

## ***The Church is a new vision = unity in diversity***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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*1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43 and Psalm 96:1-9 or 1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29) 30-39 and Psalm 96;  
Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10*

Every Sunday in this place we stand and say, "we are the Body of Christ. His Spirit is with us". I am always surprised by the reaction in myself each time... Yes, I think, we are the body of Christ, how amazing is that? As time goes by I have also found there are layers and layers to this. Here is a small story to show you what I mean. It comes from a conversation I had with one of our key Dinka people this week and it is such a good news story for our whole parish and the wonder of the Gospel. As you know the Dinka folk came to us from St George's Pearce where there had been a falling out between the various tribes and sub-tribes of that congregation. It was all related to a problem back in South Sudan. So one group came to us. They separated so they could all stay friends. For over year they were known amongst the South Sudanese community as the Ayuel Community and no other Dinka people would come to St Philip's.

But slowly that has changed. When the Dinka came here their leadership and our leadership agreed that they would not be just a group using the church and paying rent. We would be one people under one roof. We would all be followers of Christ worshipping together in this place. We would be one body in one Spirit. From the pulpit, in meetings, wherever possible we have emphasized this vision. A vision that has always been a key part of community life here at St Philip's— inclusion and welcome of diversity. The leadership have worked very hard to get that message across here and in the wider South Sudanese community in Canberra and slowly but surely the Dinka congregation here are now known as the St Philip's Dinka Congregation and no longer simply the Ayuel Community. And now other South Sudanese have started to attend services at this church. This may seem like a relatively small change but it is actually very significant for from this unity has come peace, hope, common purpose and a new life. You can see it happening in the community.

All peoples in all places can fall into tribalism. At the risk of offending someone that is what nationalism is — it is tribalism writ large. This weekend all over the country Australians are celebrating our tribe. The fact that we cannot agree on what it means to be an Australian is beside the point. It is our mob and we rejoice in our common life. But the dark side of nationalism is when we become xenophobic, afraid of the other, those who are 'not Australian' as we understand the idea.

From the invasion of Australia by us white folks, to the White Australia Policy, to the locking up of refugees in detention camps, to the appalling vitriol and racism of shock jocks, this dark side is played out over and over again. The church, to our lasting shame, can fall into this trap as well.

Tribalism goes a long way back and from our readings today we get very different pictures of what it means to belong. The first reading from the Book of Nehemiah is the story of a gathered community, in fact all the tribes of Israel. In our reading they come together to read from the law of Moses. The dominant characteristic of the ancient Hebrews was that they defined themselves over and against other peoples. Their unity and prosperity were obtained through conformity - to the community and the written law. Theirs was a tribal mindset. Their identity was ethnic, their boundaries real and physical (they had just rebuilt the walls) and they had a common language and believed in a common ancestor. Perhaps compared to the

polytheistic nature religions that surrounded them they were not totally tribal but in terms of how each person found their place, purpose and meaning the tribe was central. Non-conformity to the rules and values of the group was punishable by death. You just have to read Leviticus to become aware of the penalty for stepping outside the parameters. Yet, we must not think of them as oppressed by this system. They were not 21st century people. Something we should all keep in mind when reading the bible. The tribe was what they knew and understood, flourished in and honoured.

If we turn to the reading from Corinthians we find a very different picture. It is so different that even today we still don't quite get it. Paul's picture of the gathered community is a new vision. His letter to the Corinthians was crafted to deal with questions about identity and disunity. The Corinth church was wildly diverse. It had slaves and wealthy slave owners, Jews and gentiles, Romans and Greeks, men and women and young and old. It also seems to have had an abundance of the Spiritual gifts. Into this confusing mix Paul paints for his listeners the picture of how a community would look if it truly lived the path of Jesus Christ - his life, death and resurrection.

And the picture is not tribal. It is also not individualistic. It is of a group of diverse individuals who come together to build each other up and work for God's vision and mission, a mission that is about love for all humanity. It is primarily characterized by the Holy Spirit who empowers and animates everyone. At verse 12.13 it says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit".

