

6 April 2019

For He is Our Peace (Ephesians 2: 11-22)

Lent 5

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Thank you, Sarah for inviting me to reflect on tonight's passage, which takes our Lenten theme of reconciliation out of the inner realm of our relationship with God, and into the outer realm of how we live that relationship with one another. If I am honest, my comfortable inner journey with God, whose Spirit is reliably a source of strength and comfort, generally comes undone once I start to engage with God's creation. Being in relation with God's created order is a guaranteed way of knocking us off our spiritual pedestals and back into the bright lights of reality!

Conflict is part and parcel of daily life. How we live with one another, work with one another, relate to one another, is the space where who we are in Christ is ultimately tested. And beyond our immediate communities, the impact of the way we lead our lives can have a more profound effect.

During our Lenten journey, a number of us have been exploring the dynamics of relations between Indigenous Australians and white settlement, through the ABM Lenten study on "The Statement from the Heart". The reality of our broken and imperfect world could not be more pronounced than in the history of relations between Indigenous Australia and white settlement of this land. The study has opened for us devastating accounts of genocide, persecution & systemic injustice, frequently in God's name, which indigenous Australians have had to endure, as a consequence of white settlement.

This week the study cast a spotlight on how well meaning attempts to "help" indigenous Australians consistently fail to do so, and have reliably and ultimately been harmful. The study demonstrated the way in which that those in power have consistently *failed* to listen to the voices of the people they wish to help. A serious

part of the problem is that those with the power to do so, do not respect or take seriously those voices when they do speak out.

At a structural level, there is the continuing and embarrassing failure of the Australian government to respect or give voice to indigenous political leaders. Despite widespread consultation with the Indigenous community and the production of the “Statement of the Heart” in 2017, with a requested process of Makarrata, or treaty, our current Government has chosen to not engage in this process. In recent weeks, we have seen baby steps of support for a Makarrata, by the legal community & somewhat surprisingly, resources allocated in this week’s budget, however I won’t be holding my breath to see any meaningful action take place anytime soon.

As I have been thinking about this one-way mindset, I thought it fitted into what Richard Rohr describes as the Dualistic mind. Rohr says of the dualistic mind, “The mind that insists on being right, that it know best. It is not in love with God, it’s in love with its own righteousness.”

Our Ephesians reading opens with Paul addressing the two communities, the Jews and the Gentiles. He makes reference to the inequity between the two - calling out the dualistic mindset at work in this community. The uncircumcised was a derogatory term employed by the Jews to put down the Gentiles at the time. As Sarah explored last week, these outward marks of belonging, such as circumcision, historically required by law, are no longer necessary when a person has died to Christ. It is the belonging to Christ that is the great leveller, that unifies two separate entities into a united humanity

The metaphor of the body is not drawn explicitly in this passage, but I think it’s helpful to raise this analogy which Paul makes use of frequently in his writings, to describe the interdependent nature that all Christ believers have in belonging to each other. We are all different and we all have different gifts to bring, but we belong together because have in common the spirit of Christ that calls us and gives us life.

It's a profound vision starkly at odds with the increasingly individualistic world we live in. It's a vision that calls us out of our comfort zones of what it means to be church, that puts me over here and you over there, that it somehow matters if I am Anglican, Catholic, Baptist or any particular label we place on how to be church. Paul's vision of the community of Christ, is one in which the relational reality is first with and to Christ, and then to each other. Christ is the cornerstone of how we fit with one another.

Belonging to this reality will transcend "the church", as a denominational or organisational reality, as we see it and understand it, and into a reality that links us into a much bigger picture, where we become citizens with the saints and stand shoulder to shoulder with people not just from different denominations but dare I go there and say, with people of different faiths.

Being in Christ is, as Richard Rohr would put it, being in the space where God dwells in the material world, for all time, transcending what we believe we know and lifting us into a new reality. It is a space where no longer do we believe we know what is best for our brothers and sisters, but our hearts and ears are open to hear story in humility, so that we might walk together as equals.

Many of you will be aware that two years ago I went to live in Northern Ireland, with the Corrymeela Community, which is a faith community committed to peace and reconciliation. I thought it would be helpful to share the story of how the community was founded, because I believe it so practically illustrates Paul's vision of the universal church in action.

The story of Corrymeela began a few decades before the actual community began to form, in the war time experience of leader Ray Davey. During the second world war Ray served as an army chaplain, he was captured and detained in a prisoner of war camp just outside of Dresden for a number of years. As a chaplain, Ray was permitted to periodically leave the camp and attend to the spiritual needs of the sick and dying at Dresden hospital.

One day, he requested permission to sit with a dying man overnight, but the permission was denied and that evening Ray returned to the POW camp. That night, the Allied forces bombed Dresden and the hospital was destroyed.

The whole experience was at once devastating, but ultimately became transformational for Ray. Dresden was not of military significance and the severity of the bombing was seen as shocking. The very validity of the attack was later called into question. This experience demonstrated to Ray that the allies were not wholly good. In his hospital work, Ray had broken barriers and become friendly with the German hospital staff, a number of whom were killed that night. He came to realise that there were many good Germans. He could no longer accept commonly accepted wartime narrative that the Allies were all good, and the Germans were all bad.

These experiences served as a powerful antidote for Ray, to the growing sectarian hostilities in Belfast during the 50s and 60s. In his role of Chaplain at Queens University, Ray gathered a group of students to pray and to reflect on how best to respond peacefully to the growing conflict. Land was purchased and a home for the community at Corrymeela was founded. Corrymeela became a critical third space outside of the conflict, as a place of refuge, of education, of rest and of dialogue.

The spirit of community was born out of a refusal to engage in the prevailing dualistic mindset that all protestants, or all Catholics are evil. At the time, the Corrymeela Community was viewed with suspicion by those who didn't understand what they were doing, as the hippies on the hill! But over time, the community has found acceptance and ultimately respect as a place of peace during the ensuing civil war.

The work of Corrymeela continues today. It upholds the need for people to accept their common humanity, regardless of faith, gender, sexuality, ability or status. Among the many groups I met, one of the most inspiring was led by Mohammad Ali Amla, an English Muslim based in the Midlands, who is working with

groups of school teachers committed to devising strategies that will prevent youth from being radicalised in their faith.

Corrymeela is far from perfect and anyone who has made a commitment to the place will tell you, that as a faith community, it has its flaws. But one of the community members said to me, "The reason I stay committed to Corrymeela is because it gives me hope that things can be better, even though they are often not." Corrymeela is a place that has grown out of faith led response, at a particular time in history, in a particular place where the need for hope was most profound. It is a vision of what is possible, when we move out beyond our understanding of what is, and move into the space of where God is calling us.

I'd like to conclude by sharing with you the prayer for courage to enter that call, which we recite daily at Corrymeela.

Corrymeela prayer for courage

Courage comes from the heart

And we are always welcomed by God, The Croi of all being.

We bear witness to our faith, Knowing that we are called

To live lives of courage, Love and reconciliation

In the ordinary and extraordinary Moments of each day.

We bear witness, too, to our failures

And our complicity in the fractures of our world

May we be courageous today. May we learn today.

May we love today. **Amen.**