

What would they know?

Psalm 19; Nehemiah 1:2-3; 1 Corinthians 12:12-21; Luke 4:14-21

Rev J Shannon

Last week, our daughter sent us an email with all the advice we needed about conveyancing and mortgage negotiations. We listened because as young as she might seem, (she's not very), she has been a banking manager for well over a decade. She knows what she's talking about and we didn't hesitate to listen.

How different that is from my parent's generation. It wouldn't have mattered if I was PM, my father would have asked, 'what would I know about politics?' I remember applying for a job with a really fantastic title – just to impress him. Trying to give my father advice, even when he asked for it, even when it was within my professional specialty – was impossible¹.

In a funny way, all three readings and today's *Common Grace* celebration are about listening to the 'experts'.

My lectionary readings this morning said, "From time to time, we may be acutely aware of indifference, belittling or even sheer rejection which many people around us adopt towards the faith we hold."² And it went on to say that Psalm 19 totally counters that with graphic, poetic imagery grounding God in the glories of the earth around us. "without speaking, the universe instructs humanity about God's rule"³ The psalm screams, 'look around! Listen! Get over yourself and see what God brings'. It challenges us: Can you read the law of the land?

Our 2nd reading is about listening intently to the law – as it is written. It describes the mindful focus of the crowd and the celebration that we are gifted with such history, such structure. It is good to know the life we are supposed to live and like children, we are safe within the boundaries of law. And then Paul takes pains in his letter to the Corinthians⁴ to explain we are different but we are one; the importance of working as one body. This is the central message in Christian Unity week. But more significant is how we need to not just heed one another but celebrate. I am not a Pentecostal Christian but when I was anointed by Salisbury Aboriginal Elders, that was the moment I was ordained. I have never felt the Spirit like I did that day. Did it change me?

¹ Which is why I did not join my father's business

² *With Love to the World*, Vol 16. No. 9, p49

³ Ibid

⁴ Oh Gosh! I'd love to spend a week just talking about this reading.

Yes. Did it change my ministry, absolutely – which is why we are celebrating Common Grace today. From reading the law of the land to learning and burning – we *should* be listening to the experts. Like earth and sky, like hands and feet, they are right here with us. We have a chance to deepen our understanding of what it means to be Australian.

And in the last reading, Luke tells the story of Jesus returning to his village and is rejected or at least met with great scepticism. This story always reminds me of my father. I can just imagine the congregation looking askance at Jesus and saying, ‘Joseph’s boy? What would he know?’

Rejection or indifference are crimes in themselves. You might be wondering about why the me-too movement is persecuting bystanders as well as perpetrators but that is because we *knew*. We lived in a society where everyone knew who was a masher or a grabber but we did nothing about it other than warn some and avoid the bad guys when we could. Let’s be honest, we knew and we did nothing about it.

Sasha Baron Cohen, the comedian, gave a very passionate and serious speech about the dangers of unfettered social media. He quoted a lot of statistics about how lies travel faster than truth and how damaging the platforms can be to social cohesion, mental health and our youth.⁵ In the speech he said, “I know it’s not very funny being a comedian talking about the Holocaust, but I think it’s an interesting idea that not everyone in Germany had to be a raving antisemite for the atrocities to happen. He then quoted Ian Kershaw, a major historian of the Third Reich: ‘The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference’.”

Apathy. Indifference.

We know our history. Even before it was taught in school, we knew about the Stolen Generation. We heard the local legends about massacres and poisonings. Every town I have ever lived in, every property visited had its own stories. This is not an argument about the history wars – it is about refusing indifference. Like the me-too people, we can’t know these things and do nothing. We can’t change the past anymore now than the New Testament can change the Old but they built on it – and so can we.

⁵ He also said he was used to playing characters, speaking as himself was terrifying. I took some comfort from that.

If you've any doubt about Aboriginal spirituality, you need to go to church with someone from a community. The depth and passion for Christ literally makes us pale in comparison.⁶ We have a toe in the water, in Salisbury, it was the whole body. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters about the land and the law. Colonial law was not always just to them – that's a fact.⁷ The same law that keeps us safe and fosters civil society. Just like Biblical law it can be used as a two-edged sword. But, by gum! We have much to learn about faith.

Understanding the law of the land, the ocean. the seasons, rhythms, gifts and dangers in this land has been much beyond us. Yet, the experts are right beside us.

This Australia Day, let's be mindful of the older spirit of the land; let us celebrate culture and mourn loss with Common Grace. If we reject it – we are no better than those in the Synagogue unable to listen. The land called Australia wasn't born on January 26. It was 'born' millions of years ago. Let us find a common way and a common day to celebrate God's creation.

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⁶ And that pun **was** intended

⁷ When you don't exist as a citizen until 1967 it meant you couldn't choose where to live and in many cases, raise your own children.