

Living in the land, celebrating the seasons of Aotearoa.

So much of our spiritual inspiration is drawn from the past and present traditions and teachers of the Northern Hemisphere. But we live in Aotearoa! What does it mean for us to observe Advent in Spring, Lent in Autumn, New Year in June? How can we help ourselves and those we accompany to broaden our experience of God in our own context, our own land, our own seasons? A chance to explore and exchange ideas and practices together.

Introduction

I came to NZ in 1999 with very little sense of homecoming or belonging. Both my growing up and my adult years were in the Northern hemisphere. Most of my spiritual nourishment was drawn from English and European traditions – although I had heard of Joy Cowley! And I had read James K Baxter. But that was about it.

It took me several years before I even began to think of NZ as home and that really only happened when it became clear that because of our parents' health and their needs we would not be able to go and live in Asia again.

So in the last few years I feel I have received something of an assignment from God. Learn to live here. learn to live well. Learn to belong in this context .

Part of that has been and is discovering how my faith life and the life of the church seasons fits in with the seasons of Aotearoa, for me and for those I accompany.

The other part has been about connecting with the land and history of NZ.

So today I'll be talking a little about both aspects of this assignment, but coming at it more from the angle of the seasonal invitations.

How does this relate to spiritual direction practice?

To be honest, not a whole lot, it's mostly been about personal and family spirituality.

BUT I have a few observations to make as we go through.

- As I learn to live more mindfully and be more present myself this is something I can share with my directees, and model for them.
- For people who are adrift in prayer, the landscape and the seasons can be anchoring.
- For people who are bored with current ways of prayer and current practices of spirituality this can be a whole new world to explore.

Introducing these –

- What do I have on my little table in my room?
- What pictures and symbols do I have on display – can I rotate them?
- What resources do I have on offer – poems and scriptures that relate to the current season?

Four seasons.

For each one I'll talk a little about some of my discoveries and then invite ideas and practices from you

One of the most helpful things I have found is Juliet Batten's book, *Celebrating the Southern Seasons*. (Random House 2005)

(Also see her website www.julietbatten.co.nz)

She talks in detail about the seasonal festivals and observances of Pagan Europe, Christian Europe and pre-European Māori.

Juliet Batten advocates moving the current festivals to the appropriate season – for example, she would celebrate Christmas in June, Easter at the Spring equinox in September. I wouldn't do that because I value the solidarity of the worldwide Christian community observing the birth of Jesus at the same time. Our faith is not simply seasonal, it is historical and social.

So – instead of pining for snow at Christmas and spring lambs and daffodils at Easter I would rather delve into how Christmas takes on its own summer polish and Easter is fittingly celebrated in autumn.

And to begin – earlier this month we came to the point half way between the winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. It's called 'First Light' – when we notice the days starting to lengthen, the first buds on trees and perhaps even some of the first spring blooms. That's on August the second. And a few days is the feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus on August 6th. This year for the first time I made the connection with the foretaste of light at the Transfiguration that leads on to the great light of the Resurrection. It's not a big deal – just adding a shine to my reflections on what the story of Jesus' transfiguration means for me.

Spring

Spring begins in September – on the 1st for some people, others hold to the Spring equinox as the proper date.

Celebrating the Southern Seasons – some of Juliet Batten's suggestions for inner focus (p 123)

- what new quality, activity or attitude do you want to foster?
- where are you ready for a surge of growth?
- what is it that lies within you in seed form, waiting for the right conditions for growth?
- how can you support what is greening in you right now?

31st of October and 1st November

This is when the Northern hemisphere celebrates All Saints and All Souls Day – in late Autumn for them. If your church celebrates these days that's of course when you will do it.

And in fact when it comes to the Saints, it is perhaps fun and fitting to remember them in spring time. And here is our perhaps soon-to-be saint! But when it comes to All Souls Day this is one event where I do prefer to go with the season and also with traditional Māori practice, and remember my dead as autumn is turning to winter – I'll talk more about that later.

