

From mission field to mission force?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 21 January 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 3B (Day of Mourning)

Contemporary Reading: “Contemplation on Colonised Country”;¹ Luke 4:16-21.

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Twenty years ago now, I was working with the First Nations arm of the National Council of Churches, and was involved in organising a series of events called ‘*Hearts are Burning*’, each designed to re-ignite positive Christian engagement with First Nations people, and, above all, to help First Nations’ Christian voices to be heard. For the gifts of First Nations’ Christians are vital to any healthy futures for faith in these lands now known as Australia.

As one of our keynote speakers back then, the late Aboriginal Bishop Jim Leftwich, would repeatedly, and strikingly, affirm, ‘*the mission field has become the mission force.*’ In other words, it is those who first received the Gospel in colonial, even imperial, form, who are typically now best equipped to speak genuine ‘good news’ in these lands today. That is part of why we mark today in the Uniting Church as the Aboriginal “*Day of Mourning*”: both to recognise the continuing impact of past imperial and settler colonial violence and also, crucially, to hear the voice of the Spirit speaking again today through First Nations peoples.

It is therefore a huge delight to have Aunty Ali Golding with us again this morning, and, in a few moments, I want to hand over to her to offer her own reflections. For I do not intend to say too much myself this morning, except to share, very briefly, three questions which arise for me from our Gospel, as we mark this Day of Mourning.

Firstly, are we, as people of faith – and especially those of us who are whitefellas of faith – are we prepared to enter and dwell in the wilderness? Are we prepared to let go of our comforts and expectations, and to become genuinely vulnerable, including facing up to our own demons, our own destructive forces and acts in the past and present? Are our faith communities as a whole able to do this, hearing the Spirit of God afresh, in vulnerability and from uncomfortable places? Are we?

Let us make no mistake. The resounding words of Isaiah which Jesus reads in today’s Gospel story are indeed powerful, and a call to us. However, we need to remember that, in Luke’s Gospel, they come after Jesus has been in the wilderness. At the beginning of his recent book, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* - from which we heard a portion in our contemporary reading this morning - Gary Deverell points out how, slowly, First Nations people are being recognised as vital in arts and many other spaces.

¹ From *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* by Garry Worete Deverell

Why, the forthcoming Metro station, around us and beneath our feet, is even being named Gadigal!

Yet Churches in general, like political responses to the Statement from the Heart, are still dragging their feet. Why? Is it not because we, as Christian communities, are reluctant really to let go, beyond our settler colonial way of thinking and operating: reluctant to enter the wilderness of uncertainty and vulnerability in which the Spirit of God is speaking afresh?

Secondly, are we – as people of faith – and especially we whitefellas: are we willing to be caught up with the confrontation that hearing the Spirit of God involves? That was certainly too much for those who heard Jesus read in the synagogue, wasn't it? For the Isaiah passage Jesus read was too revolutionary for them, as it still is for many of us today. For preaching good news to the poor, doesn't sound so good if you are rich, especially when it undermines not only your position but the justifications of your privileges and wealth.

Indeed, Isaiah chapter 61 is about the biblical Jubilee Year, the Year of Divine Favour, in which debts and unjust social and economic relationships are ended; and in which, vitally, the land itself is renewed, as land is once more recognised, not as the property of a few, but as God's own gift to the whole people of the land. No wonder Jesus is effectively kicked out of his home town in the story as it is further told by Luke. What then are we willing to give up and face up to, so that Isaiah's vision may be fulfilled? Are we serious about God's Jubilee, restoring land and freeing those who are unjustly burdened?

Thirdly, and finally, are we able truly to listen, as well as seek to respond: and will we listen deeply? This is an essential part of going into the wilderness, where faith communities must go if they are to find genuine new life today. In that respect, in his recent book, Gary Deverell takes to task the preamble to the Uniting Church's constitution.² That was, he acknowledges, a well-meaning step by the Uniting Church, seeking to recognise First Nations peoples and God's presence in these lands - way, way, before European invasion. Yet, as Gary argues cogently, it is still built on colonial religious assumptions in which First Nations people and faith insights essentially remain 'invisible'. A genuine living faith, with justice, for us all, therefore calls us into much greater openness and engagement with First Nations people and post-colonial thinking. This begins by listening, deep listening: as the old Kairos ministry saying has it, '*listen, listen, love love.*'

Let me then shut up. For, as First Nations peoples repeatedly tell us, there is a welcome for us all in these lands now known as Australia. It has been whitefellas after all who have been obsessed with turning back the boats, and with 'fortress Australia'. There is still a place too for all of us in reshaping our shared faith in the light of the Spirit speaking to us afresh today. Those things cannot happen however without so many of us beginning again: journeying in the wilderness, willing to face up to confrontation (being accomplices with the marginalised and not just allies); and, above all, without listening, to those who share the Spirit of God with us afresh, and the call to God's Jubilee.

In the Name of Christ, who comforts and confronts, Amen.

² In chapter 11, 'Colonizing Indigenous Religion? A Case Study from the Uniting Church in Australia'