

# A new witness

Psalm 13; 1 Genesis 22:1-14; 2 Judges 11:1-3;29-39

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A couple of weeks ago, I attended the Spiritual Care Australia Conference and I learned a lot!<sup>1</sup> Dr Karen Pack kicked off the conference each day with a keynote address taking us on a journey of stories: whose stories; who's in and who's not there and how people can be traumatised by tales we think nothing of. We heard how the marginalised ARE marginalised because they are not in the stories as they are retold.

She started us off on the subject of her PhD: women leaders in Social Justice. In her studies she examined dozens of church histories in detail. Guess what? For round about every 65 men recorded, one woman would be mentioned, usually because she did great things AND she was the wife of somebody important (like a bishop). Even in the modern texts, like Brewer's book on the history of women in Australian churches mentions 550 men and 50 women. In the texts describing the conversation and controversy around women's ordination, the men who fought for them; the men who took it to court to prevent it; the lawyers for both sides and the judge; the Minister that conferred ordination were are mentioned by name – but not the names of the 85 women ordained. They are lost in the fog of history.<sup>2</sup> This is not a feminist diatribe. It is simply to illustrate how 'history' is told. So for example....

We know that Captain Cook 'arrived' on that specific January day and we are taught a lot about the things white men did after that. It's in the textbooks.

When the British arrived in January 1788, there were more than 1500 Aboriginal people living in the area from Botany Bay to Broken Bay and as far west as Parramatta. They belonged to many clans.<sup>3</sup> It was not an empty land.

But did you know the Gweagal knew Cook was coming? The Yuin people lit fires on the headlands marking the ships progress up the coast. The fires went all the way to the Wodi wodi people in the Illawarra and onto the George's River mob. Everyone knew something was coming up the coast and they have their own stories about it. after all, ships have to stop to take on water. These events form stories we've never heard but that have been told in clans all up and down the coast and are still told today.

There was another witness to Cook's arrival – the same event but seen from a different angle. I'd like to hear that story.

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<sup>1</sup> You'll hear more from the conference in the next few weeks

<sup>2</sup> We have a woman elect Moderator, a woman General Secretary and a woman President but it all depends on who writes the history whether they will get column space. We know almost nothing about the women involved in the creation of the Uniting Church, my sister-in-law being one of them. It is in who tells the story. Did you know the Salvos were founded by a woman? Catherine Booth. The RSPCA in Australia – founded by a woman, Francis Levy.

<sup>3</sup> including the Gadigal, Wangal, Wallumedegal, Boromedegal, Gamaragal, Borogegal, Birrabirragal and Gayamaygal.

When we tell family stories, recorded history and even Bible stories, it is important to think about whose voice we are repeating. Who else was there?

Today we have the story of Abraham and Isaac.

This story has been used by Jewish and Christian preachers to hammer the idea of faithfulness to the nth degree. THIS is how far you should go to obey God.<sup>4</sup> And yet, if we stop and think about it, I don't think most women would read it that way. But Sunday school teachers taught what they were taught. They promote this as a GOOD story and the skip over just how confronting it is.

How do you think this story might have been told from Sarah's point of view?

**(pause for comments)**

I ask, is the God we worship?<sup>5</sup>

How do you think the boy felt? What would be the lasting impact?

**(pause for comments)**

This is a story that has been used, dare I say brutally, to make sure men understood that they might be the masters of their household but they should remember how powerless they are compared to the power of the church authorities as 'authorised' by God. It has been used and misused by old and new denominations.

Now let's listen to a very different story which has much in common with this one.

**(reading 2 Judges 11)**

This is the story of Jephthah and his much loved daughter. The part we left out of the reading is where his brothers came to him and begged him to fight in the war because they were losing. They promised, if he pushed the Ammonites back, he could inherit what was his and be the head of the family. He would be rightfully restored and they would obey him.

Right at the beginning, Jephthah is like Ismael from last week's readings – He is the oldest son pushed out of the nest because his mother is the 'wrong' mother. He is denied his natural inheritance so he goes off into another land and he creates a fierce rag-tag army something like the Wagner group.

Here the stories diverge – Abraham is called by name and told what to do. Whereas with Jephthah, the spirit of the Lord travels **with** him always and it is Jephthah who makes the oath

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<sup>4</sup> For many people, this is the type of traumatic story that intersects with lived experience and drives them from the church. We promote this as a GOOD story but abused children would not see it that way.

<sup>5</sup> Is it possible that this is the story of a very, very old man who thinks he hears the voice of God?

to God. If you do this, then I will do that. Transactional bargaining rarely ends well. Jephthah made the offer – not the other way around.

Jephthah offers up the sacrifice. “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”<sup>6</sup>

After all his battle successes, he goes home and the first person out the door is His only child: his daughter. The one so delighted to see him she runs out to meet him. “When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.”<sup>7</sup>

Now in this story, it is the daughter who is dutiful. She has agency, unlike Ismael or Isaac. She bargains for time to grieve for the life she will not live and when she is done, she returns knowing her fate. Jephthah carried out his oath and she is sacrificed. She is the one who is dutiful. She could have stayed in the hills.

How would she tell the story?

Who else is not included in this story?

And once again, to illustrate how women are invisible, unlike Isaac, and just like the ordinands in the history of the Uniting Church, she is never named. Yet she is the dutiful one who made the sacrifice.

There is a very good reason we have a Triune God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not just 3 facets of one – they are different perspectives. Each would have a different take on these stories. They would definitely tell them differently.

We owe it to our God to see the world through different perspectives.

When we became Christians, we were charged with being witness to the Good News. However, we are also called to be new witnesses, seeing the Gospel with fresh eyes and ensuring our story includes all. Jesus looked to the margins and saw the un-noticed; the untouchable, the invisible and those cast out. He looked up in the tree and down to the beggar in the gutter. He knew his old Testament. He saw and reflected scriptures in a new light that astounded his listeners and brought new insights. Are we to follow a dogged faith, the faith of stories told to us that we retell unthinkingly or are we called to be new witnesses to God’s work in the world; the wonder of love and beauty; the miracle of life?

Revelations 21 says:

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<sup>6</sup> Judges 11:31

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 35

## The New Heaven and the New Earth

**21** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home<sup>[a]</sup> of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them;  
they will be his peoples,<sup>[c]</sup>  
and God himself will be with them;<sup>[d]</sup>  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.'

<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

How long will WE turn away? We called to listen to the voices we can't hear: The silent participants in this precious life; the earth; the nameless, the disempowered and marginalised. We are called to hear the stories and see the earth anew.

I will finish with a poem from 2021 called Windsong.

When the wind puffs its loneliness  
or steadies its caresses in a warm stream  
rustling my hair gently-  
or carries the pepper smell that hides behind eucalypt;  
or the subtle salt and greenish smell that floats off the water...  
when the wind batters at the windows –  
relentlessly crying to get in...  
and in an evening sigh of relief  
breath of the day, expired...  
That is the song of God breathing.  
Life  
as you witness.<sup>8</sup>

Let us be new witnesses and not ones who repeat old stories mindlessly. We need to read scripture mindfully, not through the lens of the stories we were told. Let's experience it anew.

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<sup>8</sup> J Shannon, *Windsong*, Nov 2021