

## Third Sunday after Epiphany 2019

'The best of all the preachers are those that live by their creeds,' wrote the poet Edgar Guest. Today we hear of two examples of preaching, one is rather long 'from early morning until midday,' the other rather short: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Let's try for something in between!

This weekend we mark the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove in 1788. It has become a contentious celebration in our time, a time in which it seems we are struggling to understand among other things ideas of identity, community and nationhood. The political scientist Benedict Anderson described nations as 'imagined communities' by which he meant that national identity is grounded in the shared stories and imaginations of its participants. Perhaps the time has come to re-imagine our nation, and we might consider what we might offer to that project. It is not just our problem but one we share with other western countries and it seems that such things as Democracy, the rule of law, respect, among others, have become insufficient to fire our imaginations

I doubt there is a well-worn path in your Bibles to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah! But they are worth a look! Ezra, the priest and Nehemiah the court official are sent to rebuild, reimagine the religious and civic life of Jerusalem after the disaster of defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians. In the rebuilding the Book of the law is rediscovered and Ezra reads aloud to everyone, with interpretation, that it might be the foundation upon which the city's life will be built. It conjures up a wonderful scene, all sorts of folk in a carnival atmosphere, clearly the city's residents partied long and hard that night! But.....can you build a community simply on the law? If you read on in Nehemiah you can see that this newly restored people very quickly began to close ranks and to protect their identity, there was little room for outsiders. The law became the marker of who was in, and importantly, who wasn't.

Last week we celebrated the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. It's a day when we consider that great event on the road to Damascus when Saul, the lawyer, the Pharisee who was, as we read in Acts 'educated strictly in our ancestral law;' undergoes his conversion experience. But converted from what and to what? We can't say that Paul suddenly became a Christian like we might say that someone converted from Judaism, or an Anglican became a Presbyterian. Paul didn't change religion or denomination but he found his own faith, based on the Law, changed; fulfilled - is a better way of putting it. We read in Acts: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' I replied, 'Who are you, sir?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting.'

In this moment we can perhaps see that Paul's understanding of law underwent a dramatic conversion or re-imagining. Like the call of the prophet Ezekiel Paul falls to ground stunned by a vision. Like Ezekiel he looks up, but unlike the

prophet Paul experiences the risen Jesus who tells him that through his zeal for the law he is persecuting him! This is the moment of conversion for Paul and we see that conversion in action as he writes to the members of the church in Corinth. The law rigidly determined who you were and your place in society: Jews or Greeks, slaves or free. In the spirit, free from the law, these markers of status are immaterial, this is a truly radical departure for Paul's society. We cannot underestimate what a radical shift this is, that by belonging to the community of God you move from being a slave to being a free person. It is a community in which each has a role, each has a valued place.

Appreciating how Jesus and Paul – both Jewish men understood the law has been the life work of many a theologian or Biblical scholar. Law is important, but clearly what we as Christians have to offer is the sense that law is about community and community is about human beings living together and from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah to this day our lawmakers need to be reminded of this.

I have been speaking about law from both a civil and religious perspective because of course in the Old Testament and through to Paul's day there was no separation. Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the Governor are on the stage together. And there continues much we can gain from an understanding of Paul's conversion for our day and the understanding of law from both a religious and secular perspective. Let's just recap: one of the fundamentals of Christianity, which was brought to the fore at the time of the Reformation was our freedom from the law. That our salvation is won not by the keeping of laws but because we are loved by the God who sent Jesus to prove it! But the laws remain as Jesus tells us, we keep them not to make ourselves right with God, we keep them because they are the way that we live together reflecting the love of God for all people. Paul's conversion was not a change in religion but a change in his understanding of law. This is the problem that our lawmakers have to wrestle with, are our laws simply punitive measures of keep us in line or are they the means that community is truly built up, that all are valued and all have a role.

'The best of all the preachers are those that live by their creeds' the quote I began with. Jesus read today from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah the passage was in essence about freedom. Jesus then preaches that wonderful sermon: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Jesus lived out that prophecy. Clearly our calling as Christians is to reflect the love of God for all people, Jesus lived and died that that might be our creed.

Law exists that we might enjoy both individual freedom and fulfil our desire to live together in community. I pray that like Paul we might recognise that we are individually members of one body and live accordingly. This is what we as Christians bring to the body politic today. This is perhaps how we need to re imagine our nation in our day. Amen.