

Are we better than that?

Exodus 31: 1-14, The Golden Calf, Matthew 22: 1-14, The wedding banquet Rev J Shannon

Sermons can be illusive. I had one all written in my head which was blown apart by the events of this week. So let me start by oversimplifying the parable and then I will try and put it into today's context.

There was a king who had no friends. Clearly, he was a bit of a bully. He sent out invitations for the dinner at his place and no one responded. He sent out his servants to remind people and the servants were either ignored or tortured. Not a good sign – so he sent his army to punish his friends. Then he sent his servants out to gather up anyone they could find, even people from street corners, and bring them to the feast. It was now an 'open table' – until someone turned up late, in the wrong clothes and then he dealt with them – as he did his 'friends' - with cruelty. No wonder he was a lonely man.

Now if you take the word 'feast' or "dinner" and change it for 'temple' or 'church' you are on the right track.

You see, we are back to the human nature we talked about last week. A bunch of outcasts form a church or society (or country) and before you know it, they have set up rules to exclude everyone else. They start to treat "others" as they were treated. We don't mean to. It's not intentional but we do what we know – in other words what has been done to us.

...And that brings me to the news this week. That is exactly what the Israeli government did to its Arab citizens. Through the 70s I saw the government oppress proud Arab-Israeli citizens into radicalism.

I was appalled at the invasion of Israel. The sheer terrorism and brutality on civilians was intentional and inhuman. To say I felt it in the gut is an understatement because you know I lived there. These are real places and real people to me. After the initial repulsion and shock, the horrible realisation of what the retaliation would bring hit me as well. I felt sick. I knew what was coming. Hundreds, if not thousands of women and children will die in Gaza. They are no more armed and ready as the desert concert goers and the kibbutzim¹. They are the playthings of war.²

I was nauseated by the celebrations in Sydney when I saw people celebrating murder on the streets and chanting "(the F word) the Jews!" while the police stood by.

¹ Hezbollah are notorious for hiding their guns and ammunition in hospitals, schools and apartment blocks.

² Peace is not in the interests of the political leaders on either side. There is no mileage in politicians seeking populism.

Would they have been allowed to march down George Street saying the same thing about any other ethnic group? No. We have laws against hate speech. It was a mob.

I am ethnically Jewish, and I don't support Netanyahu's extreme right-wing government. But here are some facts. There are around 16 million Jews around the world. They are of all colours and political persuasions³. A little less than half live in Israel and the majority **don't** support Netanyahu's dismantling of the judiciary. He is their Trump. But think about it. Italy has had 69 governments since WW2. They average about 1 year 11 months – but we don't blame people of Italian descent all over the world for the turmoil. People are not marching down the streets of Sydney saying “%^#! the Italians!”

That does not excuse the government's treatment of Palestinians and I stress, it was the government of a sovereign nation. We condemn governments but not the people. But...

Antisemitism is inherent, endemic in almost every society – just like any racism. It bubbles under the surface all the time.⁴ Dare I say it? The establishment of Israel was only possible because Europe thought it could be rid of its Jews once and for all⁵. And in the settlement, the UN did 'terra nullis' to the Palestinians just as the British did to Australian Aboriginals. Nope – nobody here – let's give the land away.

The Sydney Palestinian spokesperson tried to distance the movement from the mob and publicly apologized in every media but the images are burned on our TV screens. The mob may not represent them – but that's what will be remembered.

We see what we want to see.

My neighbour explained why he was voting 'no' because he had once lived in Moree and he'd seen what a mess Aboriginals made of everything they put a hand to. He said they were hopeless, welfare drunks and it was his personal experience that was dictating his decision. I stress, this is a good and kind man. He would never see himself as racist. But I can only assume that he has not been to Moe or Robinvale or Bidwell or any of the white towns down on their luck, drunk and on welfare. Clearly, he has never been to a long stay caravan park or the outer suburbs of any city where people are trying to claw their way out of a cycle of poverty, drugs and pokies. I can only assume he has never met the first nations academics and lawyers, the teachers I've worked with, athletes and the health workers who are leaders in their community

³ Jews equal 0.2 of the world's population - and yet, still a 'threat'. Also, think about the breadth of Christian practice and belief...practicing Jews are no different: some orthodox, some reform; variations between native countries etc

⁴ Did you know the Jewish schools have armed security? There is vandalism and threats throughout the year. Imagine if it was Catholic schools.

⁵ Did you know that during the war, British occupied armies in the promised land were turning back and firing on boats of European Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany?

and spokes people on the national stage. And I can only assume that he gets to make the rules about who messes up, who joins the church – and who does not. You see, there is no difference between the two propositions. You can come to dinner if you wear the right clothes.

It's been a tough week. I had a woman yelling at me about the violence and abuse the 'yes' campaigners have rained down – not on her, not in Merimbula – not anywhere she can name... but somewhere. She'd heard about it (on the internet?) and that gave her permission to be nasty to me in Tura Beach.

On top of all this angst and anger, I sat in the sunshine and finally read Jane Fry's welcome⁶ in the Spring *Insights* edition. It is an excellent sermon. Basically, she was saying how collective emotions can be positive or negative. She talked about the joy of the Women's World Cup and how unifying and delightful the journey was – until we lost. She talked about the high we take with us from music concerts – the music still ringing in our ears. And the collective grieving and almost compulsive gathering after the Lindt café siege. People needed to be in that place, together to mourn strangers.

“The willingness to be present to strangers in their joy and pain is a defining characteristic of the ministry of Jesus Christ.”⁷ There are many examples in our texts. “But the church has not always done well and has to acknowledge a shameful history of ‘othering’ – making strangers- of people and groups. Unimaginable horrors, like the crusades perpetrated against Muslim sisters and brothers; historic exclusions made on the basis of gender, sexuality or ability; not to mention subtle exclusions practiced by congregations. (Says she from personal experience.

Despite this horrible history and despite our best efforts to resist welcoming the stranger, the Spirit continually pulls, pushes and provokes the church into practicing the radical inclusivity of Jesus Christ. In the UCA, we can point to the founding commitment to the mutual ministry of women and men, to the Covenant with Congress, to being a multicultural church and, most recently, to marriage equality. All these worthy commitments will inevitably and always be works-in-progress – without constant vigilance and deliberate intention, they aren't anything more than words.

In the increasingly polarizing world in which the church is called to bear witness, there are a couple of questions worth pondering:

- What more can we do to live into the grand commitments we've made?

⁶ “A particular, peculiar hope in Christ”, Rev Jane Fry, General Secretary, *Insights*, Spring 2023, p.3

⁷ Ibid

- How do the things we do, the things we take for granted, foster connection or disconnection, inclusion or exclusion?”⁸

Last week, I said, it is human nature that where we can't 'see' God or 'feel' God, we will make one up. It is harder and harder to see and feel God in these times – but let's not build a golden calf yet. Isn't it a matter of being present ourselves? Isn't it a call to look around and see God working? That's what I see in collective joy and in collective mourning. I feel the embrace.

And finally, together, we must make sure we haven't just set up another institution that makes rules to keep others out. We **have** to be better than that.

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⁸ Ibid