

**if the salt loses its flavour....**

Celia Kemp, 15 April 2023, Benedictus



White Crucifixion 1938 by Mark Chagall

*2 Kings 2:19-22*

*Luke 14:7-27,33 – end*

An epigraph to start – in my lectionary reading today, Jesus appears to the eleven after he has been resurrected and says:

*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.*

*Mark 16:15*

I am part of a group called Streams in the Desert and this sermon is an invitation to come with me to where we meet and to wrestle with the sort of things we wrestle with.

We are focused on theology arising from particular place, and so we read Scripture in landscape and hold it against the historic and current realities of *Mparntwe*, Alice Springs.

These are in tension and this is a work in progress and this sermon takes you right up to the living edge of some of our discussions.

Currently we meet here in the riverbed on the edge of this waterhole at the Telegraph Station Reserve at the top end of town.



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It is the original “Alice Springs”, but its Arrernte name is *Atherreyurre*.

Its creation story describes an old *Arunga* (euro) man walking along the river and scratching out the waterhole and it is an important water and ceremony place of great significance to the Arrernte people.

It is also now a public gathering place across all cultures, particularly kids come and swim and picnic and play here.

And it forms part of a protected reserve that is home to herons, hawks and sacred kingfishers, euro kangaroos and dingoes.

And so although you can walk your dog anywhere in the hills around, dogs are not allowed in the reserve.

### **And to an introductory STORY**

I walk into the reserve most mornings and see little rock wallabies all the way in on the cinnamon-coloured rocks of the range.

And the waterhole is my turning around point and I pray here.

Earlier this year it rained so much the river ran and I would walk to it before dawn with swimmers in a backpack and swim, just me, as the sun came up.

One morning the path in was crossed by fresh little stream after little fresh stream.

And I went into the water and it was exquisitely lovely.



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There were dragonflies skimming the surface, a waterfall trickling down over green moss, and I was swimming in coloured light. There was a rainbow behind the buildings to the west for a while. I was euphoric. I get very excited by metaphors and it was all the theological metaphors for me and it felt like the water was life and bringing life, all around and downstream as the river ran through town.

When I came out I saw a bloke standing in the river. He was staring at his phone and he had ear buds in. He had a very large dog off-lead who was splashing around in the water.

Eventually they set off back down the path I had walked in the dog walking through each little stream.

I am always distressed on behalf of the wildlife generally, and the rock wallabies in particular when I meet dogs in the reserve.

And it seemed to me this bloke could not really hear, nor see, the extraordinary beauty and life of this particular place.

He could see enough to know that it was pleasant, and so chose to be there rather than all the area around where he could bring his dog.

In the process of taking what he wanted, he was destroying it a little for both the wildlife and for everyone else.

### **and now to Scripture**

Scripturally water sources -springs, fountains, wells - are God's provision in barren places.

And not just for a single point in time.

They are the start of new life flowing ongoingly into the future.

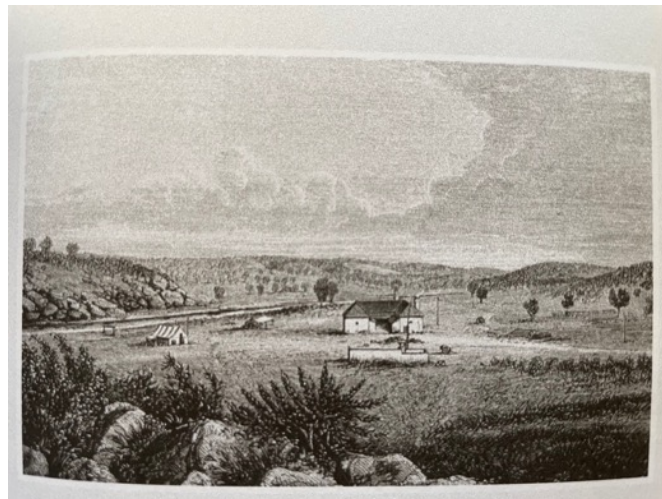
In Hebrew Scripture this often means romance/babies – it is like an ancient Mills and Boon trope – if a man and a woman meet at a well then it is on. Moses and Zipporah and Jacob and Rachel meet at wells.

