

28 August 2011 – Celebration of the centenary of King Edward Technical College

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:

What a special weekend this has been for those of you who have gathered to celebrate the centennial of King Edward Technical College. I'm sure you have had memories stirred and lots of laughter, delight in rediscovering old friends and old haunts, thankfulness for the gifts the past has given you, and acknowledgment of the people who are no longer here, whose absence you feel keenly.

I didn't grow up in Dunedin, and by the time I came here as a university student, the separation of King Edward Technical College into Otago Polytechnic and Logan Park High School was complete. But I have learnt quite a bit over recent weeks about how special King Edward Tech was – the first provider of technical education in the country, the largest school in the country for a time, the unique mix of high school, art school, technical classes, commerce, night classes.

And the music – I have heard so much about the music, the way that everyone was included in music-making, the organisation of classes according to vocal range, the mass concerts, the choirs and orchestra, military band, chamber groups.

I wonder what your abiding memories of King Edward Tech are? I suspect that for most of you they are positive ones, or else you wouldn't be here. The teachers who inspired you, the friends you made, how daunting you found it at the beginning to be in such a large school, the lifelong learning that began there, the technical skills you learnt, the songs you sang that have stayed with you always.

“Hallelujah – for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” I have been told that many of you carry those words in your minds and in your memories, singing as the whole school Handel's magnificent Hallelujah Chorus. “And he shall reign for ever and ever, for ever and ever and ever: King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

During your years at King Edward Tech, did God meet you there? “What? No, of course not” is probably the answer many of you would give to such a question. We don't expect to meet God at school, or in many other places in Kiwi society, apart from church on Sunday mornings. New Zealand schools have from the beginning of our educational history been staunchly 'secular', as laid down by the Education Act of 1877 –

though at the time 'secular' meant non-denominational and non-sectarian rather than 'nothing to do with God'.

And yet, I wonder whether in your reminiscing this weekend, or at other times when you've thought back to those far off days, you have recognised in your experience an encounter with something, maybe something you couldn't find words for, which was like a burning passion, an unquenchable fascination, a call on your life, a light lighting up the darkness, something which has shaped or guided or informed the way you have lived ever since. I believe at the heart of that encounter is God – the God who is I AM who I AM.

Moses was not doing anything particularly religious or spiritual on this particular day. He was a man with a difficult past – he had struggled all his life to know where he belonged. He had been born a Hebrew but then was adopted cross-culturally into the household of the oppressor of the Hebrews, brought up as the son of the daughter of the Pharaoh. His confusion led him to strike out for justice on behalf of his own people when he saw a Hebrew slave being ill-treated – but in his anger he struck and killed the overseer, and then tried to cover up what he had done. Unsuccessfully - so he fled, leaving everything behind him, all the confusion over who he was, all his life as he had known it, both the people he was born part of, and the people who had raised him. Where did that leave him? A nobody without family, without connections? A lost wanderer? Someone trying to find identity and meaning and purpose?

He became a keeper of sheep, not his own sheep but the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro. And in the course of his daily work, he came across this strange, disturbing, intriguing phenomenon – a bush that was burning, and yet was not consumed. He turned aside to look more closely, and there God met him. Moses discovered that there on a barren mountainside during a day of regular work, he was on holy ground,

because there he was in the presence of God – God who is I AM who I AM.

God who met Moses in a burning bush, according to this ancient story, does not remain in holy splendour, far above and beyond all knowing. This God is one who sees misery, who hears the cries, who knows the sufferings and who comes down to deliver. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of this ancient story that you may have heard and dismissed, this God is often met in the midst of oppression and pain and hardship, not magicking it away, but sticking around in the hardest of times, hanging in there in the deepest darkness, coming to be alongside us in the loneliest places.

Moses discovered in that mysterious encounter his life's work and purpose – to bring God's people the Israelites (Moses' own people too) out of Egypt. A daunting prospect, to which Moses' first reaction was “Who - me? Why me?” God's response is simply “I will be with you.” That is who God is, the I AM who I AM, the God we meet in the pages of the Bible, above all the God who lives as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth, who was also called Emmanuel – God with us.

How did your life's work unfold for you – in a moment of enlightenment or conviction, in the unfolding sense of 'rightness' as you followed something that caught your attention and your interest, maybe in a way you were not even aware of, but when you look back at choices and decisions and direction, you can trace the pattern that developed. The work that shaped your life and ignited your passion may have also been your employment, or it may be that what you did in your leisure time, or in a voluntary capacity, or alongside your paid work. Whatever it was, it brought you a sense of satisfaction and identity and achievement.

And there, I suggest, God was with you. God who created the universe, who brought order out of chaos - God made us as human beings in the image of God, each one unique, each one valuable, each one with a contribution to make. I believe that the desire to work, to produce something worthwhile, to be creative, to develop and use skills and abilities, all those things which education at its best identifies and encourages, all these are signs of God's image in us, and areas where we meet God in our lives.

And God meets us also in hard places, in dark places, in places of conflict and pain and suffering - there God is with us. When we cry out in pain or frustration, when we suffer, when we are mistreated, God knows about it and God is with us there. That is where God has been before, when God brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt (that's where this Exodus story is going to go), when God continued to be with that people through their history of success and failure, of settled living and exile.

Above all, God has been there in Jesus, who suffered much at the hands of the powers that be, and was put to death. The story we read and learn and share in this place says that God is seen most clearly in Jesus, in the way he lived his life as one of us, and in his dying on the cross.

Jesus refused to repay evil with evil, refused to use violence against those who opposed him, refused to hate or curse but rather prayed for forgiveness for those who were his enemies, showed compassion and kindness, and loved them to the end.

And his end was not the grave but the empty tomb – death could not overcome the power of such love.

This is the Messiah we sing about in the Hallelujah Chorus: King of kings and Lord of lords – but the path to that victory was a path through life and pain and suffering and death. And it is this Jesus, Lord and Christ (or Messiah) who is God with us, Emmanuel.

God said to Moses as he stood before the burning bush “I AM who I AM – and I will be with you.” This is the God who is with us still.

Hallelujah!

