

By What authority?

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20 & Mark 1:21-28

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In lawyer speak – we call it standing. That means not only who's speaking? But who's speaking on behalf of whom – and with what permission?

Australia Day has become increasingly controversial – there are a lot of voices. In particular, this Australia Day has been over-shadowed by what to call it and whether to change the date. We are celebrating the British arrival. Should we also have a Vietnamese boat arrival day? I have my own views on that – but you're safe. Now is not the time to share them.

The awards have also been a growing centre of controversy. There has been a push for a number of years to have more women represented (currently a little over 30%) ...but increasing the number of female nominations has led to even more men being nominated ...so the ratio hasn't changed.

Over a number of years, it was pretty well a given that all retired politicians and big wigs in the public service get their gong. If you claw, crush or politic your way to the top of the public service heap – it doesn't necessarily make you a model citizen. (I can name several I wouldn't feed)

Even though I saw more community activists and local heroes nominated this year, the accusation still stands that if you are white, male and rich – you're in. Business high-flyers have professionals to write their nominations *and* lobby MPs. Having a gong is good for business...and maybe even a little protection from tax audits. At least it makes the Office hesitate because there's plenty of bad press if they got it wrong.

Above all, Margaret Court's elevation from her previous award made the headlines. The new award was not for her community work but for her successes 40 years ago. It has certainly been the *most* controversial. As a result, people like Kerry O'Brian have refused their gongs and several others are handing theirs back.

That is a pretty good sign the committee may have not read the mood of the nation. Court's gong for past achievements linked with her current views on gender and sexuality was just too much. It was not credible when the PM claimed to have had no influence on the process: a process that is not transparent; that makes decisions on criteria we never see by people we don't know who have been nominated by whom??? All these things have brought to the spotlight who makes the decision about what is a good Australian and whether that decision represents our best interests ...or the views of our citizens? Who gave them permission?

Of course, I have no intention of answering those questions – I will leave you dangling. What I will say is the question of who's speaking on what authority is as old as the Bible and older again.

Epiphany is the 4 weeks after the Christmas season where the church reflects on the authority of God; His purpose and his promise. It is as relevant today as always. It is a time when the church should also be examining its own authority, particularly in view of recent events.

God is dramatically present in Genesis but by the time we get to Exodus, God's view of communal life and his will is exercised through the office of Moses. There was no committee. There was no vote. I have said before, Moses didn't want the job...but as the people experienced God's direct communications, they settled on the idea that a messenger was a lot safer. When Moses was old, he tapped Joshua and Josh was given authority by the laying of hands (Duet 31 & 32:9). Done, dusted, no questions asked.

Our readings today are from the Book of Moses where he puts in writing what God has told him about the order of the community. The leadership roles are defined: judges, kings and priests as well as the role of prophets. A lot of the rules are designed to prevent the various tribes from slipping back into pagan worship. God (with Moses) is creating a unique community identified as the people of God. He does this with the rules (what to do, how, when) and with the mark of valid authority. We no in change management 101 that groups of people revert to old habits unless you put some structures in place to prevent this.

Prophets were set aside from kings and judges and priests. They are the moral angels that sit on society's shoulders. They are the ones to whisper, 'That's not right'. It may be legal and it may be sacred and still, a prophet will name it for what it is – wrong. (Think tables in the Temple)

In today's society, what starts as a whisper becomes a cacophony before government will listen. 'Let her speak', 'me too' and 'black lives matter' start with one voice. A voice like Grace Tame. This year's Australian of the Year.

Whether we listen to them or not is an issue of culture and community.

We didn't listen to Eunice Foote, the first scientist to link greenhouse gasses to climate change. We didn't listen to her because she was a woman. She was prevented from reading her findings to the Association for the advancement of science Congress in 1856 because of her gender. A man read her paper for her but it was not published with the conference findings. Three years later, a male scientist took credit for the discovery and more importantly, the methodology. Eventually, more than a century later, she was recognised for her work.

Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962. She documented the adverse environmental effects caused by the pesticides. Today we have a bee crisis – then it was birds. Carson accused the chemical industry of spreading disinformation, and public officials of accepting the industry's marketing claims unquestioningly. Was she ignored because she was a woman or because we have a deaf ear to prophets who tell us things we do not want to hear? I love my weed-fighting Zero. Farmers loved their 1066.

