

A RURAL EASTER IN THE AWATERE

This particular Easter we had a visiting friend who is a missionary staying with us and she was keen to come along to all the services. As anyone in rural ministry knows there can be quite a few services on a Sunday

What Anne saw

When was the last time that you travelled 150 km and went to three church services all before lunch time? Well that's what it is like in the Awatere at Easter if you happen to be a mission partner (home on furlough) staying at the Awatere vicarage. I (Anne Segedin) expressed the wish to follow the rounds of the vicar on Easter morning. Awoken by the alarm clock at 5am, I get ready for our 6am departure for the first service held in a small church in Kekerengu. It is an hour long communion service complete with a children's talk I am told I'm giving. Then a quick trip back to Seddon for a service at 9am. Several families were celebrating 100 years in the Awatere so the community hall was the venue. Once finished it was down to Ward for 11am service. Before finally, we get back to the vicarage for lunch at 12:45pm. A whirl wind morning of services and people celebrating the resurrection of our Lord..

What Martin Saw

The day break highlighted the landscape which I have grown to love. It is a landscape which the people I pastor nurture and farm. Easter for me is a very busy time of celebration. I enjoy looking at the faces of the people who come. They are people whom Miriam and I have walked beside listening and encouraging in faith. Each person unique, some with deep hurts, many struggling to cope with the change happening in the rural sector. As I look into their faces, I remember afresh it is for these people Jesus died and rose from the dead. For some it is the first Easter they have experienced understanding what a Christian Easter means. I look into their eyes as I give them communion and say "Take and eat and know that Jesus died and rose from the dead for you". As I do, I thank God that he has called me to work here and that he is changing lives as His Spirit moves across this land. How true it is that the Easter Bunny died for no one!

A THREE YEAR OLD'S VIEW OF LIFE

Hooray the sun is shining, for the first time in a long time. So I'm off to pick the paper up (it's dropped at the neighbour's gate). I've got some new gumboots and it will be good to try them out.

As I walk past the small shrubs I notice some eyes. They are watching my every movement, it's Mondo the cat. Mondo and I have had many great adventures together. We run around the house, he hides and I try and find him and when I do I give him a big hug.

I always check the stones out when I walk down the driveway. Have you ever stopped and looked closely at them? There are big ones and small ones and they come in all kinds of shapes, even different colours. If you pick them up, you can dribble them out your fingers or throw them.

Up in the gum tree there is a black bird with a white bib. It's singing a pretty tune, unlike anything I have ever heard on the radio. A small bird with a fan like tail, keeps darting around me. Every time I almost get to it, it flits away a few more paces. It's almost as if it's a friend keeping me company.

The paddocks are looking at lot greener now. Maybe the farmer will bring back the calves that left because of the lack of food. It used to be good to look out the bedroom window and see them with their black and white patches. Sometimes I'd even see a bird sitting on their backs.

As I go back up the driveway, I get a chance to check the puddles out. If I throw a stone into the puddle, ripples like waves wash up onto the stones at the edge. I usually have to walk past the puddles because I have my shoes on. But today, I've got my gumboots on so. . . I'm going to jump for joy in the puddle for all the neat little things that God has given for us to enjoy in life. Will you join me? Ps 8:1-2a O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.

DROUGHT

I have grown a lot over the over the last six months as our district has faced the most severe droughts in 50 years. I have seen and experienced the worry and concern of those I care about mount as day's pass by without rain. As crucial dates come and more stock has had to be sold because of the lack of feed and water. As the months have passed, the landscape has not only been denuded of its greenness but also the stock. Now as I move around the district there are not many animals to be seen. The impact is far reaching, it will not disappear when the rain comes, it will affect our district for the next 5 - 7 years. Not only the income of the farmers, shearers and the farm labours but also our very community structure. The rural restructuring has meant what social supports are left in the district are those that are funded by the district. Even knowing the harsh realities of the impact that this drought will have there has been a dogged determination that we can get through it. Made easier because as a community we stand together.

It has been most humbling as I have received offers of help for our district. I have had letters and phone calls offering everything from hay to fruit cakes. While no one in the district wants a handout in the form of a Government grant these very generous gifts help us to keep on battling because they show someone cares. It may not have seemed much to those that gave but to us it was like a sprinkle of rain, because we knew someone cared.