This is the same Spirit who Jesus believed empowered him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. This same Spirit is with and in us today. Participation in this community is not through ethnic identity or tribal affiliation, although for many Christians that is part of their story. Whether we choose to belong or not is a free choice. We choose to follow Christ and join with others in carrying on his loving work in the world.

In the Nehemiah reading Ezra read from the law, the sacred Hebrew scriptures. The people wept when they heard the words because they realised they had turned their backs on God and had forgotten who they were. In the Gospel reading Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and he says the sacred scripture is fulfilled and is being fulfilled in him. And Jesus is not a book or a law. He is the living word. He is a person whom we choose to follow, to love, to be in relationship with. He is a mystery that we cannot control or define. He is a saviour who leads us into reconciliation, peace, liberty and new life. He is the one who reveals that God is the lover of all humanity and creation. God is not my God or your God. God is I am, ground of being, three in one, unity in diversity.

I have come to believe that the health, wholeness and unity of the Church is only truly possible when diversity of background, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and ability is embraced and honoured. It should never be required that membership of the Christian community is attained by giving up one's individuality or particularity. Rather individuality and the journey towards that should be central to our life together. Each one of us is called into relationship with God, through Christ. Each one of us has a very valuable and particular journey and contribution to make in the working out of Christ's mission — and we all need each other.

Everyone is important in this picture. The person who cleans the floor is as important as the one who prays. The little baby is just as important as the wise public servant full of experience. The person who comes to church late and leaves early is as important as the one who comes early and leaves late. The person with end stage dementia at the Kankinya nursing home service is just as important as the bright young person with their lives ahead of them.

The elderly person who faithfully turns up each week, when they can, is just as important as the priest. Actually the priest, that's me, is by far and away the least important person here. But all of us are essential. We all make up the incredible, beautiful, diverse, complex, amazing Body of Christ.

I was praying last week about the needs of the parish and I did what I often do, I handed you all over to the Lord. As I prayed I was struck by the truth that Jesus the Christ lives in each one of us, you and I. And together we are the Body of Christ.

You know as your parish priest I am not particularly interested in whether you believe the words of the Nicene Creed or where you stand with any of the doctrines of the church. Some days I'm not too sure about the creed myself and I take comfort from the fact that when we say it we are saying it on behalf of the whole church. I am more interested in whether your doubts and struggles with the creed and church are distancing you from God, the source of your life, the ground of your being. I am more concerned with you finding your particular gifts and path, not with you conforming to a set of propositions or indeed conforming to anything. It is vastly more important to follow Jesus the Christ with body, mind and soul than it is to bend the knee to anything else. For in following Christ, freedom, peace and justice become possible and we can live in love not fear. Love of the other, our neighbours, of any race or creed.

I am not particularly enamoured of the church at times and I am talking here of the "Church", not this local gathered community. I found our own tribalism in the Anglican Church just plain tedious. I have much sympathy with atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. And we in this place know the tensions and difficulties of living a life of faith together. Yet I have come to know the joy and love of a life lived in Christian community — a real, messy, incarnated, very human one like this one. I have seen the power of Christ's Spirit working in people's lives, transforming relationships and reality itself. I have come to see that the challenge of our difference and diversity, our very individuality, saves us from ourselves. It is when I am confronted by something in the other, what they say or do, that I come face to face with myself and where I need to die to my self-will, my old attitudes and ways, my own tribalism. It is where I am brought into wholeness and new life with others. This is not easy... In many ways it is inexplicable but very precious. Let us hold it very dearly, honouring each other in all circumstances and living this message so we may be a sign of God's diverse love and grace. May we preach Jesus Christ in word and deed, the Jesus Christ who gives us a new vision of God's love in a multi-faith, pluralistic, incredible rich and beautiful world.

Let's pray for a moment ...