

Talk 1: From One Degree of Alienation to Another

Aliens and Strangers
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My brother Michael is a journalist. A few years ago, I was at the Sydney Writer's Festival where he was speaking, and in the evening he took me to a party with his fellow authors. It was a gathering of urbane, intellectually sophisticated literati. He introduced me as his sister, and then (as only a brother can) he lobbed his little social grenade – 'she's a priest', he said. There was the usual mixture of surprise and slight awkwardness as those around me cast their minds back to see if they'd sworn or blasphemed since I'd been standing there. But then – something less usual happened. A woman – I later found out she worked in advertising – lit into me. 'How can you?', she said. 'How can you bear to be in the church?' She was almost apoplectic with outrage about Christianity – which she accused of systematically denigrating women (a bit rich, coming from an advertising executive), of being judgemental and hypocritical, so arrogant and self-righteous that it thinks it's got the right to tell everyone else how to live. 'What are you *thinking?*' she cried.

Well – this is the most direct attack on my involvement with the church I've ever experienced, but it put on loud speaker what we know is out there. Many of our contemporaries find Christianity and the church an anachronism, at best irrelevant and dying away and at worst actively damaging and corrosive of the common good. I have another brother who tells me that when he mentions my being a Christian to people in his circle, they tend to assume I'm either very conservative or not very bright – otherwise, why would she be taken in?

I imagine many of you are familiar with this kind of experience. It lies behind the theme we're exploring over these few days. As our conference blurb puts it, 'Our identity as aliens and strangers in the world is something we can only expect to feel more keenly'. And accordingly, we're considering the question: 'How will

we maintain our strange identity as citizens of another country, while speaking of our country to neighbours who have never heard of it, or who are disinterested in it, or who despise it?’ I feel the importance of these questions, and I’m excited to be exploring them with you. And yet – I also sense that if we’re to ask them in good faith, then we must begin with two clear acknowledgements.

The first is, let’s face it, that a great deal of the hostility towards Christians and the church in our context is not because we have been purveyors of the subversive truth of the gospel, but because (as a body) we have indeed been hypocritical, oppressive, self-serving and culpably blind to our own shadow. The Royal Commission has revealed some of the most flagrant instances of these ways of being, but there are countless more – from stories of those socially excluded by the nice Anglicans in the district, to the damaging moralism of so much of our preaching and common life. If there is ‘another country’, one characterised by the non-judgemental Goodness of God, solidarity with the least, and the surrender of self-righteousness, then in too many ways we the church have dramatically failed to live as its citizens and representatives.

Second, we must acknowledge there are real risks in conceiving of ourselves too glibly in terms of this metaphor, ‘aliens and strangers’. The book that led to my brother’s ‘gig’ at the writers’ festival came out of his investigation of the Exclusive Brethren, a quasi-Christian sect, which enforces on its members a rigid separation from the ‘sinful world’. The biblical text the Brethren use to justify this separation is drawn not from Hebrews (where we get our text), but from 2 Timothy: ‘Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness’ (2 Tim. 2:19).¹ But you can hear the resonance. There’s nothing like feeling yourself a misunderstood and virtuous minority to buttress a complacent sense of your goodness over against everyone else, and to insulate you from proper self-criticism. Even when it doesn’t lead to sectarianism, the world-denigrating implications of this imagery of living as aliens on the earth has led to

¹ Michael Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2008), p.8.

the failure of parts of the Christian tradition to take seriously the fate of the world and our flourishing in this life. This is what one Australian writer has called ‘heaven-ism’.

All this suggests that if we’re to identify with the imagery of being ‘aliens and strangers’ in order to explore what it means to be the church in 21st century Australia, then it’s going to need some careful unpacking and discernment. Fortunately, we have a rich resource for this reflection in our biblical tradition. And in today’s talk, which I’ve called ‘From One Degree of Alienation to Another’, I want to begin by considering three uses of the motifs of alienation and estrangement in Scripture.

Motif 1: Alienation and Disobedience

My first text is Genesis 3.

‘Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Though God said, you shall not eat from any tree of the garden—” And the woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the garden’s trees we may eat, but from the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it, lest you die’”. And the serpent said to the woman, “You shall not be doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil”. And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man, and he ate. And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths’ (3: 1-7).²

Let’s pause here, for a minute. This is the translation from the Hebrew by scholar Robert Alter. The NRSV translates the second sentence in verse 1 as if the serpent were asking the woman a question: ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from

