

Pathways to Humility

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 23 October 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Garry Worete Deverell

Pentecost 20C

Joel 2: 23 - 3: 2; Luke 18: 9-14

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Ya pulingina

That means hello in Palawa kani my language. I'm a Trawlolway man from North Eastern Lutruwita or Tasmania - as many of you may know it.

I want to acknowledge today that we worship, we pray, we converse, on the lands of the Gadigal people. I acknowledge their ancestors who formed this country and the elders who have cared for it through thick and thin - a lot more thick than thin lately than a long time ago - and acknowledge that they persist to do so in the face of great difficulties. Thank you Jo.

Scripture means different things to different people. One of the interesting things about any classic text, I think, is that it continues to have what Paul Ricœur called a *surplus of meaning*. Which means that if you read it in new contexts, places other than the place of production of the text, and the community to which it was originally addressed, you may find that it says different things in different places.

The text from Joel is a case in point. Scholars argue about what the original community, the original hearers of this text might have been, because some scholars place it in the eighth century and some in the fourth. There's a sense in which they're not sure which of the great empires of the days were being referred to. Was it the Persians? Was it the Babylonians? Or was it the Greeks who swept down into the tiny corner of the Mediterranean known as Israel and destroyed so many things and killed so many people? It's a bit unclear.

We're not even sure whether the locusts that are referred to in the text, that seem to have come and eaten everything, were actually locusts or whether this is a poetic device to talk about armies? Human armies, who sweep down and clean up everything, leaving the land destroyed.

But I can tell you now, as an Aboriginal man, I read this text and I ... I understand what it's about. It's about the actions of Empires and Crowns. It's about the actions of people who think they have a right to go into someone else's place, someone else's country, and take whatever they like. Whatever takes their fancy - without having to form any kind of relationship with those who understand that country. Who understand how it is that you can live sustainably in that place. Who understand the way in which the local god is in relationship with those people.

One of the very interesting things in many of the prophetic texts is the use of two names for the divine. The first name, which is often just translated 'god', is El. And if you find your way back to Genesis you'll discover that El was a local Canaanite god. El was the god of the indigenous people of the land.

The other name that is used in the text (which I noticed your translation just skipped!) is Yahweh. Yahweh! Yahweh is the name of the god who apparently took Israel out of captivity in Egypt - and took them to what they called the Promised Land - which of course was, from the point of view of the Canaanites, colonial occupation of their country.

And so there's a tension in this text. There's a tension between honouring the god of the land - the divinity of the land itself. But there's also a calling upon the warrior god to come and rescue the people in the way that they have done before. But this rescuing was at the expense of the indigenous people.

What we do know about the people of Israel is, actually, they became a hybrid people! Whatever the texts, say there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, while there was a group that came up from Egypt and settled in the land of Canaan, that many of the tribes were actually still there. And they were indigenous tribes! And they did make treaties! And they did inter-marry. But what happened is, that later on in the Babylonian exile, when schools of theologians were trying to make sense of what had happened, when the empires of the north came down and destroyed everything, some of them decided that it was because of this treaty making and this local blending with indigenous tribes that the Yahweh god the warrior god was angry.

And what scripture actually freezes in time for us, if you like, is not a single text with a single point of view about all of that, but rather an argument that is occurring between different theologians, different theological schools, about the meaning of liberation; and the whether it's worthwhile and important to make treaties with those who perhaps were formerly your enemies.

Certainly, whatever is the case when it comes to this prophet, Joel, is that the people are again in strife, in trouble. They again find themselves at the bottom of the food chain. They again find themselves oppressed. And they call out to any god who will hear, whether it be El, the god of the land, or Yahweh the warrior god who rescued some of them, at least, from Egypt at some point in the past. And they say: *please have mercy on us! we need your help.*

If we turn to the Gospel reading, this is a story, at least, in the way it's presented to us, about a goodie and a baddie. A goodie and a baddie. The goodie, at least in his own eyes apparently, is a Pharisee. Now before we give Pharisees a hard time let us recall that Pharisees were a renewal movement in Israel in the first century. They were seeking to call Israel back to its covenantal responsibilities. They were seeking to call people away from their unthinking allegiance to the occupiers, the Roman Empire.

So, in many ways, they were the progressives! They were like this congregation! They were the ones who were seeking to renew the faith in new ways. And this Pharisee is very proud of the renewal that they are doing. The new language they are introducing, the tithing they are doing. The fact that they are withdrawing themselves from systems which make for theft and murder. They were very, very proud.

And this Pharisee raises his hands to heaven and says: *Thank you god that I am part of this terrific new movement! Thank god I'm not like those fundamentalists over there! Thank god I'm not like those seculars over there who just sort of join in with whatever the Roman Empire says! Thank you god I'm a progressive!*

But over there in the corner in some literal shadowy part of the Temple, we're told, there was a Tax Collector. And of course, in this society Tax Collectors were viewed by some as the worst of the worst - because they were doing the bidding of the Romans. Pharisees in particular would have been very, very, very unhappy with Tax Collectors.

And we're told that the tax collector doesn't even raise his eyes. He stays in the corner. Interestingly, for me as an indigenous man, he looks at the ground rather than the heavens. Looks at the ground! And he says: *god have mercy on me, a sinner*. Who are the saints and who are the sinners? Human nature, I would suggest to you, works like this most of the time.

I'm the saint and they're the sinners. I'm on the right path, those other people they're missing the point. If only everyone was like me and my community then we'd have a lovely time!

One version of this that is about (and I'm an Anglican so I know all about this) is what I call white saviour ... I'm not sure what to call it ... Illness? Syndrome? White saviour syndrome? I like that I'll go with that!

This is where the church tells itself that it's doing terrific things for indigenous people. we've got missions, we've got a congress, we've got a preamble, or in the Anglican Church, we've got a mission agency that deals with all that and so we can feel very comfortable that we're doing good things for those poor buggers.

And the stories we tell about the good things we are doing have ourselves, that is the white saviours, at the centre of the story and the indigenous people as the poor buggers who are the receivers, recipients of our gracious charity.

White saviour syndrome. The truth is that we indigenous people would just really prefer that you didn't help, because the difficulty is that you help out of what you think you know, but you don't know our lived experience. You don't know our spirituality. You don't know our country. You don't know our kinship systems. You don't know how to speak to the animals. And so you don't help, you hinder and you harm!

That is not to say that in a Christian Community, with people from many places, that we should not support each other. It's a question of who takes the lead. Who makes the decisions? Who decides where the resources that we share together should be allocated. It is to have humility towards the ground beneath our feet and the people around us. It is to recognize that sometimes the god of the land is more friendly than the god of the lamb that you come from.

So here is my challenge to you today. Hear the word of the prophet, who from a complicated history says: *We're at a crossroads, but we do not know where to turn. We don't know where up and down and left and right are. Please god, whoever you are, come and help us.*

And the word from the gospel, as Luke tells us, which encourages us to have humility, to put aside our knowing, our expertise - and to listen to the one in the corner who knows what humility is.

In the name of God, Amen