In terms of the turning of the year, October 31st and 1st November equate with the 30th of April and the 1st of May, Pagan Beltane, or in Christian Europe, May Day, a time to celebrate the greening and flowering of the earth as warmth returns.

For all these days, Juliet Batten has suggestions for personal reflection and ritual .

Parihaka Day – 5th November

This isn't a seasonal story, it's a historical event. A story to remember and meditate on.

The Māori word for spring is 'Kōhanga' – the digging time – and Parihaka is about the Taranaki iwi, led by the prophet Te Whiti-ō-Rongomai peacefully resisting the annexation of their land by continuing to plough and dig it. Here's an extract from a prayer poem

*Parihaka speaks to us of peace,
A new way of seeking justice,
It opens up the horizon of hope.
To bring glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill to all people.*

*E ngā manu e rua, Te Whiti o Rongomai kōrua ko Tohu Kākahi, Ngā mihi, tēnā kōrua.
Korōria ki te Atua ki runga rawa, maungārongo ki te whenua, whakaaro pai ki ngā tāngata
katoa. Mō āke āke, Āmene.*

Advent

I know that we name the first of December as summer but in Wellington at least that seems ridiculous – I think of it as still spring until we come to the solstice in the 21st of December.

To me it seems utterly appropriate to observe the preparation for the coming of Christ in the time of readiness, beginnings, hopefulness, waiting.

The colours become more and more vivid and intense. Kowhai, rata, pohutakawa, poroporo and all the flowers our Pakeha forbears brought with them. I think of it as a bright stained glass window.

It's a time for preparations, for decorations, for carol singing in the spring sunshine and a time to count down the weeks and the days to Christmas ...

Summer

Summer begins around the time of the solstice – the 21st of December.

Summer begins with Christmas. And the sun at its highest fittingly marks the birth of the Son of the Highest.

As Shirley Murray's hymn says –

*carol the summer and welcome the Christ-child,
warm in the sunlight and sweetness of air.*

Time for feasting and family and holiday and hopefully, although not always, lots of sunshine.

I still dream of a white Christmas –

but it's the white of Manuka blossom

the white of foaming surf,
the soft white peaks of cream on the Pavlova

By having Christmas in summer time we do lose something that been traditionally evocative about Christmas – the birth of light in the hardest, darkest, coldest time of the year.

But I maintain that what we might lose there we gain by celebrating Epiphany in summer. Epiphany is all about the demonstration of God's glory to the whole world.

So this season of golden sunshine and flaming pohutakawa and immense and dazzling light is wonderfully evocative of that.

You might be surprised to know that one of the most traditional of 'Northern' carols is perfect for our Aotearoa Christmas – *Hark the Herald Angels sing*

*Hail the Heaven-born Prince of peace,
Hail the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.*

And as we move on through the summer we might pray with Leunig

We welcome summer and the glorious blessing of light. We are rich with light, we are blessed by the sun. Let us empty our hearts into the brilliance. Let us pour our darkness into the glorious, forgiving light. For this loving abundance, let us give thanks and offer our joy.

Amen.

February 2nd

Astronomically the next significant date is February the 2nd – half way between the solstice and the autumn equinox – in the old European tradition this equates with 'Lammastide' and here there's actually a significant divergence between the European and the Aotearoa experience.

For Europe this is a time when the first fruits were being gathered, and because we've brought our vegetables and fruit from Europe, it's become a time of harvest here too.

But for pre-European Māori there was less food available because the kumara were not yet ready for harvest. Juliet Batten suggests that this can be a good time to reflect on both our plenty and our want. In this world, even here in Aotearoa, some go hungry while others have plenty.

And our prayer might be on this day

'To those who are hungry give food. To those who are full give a hunger for justice.'

Autumn

And so we move into March and Lent and Easter come with Autumn.