On the 15th of February we met in a paddock to support each other and to ask God to give us rain in Gods perfect timing and wisdom while we wait. We invited the churches of Blenheim to join us and were bowled over by the response. On the day there were 250 people gathered. We sang, we talked and we prayed. The next day the gathering was shown on TV and the reporter said even with the prayers the drought is not expected to break before April and there was no rain forecast for today. That afternoon I watched as clouds gathered and thought this would show that God is real, quickly checking the thought because God does not have to prove anything. When it started to rain, I asked God for « inch and then added cheekily an inch would be nice. We got 4mm, I guess God said that's enough. Two days later we got another 4mm and within the week we had received 39mm in total. Our God "rains" and though the drought might not yet be broken we thank God and continue to look to God for our needs.

It has been a humbling experience and at times I have been close to tears as I have seen the Christian church in action. The love of Christ that we have experienced through their actions challenges us to remember when others are hurting (even when they are miles away) to ask how would Christ have us respond. Blessed be the cake makers, the hay makers and those who give in so many ways for it is in your actions that Christ's Kingdom comes.

GOT THE RIGHT STUFF TO BE PICKED?

As a parent I am often reminded about feelings and experiences of my own childhood as I observe the lives of my own children. Can you remember back to your school years when a team was being picked? Two would be nominated as captains, then take turns choosing their teams. Can you remember the feelings you had as the team was being picked? If you were like me, sport was not my greatest subject, it was a horrible time. You hoped like mad that you would not be left standing there as the last dregs that the unlucky team had to have. The feeling of not being picked first often hurt in a way that you would not dare let anyone see.

In many ways throughout our lives we face this team picking scenario, over and over again. Whether it is finding a partner for life, or joining a club or organisation. There seems to be invisible pecking orders. As we get older, we learn ways of coping and avoiding the hurt it can cause. I suppose the thing we feared back at school and in our adult life is rejection and the pain it brings.

One person who is no stranger to pain is a person who was rejected as a loser. The favoured people of the day rejected him. Many even despised him because he threatened to upset their power and challenged the things they held important. This man chose to hang out with those who were described as the losers; prostitutes leapers, slaves, fisherman... To these people he offered love and hope. The man you might have guessed is Jesus.

As I watch my boys being picked for teams and think of the feeling I used to have as I waited to be picked. And indeed if I am honest still feel at times as I face possible rejection, I am glad that God knows and understands how it feels. Because he chose to humble himself and walk amongst us, to live a life on earth. To experience life as we do, even to the point of being rejected. That's how much he cares and loves us.

Thinking of picking teams, if we see Jesus as the captain then the church is his team. What a mixed bunch we are. There are some that seem to have it all together, while others clearly don't. But in this team we are not picked on our ball handling skills or our even on our own merits. Instead we are given the invitation to belong by the captain who has already won the game. It has been said the church could be described as one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. There is even great rejoicing in heaven when we make the choice to belong. As a team we will often look rough, and definitely not Super 12 winning stuff. But we know if we march with the captain, despite all our faults we'll make an eternal difference.

HARVEST FESTIVAL

This morning we celebrate in worship, Harvest festival. It is a time during which we reflect on the many gifts God has given us, especially the harvest from our labours, apples, vegetables and the means by which we can buy food.

As I look out the study window I see the season is changing and much of the harvest has finished. The leaves are changing and we are being treated with a brilliant burst of colour, yellows, oranges, reds and many other shades make up a visual symphony.

This symphony reminds us there is a time for everything. We have watched the cycle of the trees as they budded and sprouted new leaves, as the fruit developed and is harvested. Now as the leaves change colour and fall we know the season is at a close.

Speaking with a younger member of the congregation who has a cousin dying they remarked how fragile life is. How we don't know how long our life will last and the need for us to cherish the gift of life we have.

The writer of Ecclesiastics reflects about the seasons; that there is time for everything. For everything there is a season, & a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, & a time to die; a time to plant, & a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, & a time to heal; a time to break down, & a time to build up; a time to weep, & a time to laugh; a time to mourn, & a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, & a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, & a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, & a time to lose; a time to keep, & a time to throw away; a time to tear, & a time to sew; a time to keep silence, & a time to speak; a time to love, & a time to hate; a time for war, & a time for peace. (Ecc 3:1-8 NRSV) After much pondering he concludes, life is meaningless unless we know God. After all this the end of the matter is: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ecc 12:13-14 NRSV)

Let us this morning not only celebrate the gift of things that sustain life but also the very meaning of life and the means by which we can know God, the gift of salvation.

