

WEEK 2: WHAKARONGO (to sense, listen, perceive)

[Renew Together Week 2: Bangladesh \(vimeo.com\)](#)

Welcome to week 2 of *Renew Together*. Last week our theme was mutual humility. The second value I want to bring you today is Whakarongo – listening. Humility as it is actioned is about *putting others first*.

Whakarongo¹ as an action is that *we follow Jesus into new areas and new places*, and we do that by listening, listening with the sense of really hearing.

Whakarongo is *listening wisely to God*, to all the hints and nudges that the Spirit gives us because the world has changed and continues to change-quickly making wisdom, in how we go about reaching people so important.

Whakarongo also means *having an ear to the times in which we live*, so we understand what's going on for people, globally, in our communities, and right outside this very building. Listening with intent and empathy.

Listening, even when what we believe does not align with what others believe and how they live their lives. Why? These are the very people God has put around us to reach for his kingdom.

I'm reminded, that though what we're seeing is like an advancing of what is dark and anti-God, this gives us no reason to retreat. That it seems hard and hopeless and often confusing to us, God still says "I'm with you". He still says "go". He still says "I'm willing that none should perish but that all might come to everlasting life". The same Jesus who looked out on the crowd (Mark 6:34) and had compassion on them is the same Jesus who wants us to show compassion...

There is a sense in which Whakarongo today is like what read we of with the sons of Issachar. (1 Chron. 12:32) *from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do*

The sons of Issachar had analyzed and understood their times and had perceived correctly what those times were all about and they knew what to do because they understood what was happening.² This is what we need today...but it's not an easy task navigating this world, even for believers.

As we navigate and respond to this changing world sometimes that requires us to review what we've been doing and how we've been doing it so as to respond to this changing world, because we want to be effective, right?!

¹ Whakarongo is a suburb of Palmerston North, New Zealand, between the city and Ashhurst ([Whakarongo - Wikipedia](#))

² [Who understood the times? \(aussievitamin.com\)](#)

So that there is no confusion I'm not talking about being liberal with the truth. No, culture and society might change but God doesn't change, his truth doesn't change (*same yesterday...*). But what I am talking about is adapting where we can. So whakarongo means **showing compassion, showing mercy** – remember the Parable of the Samaritan (*see Luke 10:37*) – *grace*, as we're called to do, responding to people's needs as we're required to....and it all starts, with listening.

The kind of listening, really listening, we're talking about this morning, **requires courage**. That is because as we hear God, as we see the state of our world, and see lost people, perceive what we can do and decide what we need to do, courage is required to be obedient to follow through and do what God says (*story to conclude is a great example of this*).

When we *commit to listening, with compassion* we should never be surprised at what God shows us and particularly so what God can show us at times when it really counts.

Now I do not profess to be an expert but I was in a difficult situation a few weeks ago and had reached the point where any inspiration I had, had all but dried up and I literally did not know how to move forward, I was completely out of my depth. Then it was almost like the Holy Spirit said "say this, this is how you move forward" I did, and the situation completely turned a corner. I might say the work that Karyn and I do with people bereaved by suicide has forced us to become listeners.

So summarising the four key parts to Whakarongo (listening...) as I see them:

- a. Listen to God
- b. Listen to the times (*compassionately, mercy...*)
- c. Listen to people
- d. Listen for how to follow Jesus into new things – *where are we to **follow** Jesus? (action, mission...)*

Folks we must once again be reminded and encouraged that each one of us, as the body, are a critical and essential part of whatever new thing God might be doing.

If I can stay on that point for a moment: I've been so convicted in my preparation of this message. Though the last 2 years have had their impact on this church, I believe God has/is showing us that this is still his church, he has not forgotten us. I believe he is showing us as we think about mission here, and our support of mission abroad that we are a gold mine of resource and gifting and skill, and of our time. We all have a gift, all have a role, all have something to give. We'll know what that is as we embody the value of listening for this next season of mission ahead of us.

Come with me to Isa. 43 as we explore this theme of *listening* to God with a view to *following* him into new things.