In the New Testament it changes a little so Jesus' banter encounter with the woman at the well is for life bubbling up into the future – as you would expect - but in the woman speaking good news rather than the marriage babies way.

You could say the original 'Alice Springs' was the start of the settler-colonial stream flowing into the future in this place.

Because this water was here, the first whitefella building was built here in 1871 – the original telegraph station.

And the telegraph line 'opened up the centre' bringing with it cataclysmic change.



Surveyor Edwin Barry's 1873 sketch is the earliest known image of the Telegraph Station

It is a story of pioneer strength endurance and ingenuity but also a story of conflict dispossession, suffering and death of the people who were living here already.

The conflict often centred around the limited water.

The telegraph line brought blokes with it and they bore children with First Nations women and this became what was talked about as the 'half caste problem' in those days -a lot more on this next week.

After the telegraph station shut down this site became the Bungalow, a home for what we would now talk about as 'stolen generation' children.





Washing Day at the Bungalow, 1934

In the 1930s and 40s those kids swam in this water hole.

The Bungalow was a troubled place, the conditions were poor and there was sexual abuse of some of the girls.

The site then became an Aboriginal settlement and finally what it is now, a major tourist site.

There is an ongoing struggle about how to present its history, is it a story of derring -do pioneer triumph? Or of suffering and trouble?

This tension continues unresolved.



Photo taken from [https://classicoutbacktrial.com.au/alice\\_ariel/](https://classicoutbacktrial.com.au/alice_ariel/)

2 Kings 2 describes a town in a pleasant situation.

Behold! The people of the town say. See! Our fruitfulness into the future is threatened. The land is barren, it does not bring life. Because the water of our town, it is bad.

There *is* trouble now in Alice, although I often don't recognise the Alice I experience from what is being reported. It *has* been heightened recently but it is not new .

Perhaps the recent furore does achieve this, behold! See! All is not well. Things are not working. Our fruitfulness into the future is threatened.

Someone once told me that there was a cycle that repeated in Central Australia.

There would be the latest great project in Indigenous affairs, and it would come with a huge amount of enthusiasm, money would be secured, and detailed plans drawn up.

Then the work would start, a spade would be put into the ground it would hit the bedrock of colonialism and the whole thing would fold.

I went back later to thank the person and they said they had never said it.

So I am not sure who I am citing but I do think it describes the reality here of endless new projects that promise life into the future but fail.

I believe that is because the settler-colonial stream, which is of course my stream, had death-bringing forces present at its origins that have flown onwards to this day.

Back to 2 Kings where Elisha, the prophet of the Lord, goes to the source of the woe, the spring.

And he cleanses it with salt from a new bowl.

And the waters are healed.

This isn't a chemical thing, like rebalancing a swimming pool with the right buffer.

It reflects a pattern that appears over and over in Scripture.

In the face of a vast insoluble problem God calls humans to do something that for some reason is necessary, but in itself is not sufficient.

And even though what they do is manifestly inadequate, mysteriously God works through it and so it is enough.

In the New Testament Jesus told his followers that they themselves are to be salt.

*Is Christianity the salt that cleanses the settler-colonial stream? What would that mean?*

Luke 14 says that if the salt has lost its flavour it is useless and the chapter sets up flavourless salt as God's people prioritising the building of their earthly empires over the kingdom of God.

The examples given are accepting the respect we think is our due. Hosting our friends and family and wealthy folk and being hosted by them in turn. Buying and caring for property. Spending time working. Prioritising our marriage. Loving our family.

This is disconcerting. These are good things. This is a pin point accurate description of what we would in 2023 consider to be a 'good life'.

It is, in fact, the Australian dream.

But Jesus sets these things over and against the kingdom of God.

It isn't that each thing is wrong in itself.

But we live in a world of limits; limited time, resources and attention, limited love and care and effort and work.

And so there a tension between working for the good of me and mine, and the good of others, between building up my own empire and working for the broader good.

It is an uncomfortable tension and it is much easier to evade it.

And this evasion is what I see as the corruption at the heart of the settler-colonial enterprise.

Those who came here worked very hard and in the process they took what was here for their own benefit at great cost to those they were taking from.

Like all people, they had a desire to see themselves as benevolent/good.

And so the stories focus on the hardships they bore, which were real, but often block both the self-interest and the cost to others from view.

