When I read the reading from Matthew earlier in the week, I got captured by the verse, “You are the light of the world, a city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

This verse caught me for two reasons, one was this idea of visibility, how are we as a church visible in the world, so I thought about that, and the other reason was the importance that that verse, in particular the phrase “city on a hill” has in American political thought.

Sadly, I could not shake that vein of thinking off.

So, this Sermon takes a look at that, but also at a new Zealand context for that idea.

One Sunday in 1630, on board a small ship, at sea of the coast of north America, near the modern-day city of Boston, a puritan Preacher called John Winthrop, preached an amazing sermon, some of the words and phrases from it have entered American consciousness and are still referenced today.

The most commonly quoted lines from the sermon are these:

<quote>

The Sermon, or at least this oft quoted section of it feed into an understanding of America as a shining example of wealth, power and dear I say it greatness. Sometimes this is given the label of American Exceptionalism.

In some quarters this became almost like a theological doctrine of sorts on a part with the notion of the divine right of kings, or elements of jingoism that surrounded the 19th century British empire.

Sadly, this jingoism taken from these few words at the end of the sermon, displaced some of the startling ideas in other parts of the sermon. The qualities that Winthrop strove for amongst his flock were qualities like, not owning more than you needed, to be of assistance to others when they were in distress. He talks of their need to work together, suffer together, to be a community together in the service of God.

When they create this form of community together, then they will be known, and upheld as a shining example to others like a city on a hill.

Powerful stuff.

What has become powerful is this idea of the specialness of America, sadly shorn of the underlying traits that Winthrop talks about.

What challenges me about this, and something I want to think about today, is what makes us special as a country, or what might be our equivalent of a sermon preached on board one of the early ships that brought folk to this country.

Sadly, or possibly gladly none seem to exist. All we have of Marsden’s sermon on Christmas day is the text from Luke.

So, in the absence of any fine sermons, what can we use to guide us in defining what it might mean to be a New Zealander.

We have our people of course, people like Ed Hilary, whose life is an exemplar of resourcefulness and charity. We have rugby players like Dave Gallaher, or Richie Macaw, we have women like Kate Shepherd or Katheryn Mansfield, we have literally dozens of men and women who could be shining examples to us and to the world of what makes a new Zealander.

But I want to introduce you to one little known New Zealander that I met when he was in his mid-70’s.

When I say, little know, he was tremendously well known within the world of Maori in New Zealand, but few within the European world of New Zealand would have known of him. He would not have minded that.

In 1952 the then colonial administrator of Niue was murdered in his bed by three young islanders. This was a shocking act, and if nothing else showed that relationships between the Island people and the European administration had hit a low ebb.

The New Zealand government need to appoint a new administrator, and fast. They looked round to find someone to fill the role.

They chose a young civil servant in the Native Affairs department called Jock McEwen.

Jock was married and had a young family of three lively boys.

What was different about Jock from other young civil servants of his generation was that he had immersed himself learning all he could about Maori, the language, the customs, the music, the songs.

By the mid-1950s, he had studied enough about Maori carving to be able to carve his own Waka huia.

So, he was a natural choice to send to Niue, and on the voyage to the Island he started to learn the Language, and even started to make his own dictionary of the language.

When the family arrived, they settled in and on the first Sunday, they went to church. Jock was a good Presbyterian, though his wife was an Anglican.

The local people were stunned, as few of the earlier colonial administrators had ever been to church on an ordinary Sunday.

The people soon realised that Jock could play the Piano and sing.

At his first meeting with the Island council he found a very stiff and formal group of men, dressed very carefully in their best cloths. The atmosphere was a bit tense, so Jock, greeted them in their own language. Smiles broke out and soon the group were working well together in the business of the Island.

Jock respected the Island way of life, and entered into it by observing the customs, respecting the customs, learning the Language, and working alongside the people to help develop the Island.

I could tell many tales about Jock McEwan, from the days that I knew him, from what I have read about him and from what others have said about him.

But what I want to do is explain why I think he could be an exemplar for us, as a New Zealander, who expresses what it means to be a New Zealander.

Jock McEwan, deeply respected other people, to the extent that he wanted to know about them, learn their language so he could converse with them, treat them as equals, who had valid points of view.

He never lost sight of who he was, but he had a positive view of who others were.

Later in life he taught carving to the prisoners of Rimutaka prison. He never saw the young men he taught how to carve as being inferior to him, and he never had a problem with them handling sharp carving tools.

He exemplified for me the qualities that I think could make New Zealand a great country, and I don’t think in any way that this will be easy for us, because most of what drives us today is not Jock’s curiosity about the other, or acceptance of the other, but a fear and growing selfishness towards the other.

Our scripture today talks about salt and light.

These two things are what they are in and of themselves. Nothing makes salt, salt, nothing makes light light.

Christianity is not something that comes from outside as it were, but must come from within us. The virtues and values of the beatitudes are not things to be imposed, but they are inward qualities like salt and light.

Jock McEwan, yes learned languages, learned how to carve, how to sing, but his natural dignity, his deep respect for the other, his humility and humbleness came from a deep well within him, that was I believe feed by his Christian faith, his knowledge of God’s love and grace in his life.

The beatitudes that we read at the start of our service today, are not laws about behaviour to be imposed, but they are ways of being that come naturally to a person who has within them a deep knowledge of God’s love and grace.

By knowing that we can live that, by knowing that we can become salt and Light, we can be as a city on a hill.

Amen.