



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

“I am a man”

Thoughts about gender and inclusion on Suffrage Day

Rachel Mackintosh, 22 September 2019

I am a man

Rachel Mackintosh © 22 September 2019

When I was 17 I wrote a 500-word essay in English on this quote from King Lear: “I am a man more sinned against than sinning.”



Just to recap in case you have forgotten or never knew, King Lear was on a heath in a storm, having been thrown out by his daughters Goneril and Regan, even though he had given them half his kingdom each and was expecting to live with them in his old age. He had been proud, arrogant and pretty irritating. They had been venal and unloving.

In my essay I made an analysis of how right and wrong he was, and how right and wrong Goneril and Regan were. It was the typical school analysis of the theme of moral ambiguity and filial ingratitude:

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child”.

I dwelt on the beautiful opposition of “sinned against” and “sinning”.

I had a good time, but I missed the first half of the sentence: “I am a man...”

Shakespeare wrote King Lear in 1605, in the time of the notion of the divine right of kings. Kings of England were considered to hold their positions because god had put them there.

A few centuries earlier, in a Roman Empire that was colonising Britain, kings were not just in place by divine right, they *were* divine. Caesar was God.

So for a king, and possibly a god, to say “I am a man” was perhaps more interesting than whether he was too arrogant or his daughters too cruel ...

If he was a man, he was part of humanity, with the possibility of belonging, being included, being one of us.

In the context of the sharply hierarchical society that was early 17th century England, a king who saw himself as a man gave a glimpse at the possibility of dismantling a hierarchical structure that kept most in misery and a small few in extreme comfort.

And in 2019, eight men — are they kings? are they gods? — own as much wealth as half the world’s population.

Plus ça change ...

Moving from the late Bronze Age to the 20th century, we find another instance of the phrase “I am a man”. This time the phrase is definitely central to the story and you wouldn’t miss it if you were writing the essay. In this story “I am a man” refers not to a ruler descending from his throne to be part of the humanity he had ruled over, but to a community of working class black Americans.

On 1 February 1968, two Memphis rubbish collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Eleven days later, frustrated by the city’s response to the latest event in a long pattern of neglect and abuse of its black employees, 1,300 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike. Sanitation workers demanded recognition of their union, better safety standards, and a decent wage.

The union had attempted a strike in 1966, but failed, in large part because workers were unable to arouse the support of the Memphis religious community or middle class.

Conditions for black sanitation workers worsened when Henry Loeb became mayor of Memphis in January 1968. Loeb refused to take dilapidated trucks out of service or pay overtime when men were forced to work late-night shifts. Sanitation workers earned wages so low that many were on welfare and hundreds relied on food stamps to feed their families.

In New Zealand we don't have food stamps, but we do have working people living in cars and using food banks, because the wages that employers pay in this country are not adequate to live on.

On one level the Memphis sanitation strike was about material things — safety, decent hours and adequate incomes.

And it was about who people are in this world.

The sanitation workers' motto can be seen here in this photo.



“I am a man.”

If you have the chance, I recommend seeing the documentary *At the river I stand*, which includes footage of the striking workers marching single file through town, wearing these placards as sandwich boards. The still photo is powerful — the moving footage is extraordinary.

“I am a man” is a statement of dignity and of inclusion. A demand, one hundred and five years after the end of slavery in America, for black people to be included, as part of humanity.

And you can see in the photo what happens to people who demand to be included in the human community when it suits those in power to keep them down. Mayor Loeb had introduced martial law, and these men were marching between soldiers pointing guns at them and tanks rolling down the streets.

The earlier strike had failed because of lack of community support. This 1968 strike had considerable community support, including from Martin Luther King. It was in Memphis, when he was there to support the strike, that King was assassinated.

The night before his assassination, he addressed an audience in Memphis of striking workers and the wider community, a community under extreme stress, and riven by tension, friction and a lack of unity.

King said this:

“Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike, but either we go up together or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”

The international workers of the world have a motto that you hear often in union speeches all over the English-speaking world: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” King was exhorting people to include the striking workers in their circle and to include themselves in the striking workers’ circle.