To sustain a story where it was all good a blindness is required.

Biblically speaking we do not hear, we do not see, our heart becomes hard.

But because we have only one set of ears, and eyes, and one heart, we become unable to see the truth generally.

We live in an illusion that reflects our own goodness back to us, rather than in the real.

I think the original sin here is “Self-centredness with the appearance and feel of virtue” and it continues today.

And because Christianity was a key part of the settler-colonial story the risk is that much of our Christianity has lost its flavour and is just another part of this corrupted stream.

Not all Christians.

Christianity was also salt. The first mission here at Hermannsburg stood against murder, the loss of language, the taking of lands for pastoral leases, the removal of half caste children and more and many of those missionaries lived the closest thing I know to the costly Luke 14 life.

The first Anglican priest based here arrived in 1933 and was a chaplain to the Bungalow and was horrified at the conditions and worked hard to improve them.

But this was not most Christians and I am talking about settler-colonial’s society use of Christianity broadly, as a justification everything it was doing.

We were bringing Christianity to the people so our arrival and activities were de facto “good news to all creation”.

And so Christianity became a veneer of righteousness covering an avaricious heart.

We are a very clever people and we have very clever ways of making our self- interest appear virtuous.

One way is to pretend there is no cost.

Everything is win win.

If I help my self I AM helping the world (Adam Smith)

But this is not what Jesus says in Luke 14.

Another is to see the world as a commons to be pilfered by whoever is clever or powerful enough to do it for the benefit of them and theirs.

This testifies to the VIRTUE of the taker and to the moral inferiority of those it is taken from.

But this is not what Jesus says in Luke 14.

Or we talk as though the flourishing of ourself and ours is an advertisement for Christianity, you too can be like this if only you come in here and believe what I believe and do what I do.

But in Luke 14 Jesus talks about giving up everything we have and taking up our cross.

If we are talking as though building our own empire is in fact what goodness is, then we are not talking in a way consistent with the gospel of preaching good news to all creation.

When I started to become more closely involved in work with First Nations peoples I realised I had a sort of dark crackling spot in my heart during some of my conversations that hurt to look at.

I came to think of it as a blind spot.

It was evidence I was living in a somewhat unreal world, an illusion bent to reflect my own goodness back to me.

And I need God to deal with it so I can stand in the – difficult - reality of myself, my own history, and what was going on around me.

But then, but then there are these glimpses of a larger world...

This is another world to the ones most Australians know. It was explained by my father once that it's like a blanket on the ground. We, the uninitiated, only see the blanket. Lift it up and that's what our elders... see – the real thing – a world most of us will never know or understand. Through their paintings, artists... offer us a glimpse of the world of dreams where the past, present and the future link.

*Hetti Perkins*

*(her grandmother Hetti worked at the Bungalow and her father Charlie Perkins was born there)<sup>1</sup>*

Nothing real can be built on an illusory foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> I am struggling to find the proper citation for this, I suspect it is Art and Soul – the documentary series – but have not been able to confirm this in time for this sermon



If we are blocking out the real we are blocking out God.

You cannot both truly pray to God and profit by the world. He who knows the world as something by which he is to profit knows God also in the same way.

*Martin Buber, I and Thou*

In conclusion back to Alice Springs:

This is what it looked like at exactly this time of night at our last meeting there.



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It isn't in fact a spring.

Nor is it a permanent waterhole, often the surface water dries completely up.

What it is, is a soakage, there is permanent water but it is sometimes underground.

Alice was the name of the boss's wife and she never came here.

So Alice Springs is named for person who never came here and a spring that is not there (and is inexplicably pluralised).

And perhaps this is fitting for a people who have to not see too deeply if they want to achieve what they want, whilst retaining a concept of themselves as 'good'.

And so much of our Christianity needs to be made salty again and it will look...different and it is a live question to me what we will in fact look like .

And so I will end with a reading which holds this question from Willie James Jennings:

He blessed it and broke open his dream, one part in each hand.  
To those on his left and those on his right, he said the same thing  
as he handed them his dream, "Eat this dream,  
and it will kill the dream that kills."  
Hands trembling, they wondered which of their dreams  
would die and which would grow stronger.

*Willie James Jennings*  
*After Whiteness*



Cross painted by Mrs Kathleen Wallace