HAVE YOU GOT A "DM" BUILD UP?

How's your "Legumes" and your "dry matter" (DM)? No, I don't mean the length of your legs or your mental capacity. Attending the CRT and the Monitor Farm field days I have learnt these questions refer to grass and its feed content.

Farmers have to plan ahead months at a time to provide the feed required for stock when the summer dry off occurs. They know the reality that our life is conditioned by the seasons. Some seasons are lush and there is good growth while during others there is virtually no growth. To enhance & maximize the growing seasons farmers invest in planning time and in fertilisers such as nitrogen and lime.

We also experience seasons in our lives. We, like the farmers, need to invest wisely during the good times in preparation for the tougher times. We need to invest in relationships that will endure the droughts that we might encounter. We must be careful not to waste time on the trivial but instead invest time in building up (not breaking down) good relationships.

God created us to have relationships. We have all heard the phrase "no man is an Island by himself". In my experience strong relationships with others and with God have been the greatest help in times of drought in my life.

Why not do a stock take of your grass growth / your relationships & reflect on whether you are investing wisely, building up the "Legumes" & "DM" of your relationships, so when a dry season comes you will not be caught short.

IT'S A SHEEP'S LIFE

While out on a farm the other day I strode off down a rather long narrow paddock followed by Fluffy the pet sheep & a mob of lambs. I felt like the pied piper as they followed unsure of what was ahead of them or what they were meant to be doing. Fluffy was sure of what she wanted being an 11 year old, a good scratch of the nose & the warm gentle voice of the shepherd & his family that she knew so well. The others followed because they weren't too sure what was going on.

We were of course grazing the long acre on the side of the road. As these lambs had never been out there before they found the hard surface of the road fascinating. Even after awhile when some realised there was a reasonable amount of grass on the side of the road & began to eat there were those who stood right in the middle of the road. It seems you can lead sheep to grass but they don't always eat it.

As I stood being the human gate at one end of the long acre I thought about how similar it is to life. It seems that there are always people who will drift through life not really knowing where they are going. While others find anything scary & change seemingly paralyses them. While still others know what they want & go for it.

In the bible Jesus often used the metaphor of sheep & he even described himself as the good Shepherd. In the book of John it says, he goes ahead of them, & the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Do we know the voice of Jesus & follow him trusting in the same way Fluffy the sheep does?

Jesus said he is the gate & whoever enters by him will be saved, & will find pasture. As we go through the hard & rocky times of the drought are we looking to the true Shepherd for our needs or are we standing out by ourselves in the middle of the road of life?

NEW HOPE WHEN A DROUGHT BREAKS

A marvellous thing happened the other day and it has happened again several times. John was so excited about it he jumped up and down and ran around the house and at school he wrote a story about it. They even cut out cardboard shapes and coloured them in. You guessed it, I'm talking about the rain we have received recently.

Now seemingly the drought is breaking, God has answered our prayers for rain and we trust that God will give us the wisdom we need to make the right decisions as we move on into a recovery phase. It is great to see the green coming back into the landscape, there is a sense of new beginning and a general air of celebration. Celebration because there is a new beginning. Almost 2000 years ago a group of people found themselves in a desperate situation. All their dreams and hopes for the future seemed dashed with the death of their leader Jesus. But his death was not the end of the story, it like our drought, was only the start of a new beginning. Because 3 days after Jesus was laid in the tomb, (which was guarded by soldiers) the tomb was found to be empty. Jesus had risen from the dead. The authorities had no way of disputing the claim, as they could not produce the body, and what's more their guards had made sure no one had stolen it.

One of Jesus' disciples unsure of the claims, had to check it out for himself and asked Jesus to let him see and touch the nail hole scars in his hands. The rising of Jesus from the dead authenticates his teaching (what we read in the New Testament). The Disciples celebrated because out of their despair suddenly came new hope.

As we celebrate the dawning of a new hope with the breaking of the drought, why not come and celebrate the dawning for hope of all humankind - Easter - with us.

NEXT TIME YOU'RE AT THE FARM GATE

As I visit farms I find many different methods used to hold a gate shut. I have never come across a "real" farm that has the same type of gate latches on all its gates. Instead I have found many examples of kiwi ingenuity. I've seen chains, bolts, wire loops, bailing twine, wood, rocks, stakes, bent nails shaped in the form of a "S",... Have I missed any?

