**Island Bay Presbyterian Church**

**Sermon: Feb 26th 2017 – The Nordmeyers**

Last week we read a saying by Jesus about **friendship**, something that Margaret picked up in the kids talk.

We didn’t have time to go into it last week, but it got me thinking: everyone has had a friend at sometime, right? Even if that friend is a stuffed toy or a pet, no-one gets through life without ever having had a friend…

Does this mean then that friendship is just a standard part of life and we move on to other topics, or does Jesus call us to pause and meditate on friendship just a little longer? Does Jesus frame friendship in a new light for those who seek to follow his way?

And, obviously because I am bringing it up, I say yes!

Jesus *does* shine a new light on friendship, and although I’m going to give a brief overview on the life and faith of the **Nordmeyers** in today’s sermon, we’re going to start by looking at Jesus on friendship.

- Because usually in today’s world, people make friends with people who are like them… which is fine – people with a similar background or interests or profession or opinions. Through work or sport or online hangouts, it is natural to gravitate to people who are like us in some way.

- Also, often but not always, people cultivate friendships as long as it feels good or it’s convenient. If something interrupts the friendship though, like a disagreement or someone moving away, then people may put the friendship aside.

*-* And then occasionally, (it’s not done often and it is looked down on), but occasionally people cultivate friendships to get something out of it. They choose people to befriend because they want something rather than because they like the person.

(Am I right?)

***Jesus however was called a friend of sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes***…; we believe that Jesus left heaven to come to earth, get alongside us and be a friend to humanity… And last week we read Jesus teaching us that there is no greater love than being willing to lay down your life for your friends…

In all this Jesus does redefine “godly friendship”

– by befriending people ***who are not like you***,

- by befriending people because they would appreciate your friendship and not because of what they can give you,

- and by giving the example of *sticking with your friends* and going the extra mile for them – even to the point of laying down his life for us.

So, I use that meditation on friendship as modelled by Jesus to introduce the Nordmeyers. Because, point one of ‘Jesus friendship’ is becoming friends with people who are not like us – but… how do we actually meet and become friends with people who are different to us and have little in common with us?

I would say, that one of the few places in modern society where people who don’t have too much in common get together, is in a church. For in a church you find people from different cultures, with different educational backgrounds, different hobbies, and (with Nordmeyer in mind) who support different political parties.

These days you can’t even assume that everyone who is part of a congregation is a Christian; seekers and people on other spiritual paths join churches too. What connects us here is a shared interest in pursuing a spiritual life in community, and a shared interest in this Jesus guy and the things he said.

And so, around 1951, **Arnold Nordmeyer** (whom some have called the best prime minister we never had) and his wife **Lady Frances**, joined the Island Bay Presbyterian Church. This was after he won the local seat for Labour in a by-election and moved up to Wellington.

Nordmeyer was a famous and well educated man, and had already had an impressive career before he got here - before he got to Island Bay, which at that time was not regarded as a desirable place to live: it had this nasty cold wind that came off the Cook St and so houses were cheap here. Some locals, in fact, were so poor they had to go out to sea and catch yucky crayfish to eat for dinner!

There were some professional couples like the Nordmeyers in this suburb and in this church, but most people were tradespeople who earned their living by the sweat of their brow.

The Nordmeyers could’ve gone to a larger and more influential congregation in the city, alongside other political couples like themselves, but they didn’t. They joined their local Presbyterian church and opened up their lives and their home, and befriended the people here.

Now, although Lady Nordmeyer did more in this congregation with the crafts and the donkey, the harvest festivals, inviting the youth to meet in their home, and the Pressy Players with their regular dramas etc… we don’t have time to look at both Arnold and Frances in this sermon.

So, I will focus more on Arnold, and I would like to invite people to share stories of Lady Frances over coffee later.

Arnold Nordmeyer was born Heinrich Nordmeyer in 1910, but there was this world war thing, and the name Heinrich became seriously uncool.

Arnold was a devout man with a devout mother, who thought deeply about his faith. He was a bright guy and did a BA at Otago before feeling the call to become a minister and doing a theology degree at Knox College.

He then started at his first parish as a Presbyterian minister in 1925 at Kurow, where Richie McCaw comes from. It was a small town of under 400, but served a large rural area. ***Nordy*** (as he became known) was rated as approachable, an excellent preacher who even cracked jokes, and started lots of community sports teams.

He also met his wife Frances there. She was 15 when he arrived and 19 when they married, and was a member of both his Bible Class and his hockey team. These days a minister would probably go to jail for that sort of carry on, but back then it was fine!

And a successful marriage it was too, with two children.

However, the beginnings of this new calling and family life were overshadowed for the Nordmeyers by the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.

Butter prices collapsed, and unemployment rose. Kurow slowly became a destination for the unemployed because of a new hydroelectric dam that was in the early stages of being built there, and men started arriving in town. Barbers, tailors, musicians, painters, clerks, factory workers… everyone was looking for work. And so a camp was built just out of town to house 1,000 workers and their families.

Workers there had it better than being unemployed in the city, but pay was low, there was no overtime, standards were lax and accidents were common, including some deaths, and many workers were put up in tents in the freezing cold snow of winter.

I have heard a story of Nordy seeing families shipped down from the winterless north to work on the dam, arriving in the snow with no shoes or jackets. It was pretty dire. In the mix there were also the shanty towns that sprang up for families whose fathers *hadn’t* found work at the dam but stuck around in case a job came up, and where they could hunt rabbits, unlike in the city.

