

By your grace

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

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Word of warning: whatever you thought about Grace Tame's actions, I hope to challenge your thinking.

If Jesus had been the Australian of the year, it didn't go down very well. Last week, we hinted at his rejection in his home town. Today we read about it. People were sceptical but pleasantly surprised at his capability – until they realised he was being a little too clever by half. When they pressed him on his status as a prophet, he chose specific readings to make a point. He basically tells them they do not have an automatic ticket to this show.

This pious congregation no doubt gave generously, helped the poor and were appropriately righteous. They could smugly await their rewards...and here's Jesus pointing out the stories where the grace of God, though the prophets Elijah and Elisha, has been bestowed, not on an Israelite or even a Jew but on others. Elijah graces a gentile widow who gave hospitality at a cost. Elisha cured only one leper: a Syrian named Naaman –only one from all the other lepers. What outrage! What about the deserving poor?

Jesus recognised his call and even though he didn't fully understand it yet, he knew it was beyond Nazareth, beyond Israel and possibly beyond Judaism. It was inclusive in a way that had never been known. This act was his protest and pronouncement – but was it good manners?

Jerimiah's call from God is noticeably similar to Daniel's: A young boy, wakened and resistant, doubtful of his talents. There is no doubt that God embraces certain hopes for every young person and if we are willing to listen, God will share those hopes with us. Not everyone is called to be a disciple as we think of it. Some are called to be the very best they can be in what they do – and in doing that, they also change the world. Their vocation, their function is an expression of their central being. What they do – so *well*, gives them a voice and makes change.

In a way, allowing, recognising, hearing the call is also an outpouring of their very freedom. I know for me it was. I could stop being someone else.

Writers that have changed the way we think – always *knew* they were writers. Great artists could do nothing else. They were compelled, even when starving.

Tuesday night, Prime Minister announced Dylan Alcott as the Australian of the year. Dylan has been sports mad since he was a tot. It is unusual for an athlete to win gold in more than one sport but he's just crazy determined and loves it totally.

Mr Alcott has been a sportsman all his life and he claims his success is what gave him the courage to do all the other things. He is a broadcaster and a motivational speaker. An Alcott quotable quote from one of his speeches is "... for every one thing you can't do, there are 10,000 others you can. For every one idiot who gives you a hard time, there are 10,000 others worth your time."

And by doing what he does well, (which does seem to be everything he touches) he gives voice and hope to people living with disabilities. The young Dutchman who beat him in the Australian Open was inspired to play tennis after reading Alcott's autobiography.¹

So yes, Jeremiah is right, some people are called to be a voice, if not always for God, then certainly for truth, justice, love, hope and peace.

And that is what the Australian of the year's job is – to be there *because* of who they are what they do but with a platform and a boost to make a difference.

And this is where I got conflicted. Did you see Grace Tame's behaviour at the Lodge on Tuesday night?

There has been a mountain of opinion pieces piled on this episode. In the papers, they seem to be evenly split between those who condemned it as petulant and others who congratulated her for staying true to herself and not faking it to make the PM feel better.² In the Twittersphere – she is almost 100% backed as a winner– which shows a frightening generational divide.

My first reaction was embarrassment and a little irritation for poor manners. It looked juvenile to me. I wondered whether she would view these videos when she is in her 40s & 50s, and cringe. She's only 28. One bio lists her as an artist and a yoga teacher. Right now, Grace Tame's vocation is her own brand – an influencer.

¹ Note: I specifically didn't say 'disabled people'. That is a different label – making their disability what they are rather than the talented, outrageous, modest, sanguine, rich, poor, gender specific and not, people like all the rest of us and as different as the rest of us, some of which have disabilities.

² One commentator described the photo op looking like parents trying to smile for guests through a teenage tantrum.

She had the call – she needed to be the voice of the voiceless. Her relentless energy got Tasmanian law changed. Tasmania's Evidence Act (2001) prohibited publication of information identifying survivors of sexual assault. This prevented Tame and other survivors speaking publicly about their experiences, even as Tame's abuser bragged about his crimes on social media. The law was a paternalistic attempt to protect victims. It may well have had good intentions but to make a victim voiceless when they were already powerless was a double crime. It was illegal to say “I am the one”...”This happened to me!”³

And her twitter supporters feel like the time has come where we should not force ourselves to make other people comfortable⁴.