I'll read a little more from Juliet Batten's book. (page188)

At Autumn equinox, light and dark come once more into balance. It is time to give thanks and make offerings, to acknowledge the power of seeds to carry life over the dark months ... the

moment to tune in to the mystery of the changeover, knowing that what appears to be a part of the dying is really a part of the movement forward into renewal and rebirth.

So a time of leaving, letting go, surrendering, burying, planting, decaying, and ending. It may fit in better with the journey towards Calvary than the resurrection.

I like to combine the Northern hemisphere symbols of coloured eggs with our autumnal flax which holds the fragile eggs beautifully. And flax of course becomes essential as we prepare for Palm Sunday.

The poet Ursula Bethell, writing in Christchurch has some wonderful Autumn poems, coming out of meditations in her garden.

Dirge

Easter. And leaves falling.
Easter. And first autumn rains.
Easter. And dusk stealing
Our bright working daylight;
And cold night coming down
In which we may not work.

Easter. And morning bells
Chime in the late dark.
Soon those fluttering birds
Will seek a more genial clime.
Time has come to light fires
For lack of enlivening sun.

Summer's arrow is spent,
Stored her last tribute.
So, now, we plant our bulbs
With assured vision,
And, now, we sow our seeds
Sagely for sure quickening.

So, purging our borders
We burn all rubbish up,
That all weak and waste growth,
That all unprofitable weeds,
All canker and corrosion,
May be consumed utterly.

From [A Garden in the Antipodes](#) (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1929)

Anzac Day

And then we move in in Autumn to Last Light, which is when in the Northern Hemisphere Halloween would fall. I do have one friend who observes Pumpkin Day on the 30th of April. But the event actually closest to that date which has ongoing significance is of course ANZAC Day.

Like many New Zealanders – I have an ambivalence about it. My grandfather fought in WW1, and my Great Grandfather was a chaplain at Gallipoli. My sister lives in Germany so my niece and nephew are descended from people who fought each other as enemies 100 years ago.

Winter

It's a bit hard to decide whether the next trio of events belong to the end of autumn or the beginning of winter. And to be honest although these are my three favourite consecutive Sundays I haven't thought of any very particular seasonal connections with Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity.

If I push it I can make the connection with Pentecost and fire. And the picture I have here is the fire of a hangi, and the result of this fire is food and friendship shared by the community.

However, at this point I will switch over and talk a little more about the land and how Aotearoa is speaking to me about God and my relationship with God.

In 2012 we lost a very beloved little girl who died the day after her fifth birthday and the next month Paul and I went on holiday. And of course we took our deep grief with us.

One morning we got up before dawn and went to a bush reserve and in the dark, by torchlight stumbled down a steep path into dense forest and gradually the light came up and the bird song began. And in that dawn chorus we heard the song of the kokako – like the seraphim singing, completely unearthly in its beauty.

So part of me was full of wonder and delight but I was still carrying this deep grief for our little girl. As we went on we were accompanied by a fantail which hovered close to us – so close we could almost touch it.

And it felt like God the creator coming close to us to reassure us that we were still loved and cared for and so was our precious girl.

So then of course I looked for other images. And it was very obvious that the Tui, the most vocal and visible of the birds was Christ the Word, and as for the Spirit – that had to be the Riroriro, the Grey warbler, which is often heard but seldom seen, like the wind that blows where it wants to and you hear the sound of it. I have never managed to photograph it because it never stays still but whenever I hear its trill I am reminded of the Spirit.

So I wonder if anyone else has images of the Trinity that have ongoing significance for them from this land?

The community at the River Monastery of Ngatiawa have a song

God, you are the mountain, rising above

Jesus, you are the mighty kahikatea tree.

Spirit, you are the river running through the land.

Matariki

The final thing I want to talk about is not a tradition of the church but belongs entirely to Aotearoa. This is something I knew nothing about when I came to NZ and I think it's only been in the last 12 years or so that it has grown to a big celebration.

