

25 January 2014

**Australia Day – Third Sunday After Epiphany (Deuteronomy 8. 5-14, 19-20)**

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There's an ambiguity about Australia Day – at least for many of us. Like most national communities, our country marks its distinctive identity, beauty and place in the family of nations with a day of remembrance and celebration. But the date 'we' in the dominant culture have chosen for this day represents, for the first inhabitants of our land, the beginning of a long history of dispossession and cultural genocide whose ramifications are still being felt and suffered. Australia Day is also Invasion Day – and we cannot celebrate it innocently or unthinkingly except at the cost of denial and untruthfulness, no matter how many fireworks we let off.

This difficult truth of our national identity is also true of our religious identity. As Christians, we are the heirs of a tradition and a way of life which also understood itself to begin with an invasion. As the people of Israel reached the end of their long journey out of slavery into the land God is said to have promised, they evicted or annihilated the existing inhabitants of that land. Those violently dispossessed, the people the book of Deuteronomy calls 'the nations', are the Hittites and the Amorites, the Caananites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites (Deut. 20.17). According to the scriptural stories of what happened, the 'nations' were not only collateral damage in God's project to give the people of Israel its own land 'flowing with milk and honey', but God directly commanded their destruction, their supersession. And this disturbing biblical account of the beginnings of the nation of Israel has horribly legitimated acts of conquest and

dispossession in other places – the Spanish conquest of South America, the Afrikaaner colonisation of South Africa, and contemporary Zionist approaches to Palestine.

Because these histories are so difficult to be with – because they make us squirm – we often try to avoid, justify or defend them, one way or another. The lectionary mostly omits these biblical stories from the readings. And closer to home, some historians have argued that what happened to indigenous Australians wasn't that bad, citing as evidence only the written records of white authorities, and pillorying alternative accounts as constituting a socialist and indulgent 'black armband' view of history. Others have relativised accounts of both sets of atrocities, by speaking of the endemically brutal and violent culture of those times. Everyone was doing it to everyone, so there's nothing particularly for us, as inheritors of this past, to be sorry for. And in the biblical context, the question of God's supposed complicity with the annihilation of the nations was dealt with by one theological student I knew by saying that if God ordered the genocide, then it must have been 'good genocide'.

None of this seems satisfactory. Of course, we must take account of context and the understandings available at the time when we pass judgement on those who lived in the past. But the issue we need to confront is our tendency to avoid, justify or defend ourselves or our ancestors in the face of these histories. Whatever the details, clearly, some bad stuff went down. The impact of what happened, the stories we tell about what happened, continue to be powerfully operative. And if we are to be capable of relating to all this, in our time, in a healing way then we need to be able to be with the discomfort, the squirm factor, internal to our history and identity.

And it seems to me that this work is essentially a spiritual work – and one that has very broad ramifications – from our relationship to our national past and fellow Australians, to our treatment of asylum seekers, to many of our personal relationships.

It is the difficult work of letting go our compulsion to be deemed 'innocent', to be justified, and it is at the heart of the life of discipleship.

The central issue is this. We want to do the right thing. *And* we want to be seen to have done the right thing. English theologian Andrew Shanks has put it in a nutshell – our genuine desire to do justice is bound up, most of the time, with our desire to be justified.<sup>1</sup> Often enough that works out pretty well. But ultimately, unless we are liberated from our compulsion to be justified, then we cannot really do justice. Why not?

On the one hand, until we are liberated from the compulsion to be in the right, we find it almost impossible to acknowledge where we have made mistakes, or caused suffering and damage. We have to deny or minimise the extent to which there is a problem (think of Howard government's response to the stolen generation report). Or we have to make it someone else's fault or demonise them; really, you drove me to it (and here we might think of the rhetoric about asylum seekers). But, as we know from our relationships, true restitution and reconciliation and the possibility of a shared future can never be realised while we are resisting our mistakes, our shame and defending ourselves, or making ourselves out to be the only innocent party.

On the other hand, until we are liberated from the compulsion to be seen always to be in the right, we will also not be free to act in ambiguous and difficult times on our own best discernment, sometimes in the face of no agreement, even if it means being judged and misunderstood, even if it means the risk of being 'wrong'. We will be unable to take responsibility for our lives and our choices, always looking for permission to be, and so refusing the risk and promise of adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p.30.

Discipleship of Jesus is about being liberated from this kind of compulsion to be always right, growing into this essential liberty of spirit. This is what justification by faith actually means. Self-justification is about possessing a righteousness of our own, controlling our identities. But it is just this self-possession and self-righteousness that is at the root of our separation from God and one another – it is at the root of our inability truly to repent and our defendedness, our judging and comparing ourselves with others. Self-dependence, self-assurance, self-justification is what we are asked to hand over in the life of faith, as we become radically and riskily dependent for our identity on God's gift and call. The Letter to the Colossians speaks of 'fixing our eyes on the things that are above', taking the attention off ourselves and following where Jesus leads without concern for possessing an identity (even one that looks good) apart from him. *Whatever* we do, our righteousness is sourced in our being forgiven and loved by God, and nowhere else.

All this might seem a long way from the ambiguity of Australia Day. But I believe that our continuing struggle to 'be with' our own history, truthfully, deeply, non-sentimentally, is profoundly bound up with our struggle to trust that our righteousness is always and only the gift of God's grace and mercy. It is received, not by getting everything right or by pretending nothing is wrong, but as we confess our poverty of spirit, our confusion and tiredness, our helplessness to make a difference or make it right. Only in the context of being forgiven, may we be free and humble enough to acknowledge the legacy of suffering, confusion and dislocation in which we, however unwillingly and unintentionally, are implicated and be capable of the slow, patient and painful work of deep, non-defensive listening and the seeking of a shared future.

On January 29, 1788, three days after the British fleet berthed at the place they named Botany Bay, Lieutenant William Bradley had his first meeting with the Australians. It was, writes historian Inge Clendinnen, 'a remarkably friendly encounter,

the British party being welcomed ashore by unarmed men who pointed out a good landing place .... Then, Bradley tells us, “these people mixed with ours and all hands danced together”. The next day at Spring Cove there was another impromptu dance party when about a dozen of the local men came paddling in soon after the British landed, left their spears in their canoes as a sign of friendship, and all proceeded to more “dancing and otherwise amusing themselves”.<sup>2</sup> Clendinnen’s beautiful account of this early history is called *Dancing with Strangers*. In the light of our subsequent history, the stories of these first meetings are almost unbearably poignant. Clendinnen says that the pictures drawn by Bradley of this encounter show ‘the British and the Australians dancing hand in hand like children at a picnic’. We cannot recover the innocence of those days. But I find it somehow healing to know that this happened – this too is part of our shared past.

As we celebrate Australia Day this year, may our discomfort remind us of the necessary and blessed failure of all our attempts at self-justification. May it lead us to embrace the humble liberty of the children of God, so that perhaps, one day, who knows, Australians again may dance hand in hand, like children at a picnic.

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<sup>2</sup> Inge Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003), p.8.