² Robert Alter (trans. and commentary), *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), pp.24-25

any tree in the garden?””. Alter says, however, that the Hebrew is better construed as if the serpent were beginning a false statement that is cut off in mid-sentence by the woman. So, the serpent begins: ‘Though God said, you shall not eat from any tree in the garden ...’, the woman interrupts to correct the serpent – actually, God did say we could eat the fruit of any of the trees, except from the one in the midst of the garden. So far, so truthful; except that the woman herself, Alter notes, ‘enlarges the divine prohibition in another direction’,³ saying that God had commanded not only that they not eat, but that they not touch the tree either, lest they die. Could it be, he suggests, that this distortion of what God had instructed sets her up for transgression, since ‘having touched the fruit, and seeing no ill effect, she may proceed to eat’?⁴

It certainly seems that, having begun to entertain the possibility, the woman begins to find the fruit intensely desirable – and ain’t that how it goes when we’re tempted by cake or other forms of ‘lust’?! So it comes to pass that (without further reference to God’s prohibition), she takes of the fruit to eat and shares it with her man. In this moment, the two set themselves against God’s will for them and immediately become self-conscious, conscious of themselves as separate from the life around them: ‘they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths’. It’s the beginning of their becoming alienated from at-oneness with their world, and things are going to get worse.

[return to text]

‘And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden in the evening breeze, and the human and his woman hid from the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called to the human and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard Your sound in the garden and I was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid”. And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? From the tree I commanded you not to eat have you eaten?” And the human said, “The woman whom you gave by me, she gave me from the tree, and I

³ Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.24.

⁴ Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.24.

ate”. And the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent beguiled me and I ate” (3: 8-13).

Here we have a dynamic of ever deepening alienation. The man and woman hide from God because, self-conscious, they are suddenly afraid. God asks them what’s happened and neither can own their part. When the man says ‘the woman whom you gave by me, she gave me from the tree’, Alter remarks that the repeated verb ‘gave’ ‘nicely catches the way [he] passes the buck, not only blaming the woman for giving him the fruit but virtually blaming God for giving him the woman. She in turn of course blames the serpent’.⁵ Notice that when each refuses responsibility it entails repudiation of solidarity with the other – it wasn’t me, it was her ... it was him ...

The curses that follow simply enact that repudiation of solidarity, that repudiation of belonging. God proclaims enmity between the serpent and the woman, enmity (or at least a struggle for power) between the woman and man, and alienation from the means of life. Henceforth it will be painful to bear children, painful to toil and bring forth food from the ground. And when God casts Adam and Eve out of the garden and bars their way back to the tree of life, their physical, geographical alienation is the reflection of their having already become alienated in spirit; it’s a manifestation of the separation already wrought by their refusals of obedience, responsibility and solidarity – alienation upon alienation.

So what’s the status of this story? How are we to receive it? As you know, in the Christian tradition, this narrative of ‘the fall’ has long been interpreted as an account of how ‘human creation (and ultimately all of creation)’ has fallen into the power and habits of sin, such that (in Walter Brueggemann’s words) we are ‘irreversibly alienated from God and [in our strength] helpless to alter that condition’.⁶ Interestingly, as a number of commentators have pointed out, the Hebrew Scriptures themselves feature no teaching about ‘the fall’ and appear not

⁵ Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.25.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.38.

to read this story as saying something essential about the human condition *per se*.⁷

Nevertheless, the motif of alienation as a consequence of disobedience features as a recurring dynamic in the relationship between God and Israel. Here, is another example, this time from Jeremiah Chapter 9: ‘And the Lord says: Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals ... Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ... I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their ancestors have known ...’. (Jer 9: 13-16)

As in Genesis 3, the spiritual alienation of the people is understood to issue ultimately in cultural and geographic alienation, the loss of home and the suffering of exile. And perhaps it’s little surprise to learn that the final redaction of the Genesis text is thought to have happened during or just after the 6th century exile to Babylon of which Jeremiah warned.⁸ So, in the Scriptural imagination, one prominent use of the motif of alienation and estrangement is connected with the judgement of disobedience and faithlessness. Being alienated from the garden, from the land, are embodied consequences of a prior spiritual alienation, the loss of rootedness in God.

Motif 2: Alienation and Passage

Let’s turn now to a second use of the motif of alienation, which I’m calling ‘Alienation and Passage’. There are many texts that could be drawn on to illustrate this theme, but we’ll stay for now with Genesis – this time the Patriarchal or Ancestral Tales. What’s striking, I think, is that the whole narrative of the patriarchs could be read as a history of necessary estrangement, alienation, exile. The first word God speaks to Abram is ‘Go’. ‘Go from your country and your

⁷ Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.38; James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p.64

⁸ Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.36; Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p.10.

kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you' (Gen. 12:1). So Abram goes and comes to the land of promise, but it will be a long time before his descendants can truly settle and take possession. Abram himself is led immediately on, forced to leave a famine stricken Canaan to go 'down to Egypt to reside there as an alien' (Gen. 12:10). Some time later, Abram's son Isaac is likewise commanded by God to reside as an alien in the land of the Philistines (Gen. 26: 3), and in turn his son Jacob is sent back to the house of his maternal grandfather, where he is to some extent a stranger, so that he might become fruitful and numerous and return to take possession of the land where he now lives as an alien – that is, the land God gave to Abraham (Gen. 28:4).