He held that this required a dangerous unselfishness. Changing the world is dangerous.

What is a dangerous unselfishness in Aotearoa today?

After the Christchurch massacre on 15 March this year, we heard this sentence quite a lot in the first few days:

“This is not who we are.”

This sentence is about inclusion and exclusion. “This is not who we are” includes New Zealand among the righteous. We don’t do that sort of thing.

It excludes the person who chose to kill 50 — now 51 — people at prayer, in a dramatic and violent act of hatred and dehumanising.

Saying “this is not who we are” gave us an opportunity to be our best selves, as we stood together and spoke of unity and love.

Saying “this is not who we are” was a denial. I am glad to see that — at least among the circles I move in, and in the articles I read — we have moved from there to recognise that this is indeed who we are, that the massacre didn’t occur in a vacuum.

We live in a deeply racist country, with a different but similar history to the history of America, where colonisation is our story, based in the notion of a superior people with the right to “save” an inferior people, and just incidentally where the wealth of the colony is sucked back to the colonising power.

Dangerous unselfishness now means acknowledging that racism, learning where it comes from and taking part in all and any individual and collective efforts to dismantle it. Creating a place where even a king or a god or a member of the dominant culture may say “I am a man.”

I am giving this talk in the week of Suffrage Day, 126 years after women in this country won the right to vote. This is a talk about women’s issues today. I’m about to get there, via the 1980s.

Ursula Le Guin — who wrote the Earthsea books, among many others — wrote an essay in the 1980s called ... yes, this is the linking theme ... “I am a man”. Here is an excerpt from the essay:



“I am a man. Now you may think I’ve made some kind of silly mistake about gender, or maybe that I’m trying to fool you, because my first name ends in *a*, and I own three bras, and I’ve been pregnant five times, and other things like that that you might have noticed, little details. But details don’t matter...

“I predate the invention of women by decades. Well, if you insist on pedantic accuracy, women have been invented several times in widely varying localities, but the inventors just didn’t know how to sell the product. Their distribution techniques were rudimentary and their market research was nil, and so of course the concept just didn’t get off the ground. Even with a genius behind it an invention has to find its market, and it seemed like for a long time the idea of women just didn’t make it to the bottom line. Models like the Austen and the Brontë were too complicated, and people just laughed at the Suffragette, and the Woolf was way too far ahead of its time.

“So when I was born there actually were only men. People

were men. They all had one pronoun, his pronoun; that’s who I am. I am the generic he, as in, ‘If anybody needs an abortion he will have to go to another state,’ or ‘A writer knows which side his bread is buttered on.’ That’s me, the writer, him. I am a man. Not maybe a first-rate man. I’m perfectly willing to admit that I may be in fact a kind of second-rate or imitation man, a Pretend-a-Him. As a him, I am to a genuine male him as a microwaved fish stick is to a whole grilled Chinook salmon.

“I admit it, I am actually a very poor imitation or substitute man, and you could see it when I tried to wear those army surplus clothes with ammunition pockets that were trendy and I looked like a hen in a pillowcase. I am shaped wrong. People are supposed to be lean. People are supposed to be lean and taut, because that’s how men generally are, lean and taut, or anyhow that’s how a lot of men start out and some of them even stay that way. And men are people, people are men, that has been well established, and so people, real people, the right kind of people, are lean. But I’m really lousy at being people, because I’m not lean at all but sort of podgy, with actual fat places. I am untaut.

And then, people are supposed to be tough. Tough is good. But I’ve never been tough. I’m sort of soft and actually sort of tender. Like a good steak. Or like chinook salmon, which isn’t lean, or tough, but very rich and tender. But then salmon aren’t people, or anyhow we have been told that they aren’t, recently. We have been told that there is only one kind of people and they are men. I think it is very important that we all believe that. It certainly is important to the men.”

I love this essay.

I almost don’t want to talk about it, since so much of what it says is unspoken. I’m tempted just to reread bits.

“People were men. They all had one pronoun, his pronoun; that’s who I am. I am the generic he, as in, ‘If anybody needs an abortion he will have to go to another state,’”

O! How we have been rendered invisible and ridiculous!

