

Trapped in our story

2 Samuel 6:1-5,12-17; Mark 6:14-29

Rev J Shannon

Julia Banks tells the story of being called to the PM's office a few days after Turnbull was rolled. The waiting room in the PM's office is a place she knew well. She was a strong Turnbull supporter and had been there many times. This time, she knew this meeting with Scott Morrison was not going to be pleasant. As she waited outside the principal's office, she noticed was that a very large indigenous artwork had been removed – and replaced with a picture of the Queen.

Now both those pictures are part of the Australian story...but it tells us a lot about which chapters influence a person's thinking the most. It's like accenting a differ 'si-LA-bull' (syllable)!

Today is the end of NAIDOC week and I am afraid we have not really celebrated as we should. The COVID lock down would have cancelled just about all the National events and so the profile has been somewhat subdued. Normally, the ABC makes a big thing of featuring programs but they have been starved of funds. This year's theme is *Healing country* but ironically, after the drought, the fires and COVID, there's no money.

I love NAIDOC week because as I grow in understanding, I feel closer to knowing what it is to be Australian. I have identity envy. New Zealanders know exactly who they are, their nation is built on Maori culture. Most can sing the national anthem in Maori – to be a New Zealander, you know who's land you stand on. They have a treaty.

We've not been so lucky. Denial, repression, disease and dislocation has battered our 1st peoples culture...and there's no comparison. New Zealand is a postage stamp with one 1st people and no state governments. We are a continent with many nations and many languages. White folks can't learn them all and 1st peoples can't raise one mob/language/nation above others as THE one representing all Australians. At best, we should learn about our local place and a little of our local language.

NAIDOC started as a day of mourning which I am proud to say, was rapidly picked up by the churches –and now has grown into a national celebration of Aboriginal talent and culture. And as you know stories – are the cathedrals of that culture. Rev Denise Roberts is a Uniting Church Deacon and a proud

Adnyamathanha woman. She says her people have always said, the land is speaking. Australia is a story book: everywhere you look, every rock and hill, hollow and rivulet has its story – and the local people will tell you – if you ask.

And we have our stories too. We can be inspired, disgusted, embarrassed or captured by them... as were our ancestors.

Picture this – David dancing nearly naked before the ark.

The visual of dancing with so much delight for God has always been one of my favourite images. You have practically seen me do it here when the music takes me! Now, I am no Pentecostalist but honestly, letting the joy take over our bodies – that's heaven. Maybe my black theological roots are showing. (That's a pun, folks).

So here I am, dancing in my head. David has brought the ark home...first of all, if 30,000 men turned up on my doorstep – I'd hand over the ark – no matter how blessed I was. And then the grownup in me asks, 'When did the God of Moses – speaking from the bushes, mountains and clouds – wind up in a box?' We've gone from a very Aboriginal global spirit to one captured by humankind, What??

Ah, 'but it's not God', you say – 'it is the covenant – the promise'. OK, so I wondered, if we put the covenant in a box – like the Magna Carta, only holier, are we holding *it* hostage?

Now you heard me say, I'm a bit dark on David. He is hauling the Ark to Jerusalem, the city he built for his greatness and by placing God (or the God box/promise) there – he is really, *really* cementing Jerusalem as his capital. Smart! Turning the heads of the people towards Jerusalem also turns their allegiance towards him. And he had all of Israel celebrating. The noise, the music, the BBQ!

Saul's daughter, Michal saw right through it.

After the Ark arrived and the sacraments had been made – he blessed the people in the name of God Almighty (He could because remember he was anointed) and gave each person a *whole* loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins and they went home. If they had eaten together, I might picture this as a communion...as v=building community ...but he gave these things to them to take home...every man *and* woman...everyone.

Well, I don't want to sound like a cynic but that's just plain pork barrelling, isn't it?

David was a master in capturing the story of his people and making a new story with him and his city in the middle of it. That is the story that remains to us today.

Was he a good king? Good is a subjective word – he was a successful king. He held a nation together, expanded its holdings and its economy and he protected his people. He cemented its place in history and our story. Like all great leaders, he was fallible, human in his weaknesses and also a boundless visionary. In ethical standards, it is not possible to rule a kingdom and do no harm – the balance is in 'did he achieve more good for more people than harm?'

And now to Herod...

Herod clearly married for love. Perhaps, in a time of arranged marriages, that was his weakness. Now if his brother was dead, it would have not only been fine – it would have been his duty...but in this case, Herodias abandoned her first husband for Herod. The King divorced his royal wife to marry Herodias. Not fine. She's a woman who knows what she wants.

Being a king can be a lonely job. Who do you confide in? Everyone has an agenda. Herod took comfort in the honest council offered by John the Baptist. Every famous person/king needs at least one person who will tell them when they have no clothes. The king was interested in the Jesus stories and a dialogue had begun. Herod knew John as a wise, righteous and holy man.

Unfortunately, Honest John made it clear that in his opinion, divorce was not a thing and that the king and Herodias were living in sin. She did not appreciate the smudge on her reputation and the King had John arrested – for slander?

I can't help but read a sub-text here. I think Herodias was jealous of the King's counsel. Until John – she was the main influencer. Now someone else had his ear.

Now the plot thickens – Remember Herod was helicoptered in – he was dropped on the people by Rome. Herod is throwing a party for all the men he really wants to impress: high officials, military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. It's an all stops out banquet with him as the centre of attention.

When the daughter of Herodias came out and danced...’ Boy! That was a highlight. Note– it doesn’t say Herod’s daughter. Salome was his niece. She is not a child and not yet married. You can pretty well assume she is pubescent. Doing erotic dances for drunken men is not something a woman would choose to do – it is demeaning and damaging to her marriageable properties. Who do you think sent her? The text doesn’t say she was called – it simply says, *when* she came out and dance...

Like a stripper from a cake? Herod was so excited (and possibly drunk) he offered *anything*. Was he again, trying to impress his guests?! She asked her mother what should she ask for...and you know the story: a sad and terrible end to John’s mission.

Herodias got her killing. The girl was manipulated. I can’t help but wonder what lasting impact her exploitation might have had. Was that the moment she realised, she was not a princess and never would be? She just unwittingly gave up ½ a kingdom. The gory reality of what she’d asked for must have been burnt into her eyeballs.

But Herod was trapped in his own story. He didn’t want to do it – but had no choice. An oath is an oath – even if made to a 14-year-old in drunken grandiosity. He could not go back on it in front of the very men he had gathered to impress.

And so, a great injustice was done.

Have you ever had one of those trick graphics where some see the old woman and some the young beauty...or those 3-d pictures that were so popular in the 80’s where if you stare at them long enough – in a certain way, some people (but not everyone) can see objects begin to lift and fly out of the picture.

Stories are light that. All stories, whether they are dreamtime or Bible or family stories – it is how and where we focus that manipulates the story – and has a lasting impact on our decisions. Like 30,000 men in your front yard demanding the ark. There are times we are trapped by those stories.

Changing the indigenous art in the Prime Minister’s waiting room is not good or bad but it tells me where his focus is. It is more than a symbol – it is a filter ...just as the cross is more than a symbol.

The Jesus story is our story and it should impact on how we see the world. The land is speaking – learning indigenous culture links us back to the universal

God, whose spirit speaks from the mountains and the sea; Whose promises cannot be kept in a box; cannot be captured by any other King, but One.

*God – as my footsteps mark the sand so your stories are written on my soul.
Help me hold them lightly so I might see them in the morning light, the evening light, the night time and the dawn – fresh visions, new stories again and again.*