It seems the only gate latches standardised across the farm are those gates found on small holdings where you have a "life stayer". Then they have gone to the stock agents or even worse some hardware store (like Placemakers) and bought the clasp and chain. A purpose built device that does the job very efficiently, but!

What's wrong with chain, nail, wire you say. Absolutely nothing as long as it is reliable and does the job that is required. What's more it provides a bit of interest when someone like the minister comes across the farm with you and you're entertained as you watch them face yet another homemade latch.

I often think it's good that God did not make us all the same efficient models. A model that did the task right all the time and was the same right across His farm, the universe. Instead God chose to create individual humans who come in all sorts of sizes and shapes. Each crafted individually by God. Paul writes; "not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another"(Romans 12:4-5). And "God arranged each one of them, as he chose". (1 Corinthians 12:18)..

I'm glad he did, because it makes life far more interesting. So next time someone tries to say a Christian is "XYZ". Stop them and remind them about all the different gates and the latches on the farm.

PLAYGROUND THOUGHTS

Recently the family went to the Children's playground in Tahunanui. I find it fascinating watching John at a playground. Suddenly there is plenty of energy and nothing is done at a sluggish pace. He runs between each piece of equipment. He approaches each with caution, like the plank leading down from the tower. After one or two goes, confidence grows and so does his speed. The equipment is placed there for the fun of the children and for their education. It is designed to stretch the child's ability and education. John certainly enjoys being stretched, though there are times when it is a bit scary (like the big long slide).

How similar is it to our Christian discipleship? We are eager to walk in the way that God calls us to walk. The call excites us and often we find ourselves trying to run as fast as we can along the path. Like the playground there are things that stretch us and often we find ourselves a bit scared by what is in front of us.

The neat thing is that just as John has a parent's hand to help him over the various challenges until he is confident so to we have God's by His Spirit with us every step of the way. One of my favourite scriptures that I recall when I'm staring at a challenge that is in front of me is Joshua 1:9 I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (NRSV)

One way God is with us is by the example and encouragement of others in the Church. Just as John finds the strength and courage to climb to the top of the rocket because Dad is climbing and encouraging him, so we can be inspired and encouraged into a deeper walk with Christ by each other. This happens as we share our lives together. This happens in many ways from bible study to pruning a big tall willow tree.

Will you join me on the swings as we learn what God is calling us to as individuals and as a church?

SLOW DOWN IT'S SPRING

Every Wednesday morning a small group get together to pray for things of the church. This week I decided to bike to the prayer meeting as I was feeling in the need of the exercise. To bike I had to leave 15 minutes early and by the time I got out the door I was already 5 min late.

Luckily the stop /go men on the road works always wave me on my bike through, other wise I would become later. I attacked the hills with great bursts of energy and arrived at the top fighting for breath and looking forward to the downward stretch and speed. It was at the final hill stretch that I could not but be impressed by what I saw. As I got to the top I began to notice the snow topped mountains which were displaying their magnificence against the blue sky, there were apple trees waiting to burst into leaf, lambs frolicking in the paddocks.

How impressive God's creation is. Often in our rush we fail to notice God's handy work. A great mistake for it is easy to get bogged down with the busyness of life which can drag us down. For me the view at the top of the hill was the inspiration I needed for the day and the reminder that God is sovereign and mighty. A God I can trust and cast all my cares upon. For as sure as spring comes God will answer my cries.

1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. 3 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. 4 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, (Psalms 19 NIV)

THAT FIRE SIREN

One of the most satisfying things to do at the end of a long day is to slip between the sheets and close my eyes and wander off to the land of nod. Occasionally however that noisy siren which wails out in times of emergency interrupts this. Summoning the Fire Fighters and the Rural Fire Party again in times of need. Throughout the district feet hit the floor and clothes are quickly pulled on as the mad dash to the station begins. Each person giving up their time and energy for the service of others.

This reminds me of a graphic story Jesus told showing our responsibility towards others. In it he talked of a King acknowledging people for the way they responded to the needs of others. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter.. take what's coming to you in this kingdom... And here's why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.'

"Then they went on to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me- you did it to me.' (Matt 25:34-40) In their own way the feet that hit the floor when the siren goes off are taking seriously the point of Jesus story. For a Christian, belief in Jesus brings a desire to serve others.