With King Lear and the Memphis sanitation workers, I have talked about inclusion in humanity. With Ursula Le Guin we see what qualifications are required for inclusion:

“And then, people are supposed to be tough. Tough is good. But I’ve never been tough.”

And so women — and anyone with non-“standard” dispositions — come up against the qualifications required for inclusion in society, as people. We must have or aspire to the qualities admired in “the right sort” of men. We must be tough.

Certainly if we expect to hold leadership positions we must be tough. We must appear tough and we must be decisive. Make the decisions. Stick by them.

I have personal experience of these requirements. When I started in a senior position in my union, one of my male colleagues told me I needed “to develop a bit of mongrel ...”

I asked, “What does ‘mongrel’ mean?” He couldn’t really say ... “You know, mongrel,” was the explanation. I still don’t know what he meant. Or rather I do really.



Shall we consider that image. When people say mongrel, we do not tend to think of a Pekingese–papillon cross. No, we think of a street-fighter, a pit-bull with a temper. A mongrel dominates through violence, tearing the throat out of any challenger to stay on top. If a woman wishes to be a leader, she must do that or people won’t take her seriously. Show them who’s boss.

And then she’ll still no doubt look like a hen in a pillow-case, and if she’s not careful someone will notice, so she must develop all sorts of compensations.

Inclusion becomes more complex.

What is dangerous unselfishness now? What is dangerous unselfishness when it comes to including women in society?

Dangerous unselfishness requires society to change what it values.

Those qualities that women must display to be worthy of inclusion — toughness, leanness ... —are not neutral qualities; they are value-laden qualities that favour the already dominant.

We have recently made a note-worthy step in changing what society values.

In the union movement we organise for greater equality chiefly by increasing the economic power of those who have less of it.

You may be familiar with the movement-wide pay equity campaign, fronted by Kristine Bartlett, where the country eventually recognised the fact that work done mainly by women has been undervalued *because* it is done mainly by women; because employers have undervalued the skills, efforts and responsibilities involved in women’s work.

We did this so that women would have the economic freedom to be included in society. The outcome is that 55,000 working people have their income increased by up to 49%.



There are families now whose children can participate in Saturday sports because their parents can afford to buy them the shoes.

And yet still we are expected to be violent and dominant if we are leaders.

And yet still there is more change required in what society values.



In 2017, Metiria Turei was the leader of the Green Party and she told her personal story from almost 25 years earlier, to illustrate how impossible it is to survive on a benefit in this country.

That was the point of the story: the benefit system is unfit. It is dehumanising and inadequate.

Metiria stood up in public and didn't try to be a man. She wasn't being tough, or lean. she wasn't showing us who was boss. She was showing leadership by being one of us; one of the most vulnerable, one of the people crying out for inclusion in our society.

O! the irony.

People who have presumably read Dickens, and who can see the injustice of Irish convicts in the 18th and 19th centuries being transported for stealing bread for their families, turned on her. The righteous in this country hounded her from office; made a clear distinction between the deserving and the undeserving and excluded her forthwith from acceptable society. They decided she was more sinning than sinned against and banished her to a heath.

There was no dangerous unselfishness in this country's reaction to one woman leader's use of her vulnerability to lead us to a kinder place.

The concept of inclusion implies that someone does the including and that others have inclusion bestowed on them. What happened to Metiria is a clear illustration of who gets to include: it is the dominant, wealthy, patriarchal, pākehā, non-neutral "right sort of" man. The minute Metiria did something that showed her as a hen in a pillow-case, the gig was up.

Dangerous unselfishness requires us to change that. Not by the gracious willingness of the dominant to include black people, Muslims, women, trans and gender-diverse people, tangata whenua as "men", but by a radical recalibration of what it is to be human. Our common humanity is not dependent on our all being the same. We are all different, and it will take all of us.

So that a God-King can descend from a no-longer-required throne and be one of us, so that a black man can leave a no-longer-required category of sub-human, so that a woman is no longer required to be a man ... it will take dangerous unselfishness.

And it will take fixing the benefit system.

I close with one of my favourite quotes. Australian Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, said these words to live by:

"If you have come here to help, you are wasting your time. If you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

