

The long Haul

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I promised myself I would use the time before Advent to focus on one reading and really explore it...but NAIDOC, Joshua and the foolish bridesmaids are so clearly linked, I just couldn't help myself! (readings attached)

You don't see that? Let me explain how my brain works:

1. Joshua calls on the children of Israel to put away their Gods and worship one, the One ...and then embarks on the colonialization of the Promised Land – without regard to the inhabitants.
2. NAIDOC week makes me revisit the preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution that recognises that is exactly what our ancestors did to Australia's First peoples, and
3. The parable teaches us that restoration and reconciliation takes a long view. It means preparedness and readiness. If we want salvation, we have to be fit and ready for the long haul. Our saving grace may (or may not) be around the next corner.

So come with me as we meander through my tangled thoughts.

I had my first run-in with a fellow Minister in Merimbula.

I don't know if you have had a chance to look at the video Tony put on the website – It is a message of hope from the Combined Churches of the Sapphire coast. The group is Baptist, independent, Catholic, Uniting, Salvation Army and Anglican ministers and Pastors. We meet once a month for prayer, planning and support.

The video is based on Romans 1:8-16, Paul's letter celebrating faith and diversity. "that you and I may be encouraged by each other's faith ..." and "the power of God that salvation is for everyone, first the Jews and then Gentiles...". Each Minister/Pastor read a line or two and then embarked on a short commentary. Originally, I started my mini-sermon with a poem from the Sufi Saint, Rabia. The poem celebrates God beyond churches, mosques and Temples. I knew it was cheeky. I had a plan B but I thought I'd shake things up a bit. Ever the disrupter. What I didn't expect was the earth-shattering response. I wondered whether it was because I quoted a Muslim, or a woman... but apparently, my 'sin' was that what I said afterward sounded like "Universalism".

I didn't know what that was so I looked it up.

Dr Google says <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-universalism-700701>

NOUN

1. *Christian theology*

the belief that all humankind will eventually be saved.

"Christian universalism would insist that Christ's atonement did atone for everyone's sins"

2. loyalty to and concern for others without regard to national or other allegiances.

"a tendency towards universalism and inclusion"

Wikipedia (that reliable academic resource) says Universalism (pronounced yu-ni-VER-sul-iz-um) is a doctrine that teaches all people will be saved. Other names for this doctrine are universal restoration, universal reconciliation, universal restitution, and universal salvation. The main argument for universalism is that a good and loving God would not condemn people to eternal torment in hell.

The problem was, I didn't have a problem with this. I was still in the dark. I thought God's plan was the reconciliation of all things and all people... but apparently, it is a heresy – at least to some. I confess my ignorance. My colleague and I had a long passionate theological discussion very early in the morning (I was still in bed). I pointed out that God was everywhere – even before 'us'; He/she made everyone in his image; that Muslims were also the children of Abraham and that what he was saying excluded the very Jews and Gentiles Paul was inviting. I believed that by *not* respecting peoples' faith and culture and letting it get in the way, he was proposing the opposite of what Jesus was saying.

And while we were at it – I explained why I took objection to the final part of the video which pretty well trashed the trinity for one God – Jesus.

It made an interesting Saturday morning, I can tell you.

In the end, we both changed our recordings out of respect. When two good people argue – both are right. It was worth the conversation and we are both wiser and still good colleagues.

But deep down, I suspect that it might have been the very same attitude stomped all over Aboriginal customs and spirituality. We mistook white folk culture for faith. If you believe in Jesus you must dress like me and live like me. And if you don't believe in Jesus as the one God, you are not human. We blundered in 'civilising' the first inhabitants...in other words, making them into the likeness of us, or else.

And yet, we had/have so much to learn...

Joshua does not say throw away your language, traditions or spirituality. He simply and clearly states, there is one God we follow. He does not say there are no other Gods. He acknowledges other faiths but says, we belong to *this* one, the God of Israel. Choose now.

Failure to recognise other faiths is a failure of faith in a god that made us all.

I know, I know [John1:14:6](#), is always quoted to support this

“**I am the way** and **the** truth and **the** life. No one comes to **the** Father except through me.” Even in this quote, Jesus is the guide, the door – not the judge.

By excluding other wisdom writers, my colleague was closing the door on the possibility that others might find their way to Christ *through* their spiritual beginnings. He had no patience for the idea. And no patience to wait, in silence, for the sheep to come to him. Or to listen to the sheep....(who may have been preaching the same story in a different language.) It was as if declaring Christ’s message louder and louder would make Him come sooner. There was a desperation in his voice.

And yet, our Aboriginal brothers and sisters knew there was a creation bigger than them, a spirit that covered the whole land. That they used different words did not mean it was a different concept. God was here. They waited and read the signs slowly. Maybe they had never heard of Jesus but by gum, they knew the Holy Spirit. They learned their stories and passed them on to generations, gently.