Prophets are supposed to make us uncomfortable. Remember they are the moral angels on our shoulders and because of that, they will always be the temptation to drown them out – especially when they interfere with self-interest. How much money did the tobacco industry spend drowning out the voices of those proclaiming smoking health hazards? Billions of dollars in law suits. Enough to feed all the hungry in the world.

Look at how Trump treated Dr Fauci. At times Fauci was made to completely disappear. Fauci, scientist, teacher, researcher and the head of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Recognised by his peers as top of his game. Pfft –invisible when inconvenient.

How do we get from Fauci to today's text – I knew you were wondering. The two scripture readings are linked together for a reason.

It is interesting how the Mark reading is so often taken out of context to prove a point. To some, it demonstrates (again) Jesus love and care for those afflicted and for others, it is yet another sign of Jesus' divinity. But these two interpretations (and both may be right) are a means to an end rather than looking at the whole passage. The passage is about teaching. Jesus is teaching "and the people were amazed." Then a man steps in with his demons. Jesus never addresses the man – he only talks to the demon. Mark doesn't name the demon or the man. There is no back story and no follow up. The man doesn't run off and proclaim the Lord. He is little more than an interruption and a stage-prop to substantiate authority because the whole passage is about teaching. The importance or should I say, the emphasis is on the lessons and the demonstration of authority. This is reiterated in the text, 'who sent this man?' "a new teaching and with authority!".

Mark's gospel works hard to demonstrate that Jesus is the One predicted to come; predicted to say uncomfortable and awareness-raising things. And the question was whether he would be drowned out by self-interest. His authority is established.

He certainly spoke outside kings, judges and priests. He called them on their misbehaviours and mismatched objectives to actions.

And that brings us back to Epiphany – the time the church examines God's intentions. Our Deuteronomy reading recognises that society is like a rubber band and will spring back into

its old shape without the help of standards, rules, leaders and processes that work to maintain the change. Brueggemann notes that sitting behind the whole book of Moses, and particularly this reading, is the ghost (or perhaps the lure) of idolatry. The issue is not the nature of the prophet but in the community to which the prophet speaks.

“The nature of the church is that we must host the prophetic Mosaic word in all its terror.” Especially in the church we have to hear things we may not want to hear. ‘We have a temptation to distort, tone down or silence the speakers.’¹

We have to hear the voices that proclaim “Bad theology kills”²

The Reverend Alistair Macrae, a former president of the Uniting Church in Australia said “As a minister and theologian, I am aware that bad theology kills people,” which is why he is giving back his gong.

“Bad theology underpinned the racist apartheid regime in South Africa. Bad theology supported Hitler’s racist ideology and the evil it produced. Bad theology underpinned or failed to recognise the racist assumptions behind the destructive program of colonisation not least in this land. Bad theology continues to alienate and oppress sexual minorities.”

Court has stated that her religious views are separate from her sporting career, comments which Rev Macrae argued were disingenuous for a public figure.

He pointed to high suicide rates in the LGBTQ community and stressed that Court’s views were not shared by all Christians.

“If it harms people, from my perspective, it’s not from God,” he said.

Thank you Macrae.

We cannot silence prophetic voices, even when we do not want to hear them. Are we a church that can stand strong enough to listen? I am so proud of the LBTQI voices that prevailed after years of conversations. If we are not a church that can listen then we risk the whole glorious plan and the covenant God promised.

Honest to God, God, author of our creation – please help us to stick to the plan by reminding us of our errant ways. Your voice in others is everlasting, even when it sometimes takes centuries to hear. Help us discern the prophetic from the pathetic. Amen.

¹ Texts for preaching Year B, Brueggemann et al

² **Bad theology kills’: Senior cleric returns honour over Margaret Court decision by Rachel Eddie**
[Australia Day 2021: Margret Court honour forces Uniting Church cleric to hand back award \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au/australia-day-2021/margret-court-honour-forces-uniting-church-cleric-to-hand-back-award-20210921)