

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 1st September, 2019 (Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

This week, something unusual happened. I had the opportunity to catch up on some theological reading! Theological reading is a crucial element in the life of priestly ministry, but as any parish priest will attest, such opportunities are rare, unusual, in the busyness of parish life. The book I read is called *Gondwana Theology*, and it was written by a friend of mine, Garry Worete Deverell, who is also a parish priest in our local area, at St Agnes Black Rock. Garry is an Aboriginal, Trawlolway man, whose country is the far north-eastern region of Tasmania. Garry can trace a direct Aboriginal ancestry back to the fierce warrior and last head man of the Trawlolway mob, called Manalargenna. Garry is descended from Manalargenna's daughter, Woretemoetyenner, and a white sealer named George Briggs who had procured the aboriginal woman as his domestic partner. As you might imagine, given that this was Tasmania in the early 19th century, the story of this relationship is not one romance and happiness. There was a period of imprisonment of the woman on Flinders island, the removal of a daughter born to the couple who was adopted by a European couple, and all the unimaginable suffering and long-term, multi-generational traumas that go with these tragic events. My friend Garry, who was ordained first in the Uniting

church and more recently in the Anglican church is well-placed to speak with authority on the connection between Aboriginal spirituality and the Christian faith. His book, *Gondwana Theology*, published last year, makes for very interesting, if sobering, reading. I recommend it to you.

One of the things that Garry says in a number of different ways throughout the book is that the time is past for the colonisers of the world, including the European colonisers of Australia, to pretend that nothing worthwhile, or of substance, existed in the lands they arrived in to begin the process of colonisation. Worse still, Garry explains, is the “strategic forgetting” of so many, to this very day, of the “genocidal sin” at the foundation of our nation - the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land and sacred texts, the illegal and immoral massacre of men, women and children, and the removal of children from their families thereby destroying Indigenous kin relationships and ways of life.

Garry rightly says that Christian theology is, and must be, at its deepest marrow, a search for the truth about God, the universe and ourselves. If it is not about truth then it is not theology - it is romance, or a flight of fancy. And, the truth of the matter is that the movement of Christ’s gospel into the Indigenous communities of Australia was and is far from straight-forwardly positive. There is, apparently, a saying in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: “When the white man came, he made an exchange: the Bible for the land and the sea.” Gary says that the truth is even worse than that: “It was the Bible in exchange for our languages, lore and kind as well. As has now been documented at great length and in much detail, the removal of our people from the sources of our sustaining spirituality had a crushing effect on our health and wellbeing. The loss and trauma suffered by the first generations who encountered the invader is still, it seems, in effect. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders remain the poorest, sickest and in every way the most disadvantaged members of Australian contemporary society.” (p. 21)

All of which makes for something of a dilemma for us as we remember the feast day tomorrow of the Martyrs of New Guinea, godly Christian men and women who died for their faith, and yet who, in their own way, were an inevitable part of a Eurocentric push into lands already home to indigenous peoples who, like our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, suffered at the hands of the colonising whitefellas. In his book Garry argues that “despite many fine words of repentance and apology, the churches continue to remain largely unconscious of the fact that the sins of the past continue to have their present effects, for which the churches certainly bear considerable responsibility.” (p. 23)

These are contentious statements, and amongst those gathered here today, there will be a range of responses, I’m sure, to what Garry has to say. Maybe we could invite Garry here sometime to speak with us about his ideas. But what he does say is that the answer to it all lies in grace, not a cheap grace, but a grace that is the transformation of the relationship between human beings and God and also between human beings in their relationships with each other. Grace, Garry says, does not reach its intended terminus, its goal, unless it “surges” through the bodies and communities for whom Christ laid down his life. He argues that unless we put aside our pride entirely and welcome the crucified Jesus in the form and face of our crucified brothers and sisters, then grace remains nothing more than an idea, “hanging splendid and beautiful in the heavens, but never real enough to change or transform people in either space or time.” (p. 23) And that’s not good enough! Garry concludes that theology needs to treat Aboriginal spirituality, Aboriginal experience with God, and Aboriginal “dreaming” as a legitimate source of revelation, on an equal footing with the record of God found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

There is much to resonate with this in our Scripture readings today. The verses from Hebrews remind us about service that is well-pleasing to God: “Let mutual love continue... Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing

to God.” And in Luke 14:7-14, a lesson in humility and hospitality: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” But perhaps it is Jeremiah who strikes the most penetrating note: “I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.”

I think Garry is right to remind us all that it is in remembering truthfully that the work of God can begin. I think Garry is right to argue that the truth about the colonisation of Australia, and the role of the Christian church in that, has not yet been fully told and understood. In Jeremiah chapter 2 God says “be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate” when the leaders of the time went after things that transgressed against God’s law, pursuing things that do not profit. Maybe Garry and his book have an important part to play in opening up an honest conversation within the Christian church about our history as colonisers in this great country. With him I pray for reconciliation, an authentic reconciliation that can only begin with a confession of the truth. Without this, there can be no freedom, because freedom is ultimately about liberation from lies and falsehood about oneself and about others and about the identity of God. For as St John writes, whoever lives in falsehood is a slave to falsehood. But whoever is set free from falsehood by the arrival of truth will be free to choose a new destiny. (John 8:34-38).

So let us pray:

*We pray for each other in all our diverse humanity,
that we may both delight and celebrate each other;
that we might care for each other,
being prepared to bear one another’s burden of truth as Christ himself bears ours.
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*