

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Epiphany 4

28 January 2007

Preacher

The Reverend Chris Albany

Rector

Readings: Jeremiah 1.4-10; Psalm 71.1-6; I Corinthians 13.1-13; Luke 4.21-30

Australia Day

Friday was Australia Day and all over the country people celebrated the fact that we live in this “lucky country”, as it has been dubbed. It is a day to reflect on the things that we value about Australia and the kind of values that we want to see lived out into the future.

In the lead up to Australia Day there was much in the media about the use of the flag by some people in recent times as a divisive symbol and so the threat to ban it at the Big Day Out. The young people attending the BDO had the last word on that suggestion as they, almost to a person, turned up with the flag – carrying it, wearing it draped around them, or as shirt or shorts or emblazoned on their bodies. So the BDO and Australia Day both passed in good humour and with a sense of togetherness, without the negative elements that some had predicted and which sadly have occasionally come to the fore in recent times.

As I reflect on this and where we are 'at' as a Nation, I am saddened by recent moves by both the ALP and the Federal Government to drop Multiculturalism as a focus. This week we heard that the Government has changed the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and last year the ALP also made its opposition spokesperson in this area the Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. The media commenting on this change suggests it is a shift from celebrating diversity towards a policy of assimilation into Australian, “Australian culture and identity” more narrowly defined. A back to the future move. Those of us with a sense of history will recall that Australia has moved over time from a 'white Australia' policy to 'Assimilation' to 'Multiculturalism' and now it seems back to 'Assimilation'.

Multiculturalism at its best welcomes and celebrates the diversity of the cultural backgrounds that people bring to this country and the richness that offers our society, whilst encouraging people not to limit their relationships and interaction to their own ethnic group, thus creating separation and division, but rather encouraging integration and a coming together.

The best example of this I can remember seeing in the media was on the front page of the Weekend Australian of 27 & 28 January 1996 – exactly 11 years ago. I was so impressed that I kept a copy. Above a picture of Pasil Hongswong and his wife, Anchana and their daughters, Apichana (9) and Apattra (7), originally from Thailand, and who were naturalised on that Australia Day, there is the caption, “Australia – we are so lucky to be the chosen country”, and then at the side Adrian McGregor writes, “*We’re still lucky aren’t we? To have a couple like this and their gorgeous children honour us by becoming Australians. But they are lucky too! Just look around yesterday, at the harbour, the beach, the bush. Look at the people – the elderly, the young, the new citizens. Yesterday was Australia Day, but really, give us any opportunity and we will celebrate being Australians. It’s a blessed country. That’s why people settle here. Citizenship is our gift to them, and in return they gift us their loyalty, and their children’s future. This is Australia.*” I thought it was a stunning piece of writing then and still do. Makes one proud to be Australian when one of our leading newspapers models as emphatically openness, acceptance, welcome. The very best of what multiculturalism is about.

I said at the beginning Australia Day is a day which gives us opportunity to reflect on our nation and our vision for its future. It is especially important for us to do so this year as State and Federal elections loom and we have opportunity to vote and help determine the future of our country and state by the people we collectively elect to Parliament.

The Church has an important role to play – to speak its prophetic voice to society. The role of the prophet, such as Jeremiah, whose call to that role we heard as our first reading today, was to call individuals and nations to live out God’s justice and mercy and righteousness. Sometimes it meant saying things which were not popular – no doubt part of Jeremiah’s hesitation about his taking on that task – they often were called to point out the injustices and inequities of the society of their day and to call people, those in authority especially, to account. The last verse of today’s reading reminds us that whilst there was much that was negative in their message – to tear down and destroy what was corrupt – it was always with a positive intent to build and to plant; to replace it with a society reflecting justice and mercy and righteousness.

As Christians we need to keep the call to compassion and love to the forefront with a focus on the Common Good, which sees the needs of the disadvantaged and powerless as requiring special attention. This is spelt out in Jesus’ manifesto in Luke’s Gospel which we heard last week with its sequel today. His is a message of liberation and hope and justice for the oppressed and poor. It is about love being at work – that quality of love which is so wonderfully expressed in Paul’s ode to love we heard as our second reading today. Note for Paul, love is not about feelings – it’s all about actions and behaviour. Love never gives up, keeps no score of wrongs, there is nothing that love cannot face. Love is not happy with evil but rejoices in the truth. Love and the Hebrew word Shalom go together. Shalom, sometimes translated “peace”, has a much broader meaning than is conveyed by the English word “peace” - absence of conflict. Shalom means everything in its rightful place – as it should be – it has connotations of harmony and freedom and justice. If there is no shalom then love’s work is not finished. Love never rests until all injustice and oppression ceases.

To come back to where I began – the welcoming and celebration of diversity. Edmund Burke I think it was said, “the mark of a civilised society is the way it welcomes and celebrates difference.” Are we becoming more civilised using that criteria or less so?

Luke’s gospel in particular shows us a Jesus whose message is one of radical inclusion – the most unlikely, the least and the last, the outcast, are those God uses and are at the centre of God’s concern and activity. Not a popular idea as today’s Gospel reading illustrates with the crowd reacting angrily to Jesus’ reminder that it was strangers and foreigners that God used as his agents.

We as Christians are called to live out the values and standards of the Gospel – to be salt and light in the world, calling the world to a different set of values and standards than those of personal, sectional and even national self-interest. In an election year we need to be asking ourselves what are the policies and values which best reflect those we see in the life and teaching of Jesus. Then call those who would govern us to account, so that Australia as a nation reflects the openness, the generosity, the concern for justice and righteousness and peace for all humankind that is at the heart of the message of Jesus – that was the constant message of the prophets. Then indeed we will have cause to be proud to be Australian as we live out our prophetic vocation as God’s people in the world.