.

The Reformation was about governance as well as faith. Now, the Scots do after all have a reputation for being stropky. Reading Scottish church history takes you into the battle after battle as Scotland struggled for independence from Rome, from England, from the Vikings, from France ... and through it all just kept on being Scots. They embraced the

presbyterian ethos so thoroughly because they had more voice, more independence, more freedom to express opinions and share in decisions. The word 'presbyterian' means 'eldership'. In Greek 'presbyter' means 'elder'. The highest authority is the 'presbytery', meaning the council of elders. The church of Scotland did away with Bishops and Abbots and Archdeacons and Popes, back in 1860.

Through this huge disruption there was significant continuity. The church of Scotland was still the church of Scotland, with the same church buildings and mostly the same people in leadership. Mostly, though, it was disruption after disruption. Royalty fought bitterly back and forth between Catholic and Reformed, with ordinary people getting caught in the middle. Churches split off, then split again.

Fast forward 300 years from John Knox to the 1840s. Again the church of Scotland was in a major upheaval. Over a third of local churches left the Church of Scotland in what we call the Disruption, forming the Free Church - or the 'wee frees' as they were known.

And many of these decided not only to leave the Church of Scotland, but to leave Scotland itself, going as far as they could go by boat, all the way to New Zealand. In 1848 the first ships arrived in Dunedin to create "the first experiment of the plan of a special colony", a plan fully endorsed by the Edinburgh Presbytery, a plan to create in Otago a settlement of "decency, order and rapid growth", "with the principles of the Free Church widely diffused throughout".

(quotes recorded in 'Presbyterians in Aotearoa', chapter 1, by Matheson, 24-25)

And of course there were Church of Scotland people as part of every settlement up and down the country, including here in Christchurch.

These transplanted Presbyterians had the huge task of reimagining life, family, work, and church in a totally different environment. What a disruption. They kept a nostalgia for home, much of which was encapsulated in their faith traditions, allowing for continuity with the past. For a 150 years they built this nation and built churches, joined by Reformed christians from the Netherlands & South Africa, Congregational christians from Samoa, Presbyterians from Korea and others.

The church was disrupted by war, disrupted by changes in women's role leading to the ordination of women elders and then ministers, disrupted in the 60s by bitter theological arguments, and then in the last 20 years by bitter arguments about homosexuality. But the biggest disruption of all, in my mind, is what we are currently facing – the break in generational identity. We all know in our own families the reality that younger generations simply do not care about this 'Presbyterian' label. Our children don't want this Presbyterian inheritance. The future of our church must look different from the past in ways that we cannot imagine. Maybe the Presbyterian story ends in this century, and maybe that's OK. But we trust ultimately not in our own continuity but in God alone, in Christ alone who will lead the church, even beyond our sight and influence.

The single most important continuity that our faith tradition stands on is the desire for continuity with scripture. Through all our long history, from St Columba to John Knox to our New Zealand settlers, faithful people set as their first priority living out the teachings of Jesus Christ as they read them in the Bible.

And if there was one book in the Bible which I would pick as the most Presbyterian book it would be first Timothy. Our reading today encapsulates beautifully the Presbyterian ethos

Be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness, For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. set an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

This is a strong contribution from our Biblical and religious tradition – Train yourself in godliness. Faith makes a difference in everyday life. Faith shapes our ethics. Be a good example to others.

This was a strong theme in Presbyterian history, and it flows through into family life and community life. It has its roots way way back in Celtic spirituality which honoured the divine hand in every aspect of life, every hearth and home, every hill and stream, every task no matter how humble.

The downside of our Presbyterian tradition of high moral standards was the tendency to come across to others as dour and disapproving. I'm sure my Presbyterian fore-fathers would strongly disapprove of me, a woman, standing here in a preaching gown, with bottles of wine in my pantry! As we face a society with rapidly changing ethics and values how do we hold continuity with Christian morality without sounding judgmental and just really old fashioned!?

1 Timothy is the first book in the Bible which specifically talks about eldership, and that comes up here in verse 14:

¹⁴Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

If there is one defining feature of Presbyterianism it is this, the council of elders. Many other churches have this as their leadership model, but for us it is built into our very essence. We don't have priests or bishops, we don't have a division between 'clergy and lay'. We appoint women and men as elders, some with a teaching role we call ministers and like me they come and go. Local elders hold the responsibility for the local church. And together representatives from local churches form the regional Presbytery.

Back in the day we had a clear role for our elders. These days we are more flexible; some are on Parish Council, some like Tric lead a ministry, some look after our Finances, some do pastoral care. Once an elder always an elder, even if you're retired. It is a valued and time-honoured role in how we respond to the gospel in this place.

On Tuesday night we have our Presbytery Clerk, Barry Ayers, coming to talk to the elders, and anyone interested in becoming an elder one day, about the changing role of eldership in the church today. Barry brings a wealth of experience and a broad perspective across the church.

If there was one thing which I would name as the central task for elders it is this holding of both continuity and disruption in the life of the church. This begins with continuity with scripture, as together we seek to give expression to the values and principles for life that we read in the Bible.

And we value continuity with our church traditions, for this church which is 90 years old is part of a Reformed tradition which is 500 years old and a Christian tradition which is 2000 years old. We find our own place, here in 2019, our own opinions and our own voice.

Together we discern who we are and where the Spirit of Jesus Christ is leading us.