When the siren goes at night, it takes me a little longer than others to respond because I have to stop and put my contact lens in. Sometimes this means I'm late getting there. "So late", my son has been known to ask in the morning "Daddy did you miss the fire engine last night"? How can you help those in need around you today?

TRAMPING

This week Pip, John and I spent 4 days tramping on the Heaphy track. The weather was gloriously fine (not so good for our water tanks but great for tramping).

The track between McKay and Heaphy Huts has several swing bridges. John viewed the first one from our lunch stop at the Lewis hut. It spanned from one river bank to the other, about 100m. It crossed where the river was particularly deep. He was excited about the big bridge he was going to cross.

This excitement waned as we edged out onto the swing bridge he became a little nervous. As we got further out the wind caught us and the bridge began to sway backwards and forwards, John was none too pleased.

John's experience with the swing bridge reminds me how excited we often are when God gives us a vision of something. It never ceases to amaze me how God chooses seemingly unimportant people, like you and I, for important tasks. After all he chose common fisherman to spread the Good News.

Commonly, just like John, we find it unsettling and sometimes frightening as we move forward in the direction of God's calling. Frightening and unsettling because we don't know what to expect. Knowing we are not in total control. As we trust and obey the Lord who is calling us, we are being used as instruments that are bringing the Kingdom of God more and more into reality. In this way others will know the love and freedom that we have received already.

John's reaction in the middle of the bridge was to hug dad tightly, that reaction reminds us that whatever we experience, we are called to hold on tightly to our Father in Heaven.

Joshua 1:9 encourages us "Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you where ever you may go.

WHY DON'T CHILDREN EAT VEGETABLES

It's been a funny mixed week with the weather. But no one can deny that spring is here. With it comes the opportunity of tackling one of those age old parental problems -- how do you get your young child to eat vegetables.

John and I went to town the other day to buy vegetable seeds. The theory is that if John plants his own vegetables that he is likely to eat the produce that he helped to grow. When we got home we got out some ice cream containers and filled them with potting mix. Then we planted the seeds. John had no concept of spacing (he just knew that the seeds had to go in the soil) after a bit of stress for dad we managed to roughly plant according to the instructions. We then watered the soil. John in his enthusiasm wanted to tip a whole watering can over them. (I laughed because I have childhood memories of planting marigolds that never came up because they floated away). Each day we have gone and looked at the progress. The first few days there was seemingly none, but in time the lettuces came through and the beans and courgettes are following.

Now what has this got to do with God? Have you ever thought how much easier it would have been for God if God did not let us take part in the building of the Kingdom of God. I'm sure that there are times when God gets as frustrated with me as I do with John. But in His mercy and love chooses to share creation with us and allows us to take part in it's development etc. Yes there are times when we as individuals and as a church do things in the name of God much like John planting the seeds and God with the love of a father allows us to do them so we can learn and grow.

Just like the seeds there are times when there seems to be no progress and at other times when there is rapid growth. May we enjoy our life and relationship with God as John does with his parents.

WHO DO YOU TURN TO IN TROUBLE?

"Marlborough farmers are anxiously looking skyward praying they receive desperately needed rain. " So was the opening sentence in an article in this weeks NZ Farmer.

I was thrilled when I read that sentence. Why? Obviously not because our farmers are faced with threat of drought. After all I'm one of them too!

Words like, 'anxious', 'critical', 'tight', 'struggling', 'stress' and 'desperate', are currently being used to describe our situation and feelings. Some farmers are experiencing sleepless nights as they try to make right decisions regarding selling off stock and balancing the feed budget for 'the remainder of the summer. With worry and lack of sleep feelings of tension may grow and before we know where we are relationships with those we love become strained and close to breaking point, to say nothing of the bank balance. There is no joy in drought.

But the joy that I found in that opening sentence came from the knowledge that our farmers know where their help will come from from the Lord who made heaven and earth and who causes the rain to fall and the sun to shine and that they are praying to him.

Let us all join our voices in prayer to the One at the top, who makes it all happen. Let us give thanks to him for the rain that he has sent in the past and for the rain he will send in the future. Let us pray that he will give us the faith to take each day at a time, to plan each day wisely, and to put ourselves trustingly in his hands.

God said, "Spread for me a banquet of praise, serve High God a feast of kept promises, and call for help when you're in trouble - I'll help you, and you'll honour me" Psalm 30:15