

God's answer to tribalism

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
The Epiphany of Our Lord — 5 January, 2014
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Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

On the 9 July 2011, I attended the Canberra celebration of the Independence of South Sudan. Over 98% of the largely Christian and animist southern part of Sudan had voted for independence from the predominately Arab and Moslem north. For over 50 years the country had been racked by civil war with devastating consequences. Millions displaced and hundreds of thousands of people had died during the conflict. Refugees fled the country taking the long journey and the uncertain process to safety in far away lands. But now on that day in 2011 there was such happiness. The people I was with were so happy, so full of hope. They were crying with joy. They were dancing and singing and making wonderful speeches. Yet on that day there was something that tore at my heart.

During one of the speeches a little boy, about 5 years old, was sitting in front of the lectern and in his arms he cradled a toy semi-automatic rifle. As the man behind him spoke of peace and new beginnings the little boy sat there with that symbol of death and conflict. It reminded me of how fragile a thing peace is between people. So this week it has been deeply saddening to learn of the escalating violence in South Sudan. Our Dinka brothers and sisters here are full of grief and confusion and helplessness. Just to give you an idea, Revd Monica has lost two brothers and at least four nephews in the renewed conflict. Her story is just one of many.

The reasons for this renewed violence are many and complex and I do not want to give you a false impression that I somehow understand what is happening. If I have learnt anything from working with refugees at St Philip's over the last few years it is that their experience is worlds away from mine. I will probably never be able to understand them and their story because I can never walk in their shoes. But one word has stood out for me in my conversations with people—tribalism.

Duop Chak Wuol, a South Sudanese journalist wrote, "The Republic of South Sudan does not belong to a particular tribe—it belongs to all tribes of South Sudan; those who think so should think coherently. The truth is, tribalism kills and destroys."

Belonging to a tribe and fighting for a tribe may once have been an evolutionary advantage. Belonging to a tribe was certainly important in pre independent south Sudan. With no government and no help from anywhere else you needed your tribe to survive. But tribalism does not make for peace.

When Yugoslavia was freed from communism in 1990, naive observers expected good things. They expected that the people involved would savor their new freedom and goodwill would rule. Instead, the newfound freedom was used to release centuries-old tribal hatreds that had been kept in check by force—and Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Muslims and Christians expressed old tribal hatred. The same thing has happened in Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems when a common enemy is removed we turn on each other.

But before we pat ourselves on the back and think we have done away with tribalism in Australia we should stop and consider how we create common enemies that conveniently soak up our enmity and aggression. We reserve some of our most vile, vitriolic and confused rhetoric for refugees who come by boat. And when we don't have an external threat to fixate upon we tear ourselves apart in politics, the sporting arena and talk back radio. The great evil, tribalism, divides us all into an insane patchwork of warring factions. In government and

work places, in the church and in families, in civil society and in our own hearts there are factions in conflict.

Now, perhaps you are wondering what all this has to do with Epiphany? The great message of the celebration of the Epiphany is that God is much bigger than any tribe, people, religion or nation.

The God of Abraham and Isaac is also the God of Paul and Mohammed, is the God of Gautama Buddha, of the Dinka Ayual or the Nukuna of South Australia; is the God of the Igorot and the French; is the God of the Wallabies and the All Blacks; is the God of Leyton Hewitt and Roger Federer. I hope you are getting the picture.

Paul writes in Ephesians that this is a secret that was revealed to the apostles, the prophets and to himself. The secret is that through the good news of Jesus Christ the gentiles, the ethnos, that is all people, all tribes, have a part in God's blessings. All tribes and people are members of the same body and share in the one promise. If there is one message we should take from epiphany it is that all humanity and all creation are fundamentally one. All people and all creation is equally and eternally loved by God. If there is one warning we should hear, as our psalm makes clear, it is the poor, the needy, the neglected, the weak, the oppressed and the victims of violence who are most precious to God.

I wonder, if we believed that boat refugees were one of us, part of our family and tribe, would that change how we treated them? I wonder if we believed that the Dinka men, women and children were our true brothers and sisters would that change how we interacted with them? I wonder, if we could see that that person, that we struggle with was in fact blood of our blood and flesh of our flesh would that make a difference? Would it make a difference to our daily life if we could embrace the shadow parts of ourselves and see them as just as important to the wonderful complexity and mystery of our being as those bright and shiny parts?

I mean, I do really wonder. I don't know.

I think Paul, the apostle to the gentiles - all the nations and tribes of the world - wasn't all that sure either. In our passage from Ephesians he has a very worrying verse. He says that it is by means of the church that this message of God's blessing for all peoples was to be revealed. Really, *through the church?*! In retrospect it seems a completely barmy idea doesn't it? Through the church with its blood curdling history of violence, oppression, racism, sexism, dogmatism and plain irrationality and stupidity. I mean God save us all.

Yet, there it is in Paul's writings. There it is in Jesus call to his disciples. There it is when we share in communion - the sign and foretaste of our oneness with God, with each other and all of Reality.

I think this is the clue to why Paul was so passionate about local church unity. To be able to proclaim this message the local gathered community must first become that to which it is called - one Body, one people, inclusive of all tribes and peoples, a radical place of unity in diversity. Paul knew only too well how difficult this is and I think it is why in the very next passage he prays the most profound and extraordinary prayer. We did not hear it read but I suspect what he prays is the key to it all. So let me read it to you. This version is from the Good News.

He writes:

14 For this reason I fall on my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name. 16 I ask God from the wealth of his glory to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, 17 and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in

love, 18 so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love. Yes, may you come to know his love—although it can never be fully known—and so be completely filled with the very nature of God.

Well may Paul fall on his knees because it is only in freely turning to God, the God of all, that we can begin to break down the barriers of tribalism, of an us and them mentality. Paul prays that his readers will grow strong in their inner selves, that our own selves will first not be divided and torn apart. He prays that Christ, the Lord of all, will dwell in our hearts and that we will be rooted and founded in love. As we grow ever more in this love he prays we will eventually be filled with the very nature of God.

The key then to overcoming our tribal nature is to take on God's nature who is beyond any tribe or group and who loves all people and creation equally, who sides with the victims of violence and oppression and who is full of forgiveness, compassion and mercy. It is in fact only love - unconditional, free, generous, self-sacrificing love - that can raise us up out of our small mindedness and fear ridden egos. It is only this love that gives us another horizon to journey to, an horizon big enough to encompass the whole world, all peoples, all tribes, all nations.

In this season of Epiphany may you be rooted and grounded in love and may you be filled with the nature of God—so that all may be blessed. Amen