(Vv.18-19) *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."*

Isaiah 43 begins by reminding the people of Israel that God created, redeemed, and summoned them by name. God reminds them that they belong to God (43:1), that he is faithful and will be with them in tough times (43:2-3). God's love for them comes through clearly later in the passage: (43:4-5) *"you are precious and honoured in my sight...I love you...do not be afraid, for I am with you"* In verses 6-13, God reminds them he will lead them, unlike the other gods, and they will be God's witnesses. God alone will reveal, save, and proclaim: (43:13) *"when I act who can reverse it"*

We see in v.14 God reminds them how he had rescued them from the Egyptians, through the sea in the Exodus (Isa. 43: 16-17). This reminder of how God has saved the people of Israel in the past could have led them to *complacency*, as if there is nothing more to be learned. God will just do the same again that God did in the past, right? However, as Paul Hanson says, Isaiah believed that the hour in which his listeners found themselves called for watchfulness...the Jewish community was being engulfed by international developments that threatened to obliterate its identity and vocation as God's people.³

Yet right at the point where the people were about to begin looking back at the old ways and traditions, Isaiah says *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past."* (Isa. 43:18). Now if we're familiar with this book we might think there's a contradiction here. Because in 43:18 we read *"Forget the former things"* and a few chapters later in Isa. 46:8-9 (look there...) God says *"Remember this, keep it in mind...Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me."*

So, what is going on? The past is important. Of course it is, because it tells us of God's faithfulness, and we can learn much from the past. But the past should never bind us. Our gaze must be looking forward, looking to the new things God is doing and calling us into.

In Isaiah 43, many of the Jews, now in exile in Babylon, wouldn't like the news God has for them. They want the old familiar story served up again, not a new one. So Isaiah surprises the people by reminding them that God is there for them, that he led them out of Egypt, that he is a faithful God, but then they are to *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past"*. Why? Because, Isaiah wants them to see God is doing a new thing, it's springing up...!

³ Hanson, Paul D.: Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching-Isaiah 40-66; John Knox Press: Louisville-p72

That new thing is, God wants to lead them out of exile in Babylon (*where they are*). But the way back to their homeland is through the desert wilderness, fraught with all sorts of challenges and opposition along the way. Now they may have been free to leave Babylon and head home; God had made the way. But the people were still caught in a lethargy, a kind of invisible cord holding them, dulling their alertness to the present⁴ and preventing them from hearing God and moving forward.

So they needed to be shocked out of that complacency and lethargy. Isaiah 43 was a wake-up call to the people of Israel, and I would suggest to us today. This passage recognises the place for appreciating and honouring the past, worshipping God for his faithfulness in the past. However, we look back with the express purpose for how we move forward, in faith. We think of the many faithful, spirit-filled men and women of God who built this ministry and served faithfully, who listened to God and followed Jesus into new things. They would be like today's equivalent of the list in Hebrews 11. (*Herbert...they believe God has and will be faithful*)

God has not stopped being faithful, therefore neither should we, in his mission before us. We must be careful of our hearts being full of *"If only I could, if only it could be, if only that was..."*. God is saying, *"do not dwell"*, do not pay an inordinate amount of attention to what has gone on in the past.

Rather, trust him, see the new thing he is doing and follow him there. *See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?* (Isa. 43:19) That's a crucial question isn't it? Did the people of Israel perceive what God was doing and that God wanted to call them into this new thing? It's helpful to know that in traditional translations the first word in Isaiah 43:19 is *"behold"*. In fact, there's over 1000 references in the Bible. It's not a word we use much today, but it is there to capture the reader's attention. It means to pause, and to pay attention to what God is about to say.

We are living through a time of huge global change at many levels. Life for our churches here, and our mission globally, is not the same. We aren't going back to the past; we are being called into a new reality, with new challenges and oppositions.⁵ How will we respond? Do we hear God when he says *"behold..."* and position ourselves before God to perceive what he is doing?

God says, *See, (behold) I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up...*

"Spring up" reminds us of seeds sprouting new life or grass that springs up. Here, God is saying he can do immeasurably more than we could imagine.

⁴ Hanson, Paul D.: Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching-Isaiah 40-66; John Knox Press: Louisville-p73

⁵ The world is changing rapidly. Not least in mission. What was working well twenty or thirty years ago is simply not working now. There have been major tidal shifts as:-local leaders take over leading ministries, churches and mission projects in their context, and in ways that reflect their cultural norms and style.-Biblical understanding and theology emerges not only from European universities and American seminaries but from African villages, women leaders in the Middle East, indigenous theologies and emerging missional contexts-as the full costs of colonialism are seen and greater emphasis is given to decisions being made as close as possible to those directly affected by their outcomes.-as the relative cultural strengths and financial costs of locally led mission in comparison to mission led by expats becomes increasingly more stark-as Covid and climate change bring new obstacles-as governments, especially those in regions where the least reached live, make it increasingly difficult for Christian witness

And where will God make new life, new opportunities, new ministries... spring up? In the desert wilderness and out of the challenges! When we look at the events and circumstances surrounding us now, it is easy to see stress, barriers, and impossibilities. We might think it's hopeless. How could God ever break into such darkness? Remember God sees all situations quite differently.