With their Christian convictions the Nordmeyers couldn’t stand back and watch.

*Where though do you start in the face of such need?*

First you need **a good team,** so (ably supported by their wives) Nordmeyer got together with the local doctor, who later also became a Labour MP, and the local headmaster. These three men went out to the camps and the shanty towns and got to know the people.

Nordmeyer did church services offering pastoral support, but they also organised culture and entertainment with drama groups, debating societies and sports teams. Fundraisers were held to buy shoes and coats, and there was direct intervention in the lives of some families like the story of Nordmeyer discovering one of the men was using his bath to brew beer and keeping his children unwashed and filthy – Nordmeyer went to visit and pulled the plug on all this beer.

But, you intervene in one family and there are still dozens of others with dysfunctions; you give one child a pair of shoes, but there are still dozens who need shoes.

*What to do?*

And this is when Nordmeyer started getting ***political***.

With his two mates they started looking at how to apply their Christian ethics to this situation of need on a large scale. So they started a group health insurance scheme and other experiments that laid the groundwork for our country’s social welfare system, that Nordmeyer helped bring in as Health Minister and later Finance Minister.

I once heard the legend that New Zealand’s welfare state was birthed via late evening discussions soaked in whiskey and prayer in the manse at Kurow, but when I asked Nordy’s son about that he said “*No way*!“

He said his mother would never have allowed his dad to bring mates over to the family home, and anyway, the Nordmeyers were teetotallers.

So after 10 years as the local minister, he quit in 1935 and stood as the local Labour MP, hoping to change the world, being one of about half a dozen reverends who were voted in as part of the early Labour government.

He was made Health Minister five years later, and in that role he helped bring in **the Old Age Pension and free health care** (major changes we still all benefit from), before losing his seat when Labour lost power, and coming up to Island Bay to contest the by-election and become MP here.

While he was an elder of this congregation, taking his turn to preach on occasion, Labour came to power again and he was made Finance Minister (imagine that in your church!). This was a hard job; he had to now grapple with how to *pay* for these social welfare programmes. It was now his job to balance the books as directed by his party, and he was pressured to increase taxes*.*

In 1958 he brought out what became known as the **Black Budget** in which the tax on petrol when up 75%, and the tax on cigarettes and alcohol went up 100%. This was done to fund things like free health care, but still the people hated it as it impacted on their private pleasures. Labour lost the next election, and although it wasn’t all his idea, Nordmeyer’s political career was forever tainted.

We even had DB TV ads a few years back, giving us an ‘*alternative facts*’ version of history where Nordy, a man who gave his life in compassion and service to the least, was portrayed as the puritanical Presbyterian enemy of the working man; whereas the founder of DB Breweries, who gave his life to brewing alcohol and making lots of money for himself, was portrayed as the caring champion of the thirsty masses. Nordmeyer still bears that stigma.

So, Nordy was an incredibly able and compassionate man. He and his wife saw a situation of great need and sought to respond to it as Christians – going on from that experience to feel called to give their lives in political service to try and make NZ a more compassionate and fair nation through our laws and institutions.

Some Christians think that institutionalising Christian ethics in law like this is a good idea; others *really don’t* – it is a big debate. Nordy’s motives were pure though; many benefited because of them, and he suffered for them.

At one point he found being in opposition so frustrating, as presumably some of his schemes were rolled back, that he had a heart attack.

I also chatted with Lloyd Geering a while back about Nordy, since Geering followed after him as minister in Kurow. Geering said that the people *loved* Nordy as their minister, but they felt betrayed by him as a politician – for they were the people he was taxing in order to pay for health care for the riff-raff. Following his convictions brought broken relationships.

And then he was publically vilified for the Black Budget, and was ditched as party leader just before Labour won the 1966 election, missing his chance to be PM.

That cannot have been fun…

He did earn a lot of respect among his colleagues though.

His opposite number, **Rob Muldoon**, labelled Nordy as the most intellectually honest politician of his age, and a man whose word you could trust. The Nordmeyers and the Muldoons became good friends, and people would often see them when Muldoon was PM, walking down the hill together from their house to buy fish ’n’ chips of a Friday evening, down at the far end of The Parade.

So, a fascinating career. And again, despite almost becoming the leader of our nation, he chose to become a member and befriend the people here at his local Presbyterian Church, rather than going into the city to a larger congregation with more political influence.

We may have different opinions of his politics and his way of going about making New Zealand a more compassionate Christian nation, but I do think that he embodied friendship as modelled to us by Jesus.

- For he was a friend to people who were not like him, people he hadn’t even met! - working people, the unemployed, the struggling.

- He was also willing to set aside his first calling as a Presbyterian minister (at which he excelled and for which he was loved), to come to Wellington to be a politician. Becoming a person of controversy, a person who was (and still is) vilified at times in the media.

- But yet he stuck at it. He had been given his vision of a better world, a vision like in Isaiah 65 which we read together to start today’s service…

- a world where Christianity was put into practice and where all were given a chance to survive and thrive,

- where people can live in security in their own homes, and not have them taken away by those who are stronger,

- a world where people can eat from their own vines, enjoying the fruit of their labour,

- and a world in which the poor will not bear children doomed to misfortune, but where all get a fair go.

Nordy committed himself to that vision, he stuck with it, and we still live with the benefits of what he did.

May we too come to embody Jesus’ friendship as the Nordmeyers did, and may we too become captivated by the vision of God’s coming Kingdom, yearning to see it break forth around us in *our* time and *our* place.