I know, as you probably have too, there have been many times when someone has spouted something that was a moral affront to me but I kept quiet so as not to make a scene or embarrass others. There's a whole generation who doesn't buy into that and I can see their justification on political grounds...and on adolescent grounds too.

This is a generation where civil society doesn't mean anything. They're designed to be disrupters. They may reap the benefits of civil society but are often unaware of the undercurrents that make harmony and community. Individualism is a state of mind. They are trying to assert their new-found personas and be recognised as individuals.⁵ and in adolescence, everything is about 'me'.

Ultimately, they may have to contribute differently but right now they live in a virtual world of trolls, people saying what they think unfiltered, spontaneously; anonymously and openly. It is an instantaneous world built on temporary pictures and comments. And a picture *means* something – if only for today.

It is also a world where a human **is** the brand. What they are selling is themselves. Famous for being famous – so for commercial or political capital, everything has to be about 'me'. You have to be seen.

³ In other states & countries, the victims are named but not the perpetrators. Courts are hesitant to 'embarrass' good citizens (men) and possibly ruin careers. It makes sense during the trial but after conviction, it looks like sweeping it under the carpet.

⁴ Or be exploited for photo ops

⁵ This is nothing new - from Rockers to Goths – people want to be seen as individuals **AND** part of a tribe

And that's where, when you move away from all the Valentine's Day notions of Paul's letter – you get to the real meaning of the epistle.

Paul was writing to a congregation full of fervour and piety who were arguing over who had the greatest spiritual gifts. They were at each other's throats, confused and pulling apart.

My lectionary commentary said Paul's letter had been sent, "to a quarrelsome people who needed to know that their fervent religiosity was not worth a tinker's damn apart from a new relationship to one another, apart from love."

Paul then leads them step by step through the argument of why their common life needs reorientation and describes in no uncertain terms what that requires.

First love is essential. You can pray, scream, dance or speak in tongues but it doesn't mean squat without love. You can pour money into the poor or the church, crawl on your knees as a pilgrim or make gigantic sacrifices but only love makes these actions meaningful. Without love, they are nothing but pride and daring.

Love is not a romantic or abstract idea. It expresses itself in down to earth contexts, where it refuses to stoop to petty retaliation, demonstrates patience, shuns competitiveness, resists keeping a scorecard and remains hopeful.⁶

I'm not a fan of the PM but he had the grace (and the courage) to anoint Grace Tame as the Australian of the year.⁷ (He knew what he was getting. He knew her modus operandi and perhaps he saw it as an opportunity to reach younger voters.) He has made mistakes⁸, all leaders do. He failed to live up to her expectations but the appointment was a success, victims are being heard, issues are being talked about. Maybe not enough has been done but it has been started.

She's been a pain in the government's posterior which is how she gets things done...but, without love, will it make a lasting change? Was it all about her? It *seemed* the only thing missing from this episode was grace. She was performing for her cameras.

⁶ Tests for preaching, Cousar, Gavena et al, Year C, p129.

⁷ He also had the grace to respond to media inquiries about the 'snub' by simply listing her achievements

⁸ Not the least of which is always referring to victims of sexual abuse by their first names as if he has a personal relationship, as if they are 'girls' or his daughters rather than women he respects

What we are left with are pictures – without captions – and two audiences who read them entirely differently.

In the light of Paul's letter, when I look at the 'petulant behaviour' or 'silent protest', depending on your point of view, I have a clearer understanding of the "how" and "why" But then, I have to think where does love fit into that?

Yes, we are called. Prophets come in many forms and most of them were a pain to contemporary societies. Many also lived outside communities which says a lot. There were, and are, many prophetic voices, some strident and often not thinking of the consequences (think John the Baptist} but they are driven. We must, above all else, remember,

Jesus came to reconcile humans with God: Not to condemn them

...and yet, his statements in the synagogue were *meant* to be a pie in the eye.

It was insulting to his hosts and provocative.

Paul asks us in the name of love – never to stoop to judgement and to remain hopeful. In practice, whether we agree with it or not, it calls on us to look upon Grace – with grace.