Over and over God uses the metaphor of wilderness when God is preparing them for something new and better. And for God, the wilderness is a place of transformation and new possibilities. Moses does not meet God in the palaces of Egypt, but in the desert. Elijah meets God in the wilderness. Ezekiel, wondering what God's plan is, is led to the wilderness – the valley of drybones. Jesus is preparing for his ministry and the Spirit leads him, where? Into the wilderness. John the Baptist says, *"in the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord"*. In church we talk about green pastures and fresh water, but not so much about the wilderness.

In this context, God says: 1. I can make a way, 2. I can make a stream 3. I can do the new thing. Whakarongo. See it! Behold! Pay attention to me, listen to me. I'm doing something new! The unprecedented and unexpected! Do you not perceive it?!

What new thing could God be putting before you/us today? Where is he asking you to listen to him, listen to the times, listen to people and listen for how to follow Jesus into new things?

There is one measure by which we can know if we're really prepared to listen and obey, and that is first and foremost in what we pray and how we pray. Isaiah 65:24: *"Before they call, I will answer."*

This is a testimony written by a doctor who worked in Africa.

One night I had worked hard to help a mother in the labour ward; but in spite of all we could do, she died, leaving us with a tiny, premature baby and a crying two-year-old daughter. We would have difficulty keeping the baby alive; as we had no incubator (due to no electricity to run it). We also had no special feeding facilities.

Although we lived on the equator, nights were often chilly with treacherous drafts. One student midwife went to the box we had for such babies and the cotton wool that the baby would be wrapped in.

Another went to stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly in distress to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst (rubber perishes easily in tropical climates). "And it is our last hot water bottle!" she exclaimed. As in the West, it is no good crying over spilled milk, so in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over burst water bottles. They do not grow on trees, and there are no chemists down forest pathways.

"All right," I said, "put the baby as near the fire as you safely can, and sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm."

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with any of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny baby.

I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle, and that the baby could so easily die if it got chills. I also told them of the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died.

During prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt conciseness of our African children. "Please, God" she prayed, "Send us a hot water bottle today. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, as the baby will be dead, so please send it this afternoon."

While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added, "And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?"

As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say "Amen?" I just did not believe that God could do this.

Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything; the Bible says so. But there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending me a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever, received a parcel from home. Anyway, if anyone did send me a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent, that there was a car at my front door. By the time I reached home, the car had gone, but there on the verandah was a large 10kg parcel. I felt tears pricking my eyes. I could not open the parcel alone, so I sent for the orphanage children.

Together we pulled off the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box. From the top, I lifted out brightly-coloured, knitted jerseys. Eyes sparkled as I gave them out. Then there were the knitted bandages for the leprosy patients, and the children looked a little bored. Then came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas - that would make a batch of buns for the weekend.

Then, as I put my hand in again, I felt the.... could it really be? I grasped it and pulled it out. Yes, a brand new, rubber hot water bottle. I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could. Ruth was in the front row of the children. She rushed forward, crying out, "If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!"

Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully-dressed dolly. Her eyes shone! She had never doubted! Looking up at me, she asked, "Can I go over with you and give this dolly to that little girl, so she'll know that Jesus really loves her?" "Of course," I replied!

That parcel had been on the way for five whole months, packed up by my former Sunday school class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. And one of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child - five months before, in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it "that afternoon."⁶

Ruth's bold and *audacious prayer* and the *listening and obedience* of the Sunday school leader.

You may still be wondering why on earth so much emphasis and importance on the value of listening. If we're not listening to Jesus, if he is not the frequency we're tuned into, who are we listening to? And how could we expect to be effective as a church in God's mission in the new things that are springing up without really hearing, him? Hard, yes. Opposition yes. But church there are people and situations that need us to forget the former things, dwell not on the past, see the new things God is doing, and listen and obey. Joyya, Loyal workshop, GEM school, all our mission partners need us to listen and obey. Families that need us to listen and obey.

Where is Jesus calling you to follow him, today?

Behold! I'm doing something new! Unprecedented and unexpected! Do you not perceive it?!

⁶ This story originates from Helen Roseveare, a missionary from Northern Ireland who worked in the 1950's in Belgian Congo