Rev Denise Champion was awarded an Honoris Causa PhD in Adelaide last week. Denise was our first ordained Aboriginal woman. She is a proud Adnyamathanha storyteller from the Flinders Ranges. With her friend Rosemary Dewerse, they wrote Yarta Wandatha – the Earth is Speaking. Denise tells dreamtime stories showing how the Gospel speaks from within and into those stories. She says of the book, ‘you will discover wisdom that is thousands of years old, wisdom that is full of God, wisdom that speaks to us today.’

As Joshua led the colonisation, we as a church, thousands of years later spoke of our past. I love the Uniting Church and my reasons are told in the Basis of Union ...and in this Covenant.

How timeless and patient Aboriginal stories are. Aboriginal time is different from ours. Which brings me to the Parable – at last.

We could get a tangled up in the ‘facts’ of the story. But in truth, parables have no ‘facts’ because they are metaphoric stories - so there is no point wondering what shops would be open at midnight or why the other bridesmaids did not lend some oil.

And between you and me, “I do not know you” is a bit harsh. You can’t unfriend someone you have invited as a bridesmaid just because they didn’t bring a present. But the awkward details help build drama and heighten the difference between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids. The key for me is the lateness of the groom.

In the times of this parable, long after Jesus was crucified, the people were in dire straits. Life got worse and then worse again and as the Church grew, persecution and oppression became systemic. The sense that Jesus would come again soon, was rising to a desperate cry. Paul’s letter and this parable are aimed at Christians. Paul and the parable teach patience. Something I’m not very good at, apparently. We hear the same urgency in today’s apocalyptic denominations. Hurry, now! We need you now! As if we could read God’s time. The ‘end time’ are here – and have always been here.

There are believers and believers. Those that worship with their heart and soul, put their faith in action and those who are on for the ride. They go through the motions but they are not *thinking*. There is an urgency but no depth. The idea that you don’t just prepare – you *are* prepared: awake, alert, ready – whether He comes early or He comes late. The reality of people who take God so seriously that they come to terms with the possibility of a sudden appearance at any moment in their lives, including the last.

Patience, attention, alertness, watchfulness and preparedness – it is possible that our first nation’s brothers and sisters are better at this than we are. Their culture was built on these stones.

I believe in one God, not gods but I think many people perceive the Holy Spirit differently. I know from working with interfaith colleagues that where we value diversity, our own faith grows deeper. Wisdom is wisdom. Isaiah told the Jewish people a Messiah would come but they never thought it would be tomorrow or tomorrow. Did you know Jesus is a saint to Muslims and has a whole chapter of the Koran. Mohammed is a prophet – not God. There is only one God. The God of Abraham.

I am afraid for those with brittle faith because like the bridesmaids, they may find they have been excluded and never know why. Salvation is not the forgiveness of wrongdoing. It is recognising and engaging in the Lord’s reconciliation project. That, to me, will be heaven on earth.

Jesus who walked among us and saw our tears, help me open my mind and learn more from our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Let my ears be easy with their soft

languages. Let my heart carry the burden of our mistakes and Let my hands find ways to change things for the better. Amen.

Merimbula Readings 8 Nov 2020

Psalm 78

God's Goodness and Israel's Ingratitude

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

² I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
³ things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

⁵ He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;

⁶ that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
⁷ so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

The Tribes Renew the Covenant

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other

gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴ 'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Covenanting Statement: 1994

This Covenant Statement was read by the President of the Uniting Church Assembly to the Chairperson, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress on Sunday 10 July, 1994.

We meet in the presence of God who through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our unity "transcends cultural, economic, national and racial boundaries" (Basis of Union, Paragraph 2). In this sharing of bread and wine we recall God's gracious covenant with us and the whole creation, and anticipate the joyful celebration of the fulfilment of God's rule of love and justice among us. In the meantime, as people who share in this covenant, we are called to carry out faithfully Christ's command to love one another and to order our life in the church in truth and justice. We who are non-aboriginal members of the Seventh Assembly, representing all members of the Church, make this covenanting statement.

Long before my people came to this land your people were here. You were nurtured by your traditions, by the land, and by the Mystery that surrounds us all and binds all creation together.

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.

In recent years we non-Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church in Australia have had the privilege of journeying with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and with other Aboriginal people. We have become more aware of the sad impact that in earlier times the church and our culture had on your people.

So on the one hand, we give thanks with you for those of our people who have lived among your people bearing faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which brings

hope and liberation to all. We give thanks to God who has empowered and encouraged your people to stand firm and exercise moral leadership throughout these two centuries.

But on the other hand, we who are non-Aboriginal members of our church grieve with you, our Aboriginal and Islander brothers and sisters. We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture, and confused the Gospel with western ways. As a result you and we are the poorer and the image of God in us all is twisted and blurred, and we are not what God meant us to be.

We lament that our people took your land from you as if it were land belonging to nobody, and often responded with great violence to the resistance of your people; our people took from you your means of livelihood, and desecrated many sacred places. Our justice system discriminated against you, and the high incarceration rate of your people and the number of Black deaths in custody show that the denial of justice continues today....

Matthew 25:1-13 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

25 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids^[a] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.^[b] ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids^[c] got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." ⁹ But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids^[d] came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." ¹² But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.^[e]