

## A Colony of Heaven

30 August 2020

Romans 12:9-21

Recently our own Rocket Lab was given the contract to fly to Venus. Imagine if we have to set up a New Zealand colony on Venus. What would we need? I once asked the question of a youth group as an icebreaker. Except it was Mars. For it to be a New Zealand colony they decided we would need a rugby paddock, Dave Dobbin to sing Welcome Home and a copy of the Edmond's Cookbook.

St Paul in his writings gives the early Christian community a lovely name. He calls it a colony of heaven on earth. (See Philippians 3:20 in Moffatt's Translation.) A colony is far removed from the mother country, but it does share the language, culture and customs of the home country. Paul is concerned that the early Christian community, this colony of heaven on earth, gets off to the right start. Writing just 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul's letter to the church in Rome had a lot of competition. There was so much to read in Rome - imperial decrees, exquisite poetry, finely crafted moral philosophy and yet, in no time at all, this one letter was to have more impact on the world than all the other writings put together. Building on his overarching theme of grace Paul in our passage today gives two main ways that we demonstrate that we are a colony of heaven.

According to Paul the colony of heaven, this church of which you and I are members, shows the world it is the colony by the way people live in unity one with another. And it shows it is the colony of heaven in the way it offers loving service to the community around it.

Let's unpack this a little more. Unity. It's easy to say and hard to live. Buried in our cemetery is one archdeacon, Peter Witty. Some of you will remember him. He was famous for being the Diocesan exorcist. He used to come and stay with us when I was a kid. He smoked a pipe and told stories of the demons he had exorcised long into the night. My parents would send me off

to bed, but I used to sneak back and hide just close enough to hear some of the stories. By the time I had listened to a few of his stories I was too scared to go to sleep anyway. Archdeacon Witty is my symbol of unity for today. Because he was a traditionalist, he opposed women's ordination. In the end of course the debate went against him. But notice this, when it did, he made a speech I can still remember. He said “Up to this point I have opposed women's ordination but now the church has voted for it I will support that decision 100%. I will ask the Bishop to have the first woman curate in my parish. I will support the decision.” That is unity. He could have worked to undermine the decision, to be the leader of the opposition, but he got behind it. That's what it looks like. Unity isn't getting our own way, but respecting the decisions made and supporting them with all our energy.

Paul's second great teaching is how the colony of heaven should relate to the world around us. There were lots of contenders for this. There was the *shut ourselves away* group. There was the *revolutionary* group. And there was the *just blend in and hope no one notices us* group. This would have been very attractive in an age that made Christians a lion's breakfast. But Paul offers another way in verse 20: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” Loving service.

On 29 April 1864, over three hundred Maori barricaded themselves in two adjacent hill-top fortresses at Gate Pa in the Tauranga Moana area. The group was surrounded by a force of 1500 British troops who had been ordered there by the Governor. At the end of the day they fell back to their own lines, leaving many dead or wounded on the battlefield. Hēni Te Kiri Karamū, an Anglican inspired by today's reading did a remarkable thing: This is what happened in her own words:

“Towards evening I heard a wounded man calling for water several times, and his repeated calls aroused my compassion. I slung my gun in front of me by means of a leather strap. I said to my brother, “I am going to give that Pakeha water.” He wondered at me. I sprang up from the trench, ran quickly in the direction of an old nail can, with the top knocked in and no handle. It was full of

water; I seized it, poured out about half of the water, and with a silent prayer as I turned, ran towards the wounded man. The bullets were coming thick and fast. I soon reached him. He was rolling on his back and then on his side. I said, "Here is water; will you drink?" He said, "Oh, yes." I lifted his head on my knees and gave him drink. He drank twice, saying to me, "God bless you." This was Colonel Booth, as I judged from his uniform and appearance. While I was giving him the water, I heard another wounded man begging of me to give him water also. I took the water to him and gave him drink, and another wounded man close by tried to crawl over for a drink. I gave him drink, took the can and placed it by Colonel Booth's side, and I sprang back to my brother, feeling thankful indeed at being again at his side."

We remember Hēni in our calendar of saints on the 30th of April. Hēni is remembered with aroha by her tribe and by Anglicans with a window in Lichfield Cathedral in England.

It might be some time before we set up a colony of New Zealand on another planet but in the meantime, we can strive for unity amongst us, and loving service to the world. These are the marks of this, our colony of heaven on earth.

Let us pray:

*We thank you loving God for the teaching and encouragement of St Paul  
May love be genuine among us, grant us in this, our colony of heaven, that unity  
which is the gift of your Spirit and hearts ready to serve our community.  
This we pray in Jesus name. Amen.*