And so it goes – Jacob's son Joseph is sold by his brothers into Egypt, and prepares the way for the whole family to settle there as resident aliens – only for Israel to be led out again, many generations later, by Moses to embark on forty more years of wandering without settled belonging. With this motif, it's not that being an alien is a sign of disobedience or faithlessness. In fact, quite the reverse. It's being *obedient* to God which leads Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into situations where they are not 'at home', not settled, not comfortable. They are drawn into necessary journeys, and their periods of estrangement move the action forward.

How are we to understand the function of this second motif of 'alienation and passage' in Scriptural imagination? Two elements seem significant. The first is that to be drawn more fully into the purposes of God very often occasions or requires a break with former ways of being and belonging. There's a deep truth expressed here, which many of us recognize from our own experience. Sometimes to become more fully myself and to live more truly into my vocation, means leaving an earlier identity behind. This is usually a dislocating and so disorienting experience – there's a 'wilderness' period in most major life transitions – but it is only by way of such passages, that we live our way into deeper levels of personal integration and discover our part in the whole.

The Scriptural stories do not dwell on the subjective experience of such transitions, but they clearly signal that they involve the transformation of identity. Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, and God is experienced over and over again as a voice calling them out to sojourn in foreign lands and to encounter themselves and the divine in liminal space.

And this reveals a second function of such passages, which has to do with being schooled in trust. When they are strangers in a strange land, God's people have nothing and no-one to depend on but God alone. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are recipients of a promise, but they have no means of making this promise come true in their own resource. They must learn to keep faith through what looks like the impossibility of its fulfilment, and through apparently interminable set-backs, detours and delays.

This too is a theme that recurs again and again in Scripture, from Sarah being told she will bear a son, to Moses leading a recalcitrant people through the desert, to the prophets prophesying the restoration of Jerusalem amidst the ruins. The life of faith is a pedagogy of trust, taught in contexts of exile and struggle. But ultimately, *this* is what makes God's people receptive to gift, faithful, and so living witnesses to God's giving life in the world.

Motif 3: Alienation and Belonging

Finally, we come to a third, paradoxical use of the motif of alienation which I am calling 'Alienation and Belonging'. To explore this theme, I am going to touch briefly on three New Testament texts.

The first text is Hebrews 11. This begins by picking up the 'alienation and passage' motif – that is, the sense that being called out or estranged from your former security is about being drawn more fully into God's purposes and promise. 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going' (Heb. 11: 8) Ditto Isaac and Jacob. All of these, we're told, died 'in faith without having

received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them' (Heb. 11: 13). This seems familiar enough – part of the pedagogy of trust. But subtly a new emphasis emerges, and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews begins to speak of the possibility of a different quality of being and belonging altogether. It's not just that Abraham and his descendants believe they will be given what they're promised. It's that as they entrust themselves more and more wholeheartedly to the promise, they discover themselves sourced in the divine life. It's as though their identity is increasingly grounded in their relationship with God, rather than in their earthly possessions.

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11: 13-16).

In other words, Hebrews understands that living by faith gradually transforms our way of being on earth, such that those who are faith-full are able to be here in a different way. Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew writing from a Nazi transit camp in 1943 on her way to Auschwitz, wrote in a remarkable way of this experience:

I shall try to convey to you how I feel, but I am not sure if my metaphor is right ... The main path of my life stretches like a long journey before me and already reaches into another world. It is just as if everything that happens here and that is still to happen were somehow discounted inside me. As if I had been through it already, and was now helping to build a new and different society. Life here hardly touches my deepest resources – physically, perhaps, you do decline a little, and sometimes you are infinitely sad – but fundamentally you keep getting stronger.⁹

As the camp empties of transport after transport, Etty's letters convey the all-but-unspeakable horror and suffering and insanity of what she calls the 'fatal

⁹ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomeranz (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.78.

mechanism' in which she and her fellow Jews have 'become enmeshed'.¹⁰ They also convey her freedom from the power of despair, her extraordinary joy in life and trust in God, despite everything. In the same way, according to Hebrews, followers of Jesus may be enabled to endure persecution and continue in the practice of peace and love, despite all that stands against them. For 'here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' (Heb. 13: 13).

And yet, this use of the motif of being alienated and estranged on earth to express our true belonging in God seems at first glance somewhat in tension with imagery employed elsewhere in the New Testament. In the second chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, for example, we read: 'So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" ... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the covenant of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2: 11-12). Now, though, 'in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near ... So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God'. (Eph. 2: 13, 19).

