

**'Treasure in clay jars' a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 20 November 2022.**

**Where's the beef?**

There are advertisements that have given us sayings and images.

Tui - yeah right; Speights – the two men locked in a brewery, shouting for help – “help”. Mainland cheese – two people, sitting among old buildings, speaking slowly – good things take time.

There was one that took off in the United States.

Wendy's was advertising a hamburger – they caricatured a competitor. The person serving put a burger on the counter. Three people, quite small standing. One of them lifted off the top half of what was a large bun, and underneath was a small piece of jalapeno. They peered at this burger for a moment or two, and one said in a distinctive voice – ‘Where's the beef? Where's the beef?’ The saying spread. I have heard it here. Jacqui said she heard it in the UK. When it seemed like only froth and bubble, the question – where's the beef? If it took a long time to get to what seemed an inconsequential conclusion – where's the beef? In a presidential debate, a candidate thought to bring no policies was asked - where's the beef?

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is asking that question – Where's the beef? Where is the power that can sustain love and life and hope? Where is the word that builds a healthy community? Where is the life that can hold humanity in peace?

At that time there was a well-known type, a common figure, the harsh Cynic philosopher. He made the message about himself. He preached his own moral virtue as the foundation for society. Perhaps they said “Let me make Rome great again”.

But, says Paul, I am not the message. I am not the one who forms and illumines the human soul. I am not the one who shapes the human spirit. I am not the one who builds human community. As Paul says, we do not proclaim ourselves – we proclaim Christ. We point to Christ. But not Christ as a narrowly conceived religious figure of history. No. Christ as the power for life at work in our world now. Light shining in darkness, shining in our very beings.

The marvellous thing is that this power for life, this treasure, comes to us in clay jars. Clay jars were everywhere in people's homes. Humble, usable, breakable, functional. Paul says the church is like a clay jar, but it is not the treasure. The treasure is what it points to, bears witness to, celebrates whenever it sees it - the power for life, the power that illumines, the power that reconciles, good news.

Paul asks us not to confuse the container with the treasure, because when we treat clay as treasure, we foment disunity.

Now, I would like to make this sermon a little participatory. So in the next section, when I say a clause, then clay jar, can you please respond with the words, clay jar. The aim is to help us keep focused on the treasure, the power for life, the power that unites.

Beautiful building, intricate ceiling, carefully crafted, warm timber, the whole feel of it - clay jar.

Knox Church – 1860, great heritage, distinguished past, lively contribution, diverse and active – clay jar.

Preachers and pastors, respected, loved, valued, with crafted worship and decency and order – clay jar.

Kerry Enright, Jordan Redding and whoever comes next – clay jar.

Music, carefully chosen, well-practised, often moving, wonderfully sung – clay jar.

The Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, the any named church – clay jar.

The creeds, Apostles', Nicene, Kupu Whakapono, all of them – clay jar.

And let me stretch a little ...

The Bible, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments – clay jar.

And a little further ..

Christianity or any faith ... clay jar.

Thank you ...

You may have paused at the last two, but in our tradition we say that the Word of God, the treasure, is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament ... they are not the same thing.

And in his discussion about other faiths, Jordan helped me see how our faith traditions themselves will dissolve into the reality who is the lover of all.

These clay jars are important but if we elevate them to be most important, then we bury the treasure, and we can cause people to miss knowing the power of life we have experienced in Christ.

In 1998 the Presbyterian church conducted a survey of people who felt warm towards the church but had turned away. They were all people who had not participated in a church for at least two years. Why had they turned away? Mostly because they did not feel they were good enough. They felt that the people in the church had their life together, were more moral. What had led them to that? Mostly, the church's moralising, the church telling people how to live a moral life.

And yet, we know among ourselves, scratch the surface of any congregation - cracked pots.

The focus on treasure means we can celebrate where-ever we see it.

One of the great events in the life of this church is the annual celebration of Otago Girls' High School, a few weeks ago. The first minister here was founding chair of the Board. It's a delight to host them. The service used to be nine lessons and carols. Gradually it took account of the changes in context and became less explicitly Christian. The minister here mcs it, welcomes people, announces the readings and offers a blessing. In between is music of the school and eight readings people choose. Every one of those readings, from contemporary writers, from philosophers, bloggers, poets, without it being intentional, reflected an aspect of the Christian understanding of life.

The treasure was there, in a clay jar that fitted the event.

We can join with people who celebrate and share the treasure in the multitude that is the church.

The clay jar is much more welcoming, when it knows its place.

Last Friday night, at Holy Name, Peter Matheson spoke about Archibald Baxter, a conscientious objector during World War One. A farmer from Brighton. Peter called him an ordinary guy. An ordinary guy who did not draw attention to himself. A clay jar who held in his belly, through appalling treatment, a persisting passion for peace, the power of life.

It's the question we can keep asking to guide our lives - where's the beef?

We cracked pots, all cracked pots, we have our purpose.

To carry and point to the power of life embodied in Jesus Christ.

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