The pre-dawn rise of Matariki, also known as the Seven Sisters or Pleiades, traditionally signals the Māori New Year under the maramataka, or lunar calendar. In general, celebration of Matariki starts when the first new moon can be seen following the pre-dawn rise of Matariki (this will happen on 28 June 2014.) Traditionally, Matariki was both a time to commemorate those who had passed on, and celebrate a time of plenty when stores were abundant from horticulture, hunting and fishing.

Another story. Fabian – a Māori man, in his 40s, had some connection with our community but had not been around for a while.

Invited to church he demurred with 'I'm not a Christian' – but came for the guitar playing. It must have been about the time of Matariki because at one service Fabian heard the Bible reading from Job 31:

*Who is the mother of the ice?
Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens?
For the water turns to ice as hard as rock,
and the surface of the water freezes.
"Can you direct the movement of the stars—
binding the cluster of the Pleiades – of Matariki
or loosening the cords of Orion? – of Tautoru
Can you direct the constellations through the seasons
or guide the Bear with her cubs across the heavens?"*

Fabian was overwhelmed to hear that in the Hebrew scriptures there was the record of the rising of the Pleiades – and the association with winter – he had some feeling that this tradition could become a home place for him.

He's now learned the Maori language – his own language that he's not known – he leads communion services at church in Maori, and at his instigation we've started using Maori responses as alternative to English. Fabian's embrace of his own language and history became an invitation for me to embrace it too.

Fast forward a couple of years and another Matariki and my friend Sally invites me to get up with her before dawn and go to the top of Mt Victoria to see the star rise.

In the freezing dark on the 21st of June, the darkest, longest night of the year I am watching the sky and listening to a Māori astronomer chant the names of the stars and constellations. And then he said in English – *these are our stars!* – and I had a spine tingling moment of being included, of claiming my place on this land of Aotearoa. I wasn't born here. But I can be adopted by this land. Papatuanuku, the earth mother, can be my mother too, Maui, the master mariner, can be my Tipuna.

So I'm discovering more ways to celebrate Matariki and it's easy really because it's becoming more and more of a public celebration.

This has become the season when I remember the ones who have died.

I bring out the Christmas stars and hang them again.

I bring out my Advent candles and light them again in midwinter.

And I bring out memories of beloved people who have left us in the last few years.

So to finish with, here's a psalm for midwinter and Matariki.

Psalm for Matariki

Lowness of winter sun,
thin-ness of shadows,
paleness of winter sky,
now praise the Lord.

Bareness of cherry tree,
seed-seeking silvereye,
spent husks of harakeke
now praise the Lord.

Now in the dropping,
now in the deepening,
now in the loosing,
God's name be sung.
Now in the leaving,
now in the losing,
now in the ending,
God be our home.

Whirring of tui-wings
flitting of fantails,
wheeling of seagulls' flight
now praise the Lord.

Squelching of muddy grass,
yielding of sodden moss,
puddles and dripping
blades,
now praise the Lord.

Now in the star-rise,
now in the Little Eyes,
now in the dawn-watch
God's name be known.
Now in the story-ing,
now in the sky-gazing,
now in the waiata
God's love be sung.

Coldness of shadow,
lateness of light
swiftness of sunset,
now praise the Lord.

Fierceness of frosty night
hardness of icy earth,
wildness of southerly,
now praise the Lord.

Now in the grounding,
now in the falling,
now in the dying,
God's Name be known.
In the remembering,
in the relinquishing,
in the returning,
God be our home.

Growing up in India, working 20 years in Bangladesh and now resident in Wellington, please don't ask me 'where are you from?' Since doing the SGM formation course I've been offering spiritual direction and supervision in Wellington. My difficult and joyful 'God-assignment' at the moment is learning to live well in Aotearoa, even though Asia will always be home.

*Adrienne Thompson
46 Hathaway Avenue, Karori
Wellington 6012*

ACSD Training Event, Home of Compassion, Island Bay, Wellington. August 2015