

## **Our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God**

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*Isaiah 9:1-4, Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Matthew 4:12-23*

Very soon we will celebrate Australia Day. Next Thursday in fact. It is Australia's big party day. There are ceremonies all over the country welcoming new citizens. We'll have the announcements of Australians honoured for their service to the country and we will have all the debates about whether they deserved it and who else should have been mentioned. Thousands of barbecues will happen all around the country with men behaving badly with copious amounts of alcohol and there will be lots of flag waving and cheering. All the paraphernalia is already in the shops.

Nearly 23 years ago I was in an Australia Day parade in Adelaide dressed as a new settler with my baby son on my lap as we sat in a cart pulled along by a donkey. At that age I didn't really care what it was all about; it was just a good reason to get dressed up and have a party. There are of course many reasons to celebrate Australia. It's a great country and I love it. Anyone that has traveled overseas knows the joy of returning home to the sunshine, the eucalyptus and the beaches. Australia Day is our national day of celebration.

It is not all quite as simple as that of course. There's a part of our history that we cannot forget even on Australia day. My Aboriginal sister-in-law and her family call this day Invasion Day. Others like her call it Survival Day or the Day of Mourning. The fact is that our history has some terrible and violent aspects. Even putting aside the story of our Aboriginal citizens, we are a country founded because Britain needed somewhere to dump its criminals. It also needed an outpost in the Pacific to further its imperial ambitions.

Our nation was founded with conquest, violence and oppression. But we are not alone. Just about every other nation on earth has been established through conquest, violence, oppression and revolution.

This is the 'black armband' view of history that John Howard so deplored, but it is the truth. Australia does have a dark history along with our stories of heroism, perseverance and mateship. And the darkness remains. We are living in darkness, a darkness perhaps greater than that of 'Galilee of the Gentiles.' Our darkness is seductive; it sells the sweet dream of Australian 'values', which really means we value our own interests at the cost of everyone else.

We don't have a Roman army occupying our land as did the first century Jews and Christians, but we do have the oppression of our own lies about ourselves. We lock up innocent women and children for unacceptable lengths of time. We go to war to curry favour with the powerful and on the flimsiest of pretexts. Our wonderful servicemen and women are doing the job they bravely signed up for but we must ask why and at what cost. We irrigate the arid zone and destroy whole ecosystems for the god of money and progress. (Why on God's good earth are we growing rice out there?) We do all this and much more but we tell ourselves that we are really OK and then we celebrate with cartons of beer, flag waving and pats on the back.

Now the thing with a black armband view of history and the whole idea of sitting in darkness is that you don't just sit there—you repent. When Jesus heard that John has been arrested, he went to the region of Galilee, the land that Matthew, following Isaiah's lead, says is the land of people living in darkness and the shadow of death. Jesus began his public ministry there, proclaiming this message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near".

I love this in the Greek. *Metanoete*, which is translated in our version as 'repent', really means 'you repent' and is addressed to more than one person. It is 'you' as plural. So Jesus is traveling through this region saying to the people as a whole, those who are living in darkness and the shadow of death, "You repent". You, as in all of you, change your thinking and your way of doing things. Don't just say you are sorry—change. It is said as a command, with a sense of urgency and it is a command that calls down through the ages right to our time and place.

But why should we repent? What is it that motivates us to be different? What could possibly be better than beaches, sunshine and eucalyptus trees—oh and beer? We should repent because the Kingdom of Heaven is near. In fact right with us. And in this Kingdom, unlike our sovereign nation states, God is sovereign and in God's Kingdom there is justice, peace and healing. Under God's vision for our communities there is the potential for each and every part of God's creation to find wholeness and complete fulfillment—*shalom*. As Isaiah puts it, "There will be no gloom for those who are in anguish". Jesus presents us with a picture of how things could be if we only caught the vision and collectively changed enough to invite the light in and let it transform our relationships and us.

However, we must be clear that the realisation of this picture of the Kingdom of God is doesn't depend on our efforts at social justice. If that was so we would burn out and quit in frustration. The critical element is our own transformation, the change of our hearts and minds, by the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The most important thing I discovered in my research in the Philippines, which probably seems obvious, is that it is changed people who change oppressive and unjust structures in society.

That is why Jesus imperative command, "You repent ... you change" is some of the most important words we can ever hear.

Changed people are not just people that discover a new idea, think about it and then spend the rest of the time thinking they have understood it. Changed people do things differently. When they do that, the situation around them changes.

What is the message in all of this for you and me? For we folk that belong to this church of St Philip's, loyal Australians and committed Christians? Like Andrew and Simon, James and John, we are the called. We are called firstly ourselves to repent, to change, to be transformed and be loved and nurtured into the likeness of Christ. We are called to be followers of Christ who are then to shine as the light of Christ.

We may be Australians, but our primary and eternal focus and commitment is Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God he proclaimed, the realm of God's peace and justice. As transformed people, our task is to proclaim not the sovereignty of Australia but the Kingdom of God. That is our prize and treasure, our true home. For that, if we know its worth, we will sell all we have to secure it for the future.

Our repentance, our change, is not a one-off event. It is a continual, life-long, spiritual practice. We could all do with being more loving, more just, more forgiving, more caring and compassionate, more committed, more disciplined, and more willing to lay aside our ego and our fears for the good of others. It sounds like I am suggesting we climb a mountain doesn't it? Well I am not—it is actually easy. The yoke of Jesus is easy and the burden is light. We just need to want it enough and be brave enough to open ourselves to Jesus and the Spirit and do that moment by moment, day by day. The transformation will happen while we are doing the dishes and taking a nap. Seriously it does. Never underestimate what God can do with you if you let him!

Jonah, who is one of my all time favourite biblical characters, was asked by God to call the Ninevites to repentance and he ran screaming in the other direction. He couldn't face the possibility that God might possibly forgive the city. Jonah preferred the wrath of God and his own prejudices to God's ways. At the end of the book Jonah is still unconvinced and remains in sulk because God has indeed spared Nineveh.

When Andrew and Simon, James and John were called, their response was unequivocal and immediate. They left their nets and followed Jesus. Unlike Jonah, they had focus and they put God's Kingdom first. For them the vision of Jesus was a guiding light and they were not disappointed by their trust in God.

During the election campaign that he lost in 1949, Ben Chifley said, *"It is the duty and the responsibility of the community, and particularly those more fortunately placed, to see that our less fortunate fellow citizens are protected from those shafts of fate which leave them helpless and without hope ... That is the objective for which we are striving. It is ... the beacon, the light on the hill, to which our eyes are always turned and to which our efforts are always directed."*

Chifley could easily have been talking about the Christian community, our Christian community, and many more like it. In fact I am pretty sure he nicked his ideas from the Christian story. He did after all come from Irish Catholic stock and attended Catholic schools.

As bearers of the light of Christ, it is our task to keep shining in the dark, even when political groups steal our best lines, even when no one seems to be listening anymore. It is our ministry to remind each other and those around us that the Kingdom of heaven is the place we are called to inhabit, treasure and proclaim. On this coming Australia Day, may we repent and be transformed and proclaim the Kingdom of God in all we do and say.

Let us pray.

Lord of all, we sit in darkness, in the shadows of affluence and plenty.

Come to us that we may come to you

Change us to bring us home

Help us to live as if your Kingdom was our treasure and the hope of our world.

Let your light shine in our hearts

That we might be light to those we meet,

To those we love and to all others.

Amen.