In these words addressed to a community of Gentile Christians, the gospel is said to overcome the experience of not belonging, rather than induce it. For what was so deeply subversive about the gospel in a social context of rigid and life-determining distinctions between Jew and Gentile, citizen and non-citizen, was its breaking down of the 'dividing walls' and the hostility between the different groups. As Rowan Williams has said:

Those who were once strays, migrants, exiles, foreigners, are now insiders. They now belong. They are neither a collection of random individuals nor a group of barely tolerated marginal oddities, they are citizens of a proper civic community.¹¹

¹⁰ Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.126.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.32.

So we seem to have two, quasi-contradictory notions here. On the one hand, the New Testament proclaims a radical belonging for all, a subversion of the whole category of ‘stranger’ and ‘alien’. And on the other hand, it is this very belonging that leads to an experience of alienation of a different kind.

The text of 1 Peter suggests how these two notions are to be held together. In a passage that may have been influenced by the letter to the Ephesians,¹² 1 Peter 2 proclaims: ‘Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight ... Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy’. That is, all who were formerly estranged now belong to God (‘now you are God’s people’). Yet this is followed immediately by the injunction, ‘I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul’ (1 Peter 2:11).

With this juxtaposition, we see how the New Testament writers use the imagery of alienation and estrangement to express the strange paradox of life in Christ. On the one hand, there is no real estrangement any more – not from God, not from one another; there is the possibility of communion, at-onement, with all. And on the other hand, this very overcoming of social forms of alienation renders those who are truly ‘in Christ’ strange in a world which remains hostile to the life of God, and which insists on maintaining its rivalries and categories of inside and outside. Here, it is our *not* belonging to these patterns of life in the ‘world’ which signals that our true home is elsewhere, that we are indeed citizens of another country.

Discerning Alienation

So, let me summarise some of this. Imagery of alienation, estrangement and exile is pervasive in our tradition. I’ve identified what seem to me three major motifs –

¹² Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.31.

three ways in which these metaphors help us imagine our experience and our life with God.

First, is the motif of alienation and disobedience, where being alienated (spiritually, culturally or even physically) is a sign of having refused obedience or of being out of alignment with ourselves, one another and God. Second, the motif of alienation and passage recognizes that being dis-located and unsettled, drawn beyond former ways of being and belonging, may be something God asks of us, a necessary movement if we're to become who we are called to be. And third, the motif of alienation and belonging recognizes that there is something so profoundly counter-cultural about living radically as God's people, that those who belong with God will find themselves always and at least to some extent not at home in 'the world'.

And here's the rub, depending on the nature of your experience of alienation, different responses are called for. If you've been disobedient, repentance is required and the willingness to begin again. If you've been drawn out beyond where you know how to be, responding to what you've thought was a call from God, you need courage and steadfastness, you need to practice trust and listen hard. And if you're being persecuted for *righteousness*' sake – well then 'rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven' (Matt. 5: 12) and meantime stay true to love and the possibility of communion with all.

We began by saying that as church and as Christians, we feel ourselves nowadays to be in some sense 'aliens and strangers', pushed to the margins, not fully at home or given a place in our society. The question is, how are we to discern this experience? My sense is that – to different degrees in different contexts – all three forms of alienation are part of our experience as individuals, as parishes and communities, and as the body of the church as a whole.

We have, manifestly, been 'disobedient' and out of alignment with God's mercy, justice and love – and as I said at the beginning this shows itself not just in the flagrant and terrible ways revealed by the Royal Commission, but in all kinds of

petty parish behavior, by careerism in the church and our enmeshment in our culture's anxieties and preoccupation with status, power and success. We are also, it seems to me, in the process of being drawn beyond a former, settled way of being and belonging in our world. We might be kicking and screaming, but we are being asked to keep becoming, to let ourselves follow on an adventure led by the Spirit. We don't know where we're going or what the end will be, and meantime we find ourselves in some trackless and confusing spaces – too often clutching at quick fixes and programmatic responses as we seek to shorten our passage. And finally, we are, despite everything, seeking to be ambassadors of divine love, proclaiming the possibility of forgiveness, healing, truth-telling and lasting peace in the midst of a consumerist and divided society, where many don't particularly want to wake up to uncomfortable truths about themselves and our way of life.

Today, I invite you to take some time to discern your experience of being 'alien' or 'alienated'. It seems to me we need to pay real attention here – not simply to gesture towards broad categories but really to look for ourselves. What might the experience of alienation be signaling in your ministry, your life? What might it be suggesting or calling forth in you? The quality of our discernment here will make all the difference to what starts to emerge as possible. For here is the good news. God *is* present, reconciling all things – with us and without us, through us and despite us. We're seeking just to join in.