

St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor — 12 August 2007

Revd Rob Lamerton

Isaiah 1.1, 10-20; Psalm 50.1-8,23-24; Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16; Luke 12.32-40

This week, I took Sandy and myself to see the movie *Amazing Grace*. It is, of course, about the efforts of William Wilberforce to bring about the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, working from 1787 to the eventual passing into law of the abolition in 1807.

Wilberforce was an Evangelical Christian who had a strong sense of the hatred of sin and the need for repentance; but this was not in isolation from deeper moral and social responsibilities. As well as the abolition of the slave trade, he worked for the end of slavery and the freedom of slaves. He also generously supported the schools of Hannah More and the Church Missionary Society, as well as the Bible Society. He supported efforts to allow Roman Catholics the right to own land and hold public office, at a time when Roman Catholics in England much oppressed. There is much more!

As I came away from the theatre, I began to wonder what might be the great issues of our day to which we as Christians should give our attention. The three that came to mind are:

1. the whole state of care for the aboriginal people of this country—indeed for all the people of this country! For if some are not cared for, we are all the poorer! If some are not included we cannot be strong;
2. the whole area of housing which is so far beyond so many of our people; and
3. the whole environmental issue and use of resources

As we read in the gospel today, Jesus speaks to his followers, his “little flock”, “it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ... Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out” You need to have containers for “unfailing treasure in heaven”! (vv.32-33) “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (v.34) The thing we most value will be that which gets the bulk of our attention and our affection!

The rest of Jesus' words are about preparedness for action. “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” (v.35) Be like servants awaiting the return of their master - making an effort to have everything ready! (v. 36) This points me to not only our personal relationship with God but to the level of justice and equality in our land at the national state local and community levels.

Isaiah spoke to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel in about 700BCE. This is not long after the prophet Hosea, so the picture is similar. Isaiah speaks about the inability of the people to turn their worship into living justly and fairly with each other!

What to me is the multitude of your **sacrifices?** says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, (vv, 11,16)

The result of such behaviour will be sharing the benefits. “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land” (v.19) ... Now!

On my first item ... The present intervention policy of the federal government in the Northern Territory's indigenous affairs appears to me to have very much the same pattern as the Iraq war!

Not enough resources have been applied over the past years to resolve or help build the infrastructure needed—like Iraq, where for years the regime of Saddam Hussein was courted as long as it was needed but not enough was done in a strong and positive way to help bring change.

So suddenly a major intervention is needed! It looks good for those who want action: when in doubt do *something*!! In the case of Iraq it was war. In the case of the aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory, it is this intervention with military overtones.

But also like the Iraq war, the whole issue of the long term seems to have been either overlooked or badly planned. Jack Waterford's editorial in yesterday's *Canberra Times* points to the increase in the estimated cost of this intervention and questions the ability to increase the level of funds and resources for the long term.

Now please do not think that *I* have the answers! But I am very concerned that the swift answer to the concerns of child abuse in *some* aboriginal communities may not be helpful in the long term. Moderate aboriginal lobby groups seem to share the same concerns. In some cases the intervention appears to trample on hard won aboriginal rights over land. Yes there needs to be sound management of the child protection issue *with* structures for long term care and management of aboriginal communities. I even wonder if there is a need for a bi-partisan Department of Indigenous Affairs that is outside the influence of the political process. It is obvious to me that aboriginal culture does not fit well into our white Western European mould.

This has been a concern for as long as I have lived. I see us edging towards real justice for the traditional owners of this land and then slipping back, and I wonder when we will take it out of the hands of our political leaders to develop long, long term policies and ways of giving dignity to Aboriginal people.

I wonder *how* we as a church community can work towards these goals as well as the housing issue and environmental concerns.

On the housing concern . . . I recall a church in Wagga Wagga that bought up a number of houses for students at what was then the Riverina Teachers College. I wonder if there is a way we could do something as a church to counter the way that university accommodation is moving away from the care of the student!

These are big issues! As I said, I do not have the answers, but I hope we will at least look at the questions! The letter to the Hebrews gives us something to consider for the way ahead.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (v.1) The writer speaks about things which are not visible at the outset, that are becoming not only visible but real . . . a land and descendants . . . because Abraham was willing to undertake the journey!

The writer concludes by talking about desiring “a better country” meaning the “city of God” or the “Kingdom of God”. I wonder if we can't think of “a better country” as the place where we live, a place where God's justice is applied for all our people.

Jesus concludes his little parable with words about preparedness for “the Son of Man”. In the Old Testament, the “Son of Man” was one who looked like a human being but who was filled with, surrounded with, the light of the glory of God and who, it was believed, would usher in the new age of God.

Jesus is the one in human form who bears God's glory, who challenges us to be ready for him! By establishing God's justice and peace we thus bring the light of God's glory to this world and the important

issues of our time.

Where your treasure is there will your heart be also! Wilberforce spent twenty years labouring to abolish the slave trade. His treasure was to achieve that goal. What are we willing to call our treasure?

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B2 Forum
ADDENDUM
Jack Waterford

THERE are not a few perks, privileges and bits of insider access associated with being a journalist, most of which I bear with all of the fortitude I can muster. But there are also embarrassments, not only in explaining what I myself or my colleagues have done, but also in attempting to explain what my community, my government or fellow Australians are doing.

This week, I have been asked by a number of non-Australians to explain exactly what is now happening in Aboriginal affairs. I have been asked the same question by a number of Aboriginal people. Neither group is particularly interested in my own view about what ought to be done, or my criticisms of what it seems to me will happen as a consequence of what is being done. They simply want to know what is actually happening.

It's a hard question to answer. There is no shortage of press statements - bold in their declarations of intent, but rather thin in stating what is being planned, or why. Even thinner in describing to what extent old policy has been turned on its head, how things will be different, or differently administered.

There is now, as well, a second reading speech or two associated with the package of legislation put to the Parliament on Tuesday by Mal Brough, who numbers Aboriginal affairs and social security operations among his responsibilities. Mal is particularly strong on moral indignation about an appalling (and, apparently to him, completely new) amount of physical and sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, particularly in the Northern Territory, and has put together a ragbag of decisions - now proposed legislation - which will apparently resolve all the problems. The moral indignation, which is apparently shared by his chief adviser on the subject, Wayne Gibbons, the head of his Aboriginal unit, is accompanied by a new and complete impatience with any idea of delay about anything, and a tendency to accuse anyone questioning even the minutiae of the decisions as somehow being soft on child abuse.

The Australian Defence Force is involved with the intervention - some say invasion of the Northern Territory. It goes down well not only in the press statements, but with the notion, being used for some political purpose, that the occasion is a national emergency, justifying use of the ADF for civil functions.

When, however, one asks it - as a somewhat more Professional operation - just what it thinks it is doing, even the CDF, Air Marshall Angus Houston, can use only vague terms about providing general support, particularly logistical support, to a "scoping" Operation.

"Scoping" is a new word already, so old (perhaps five years in general parlance) that everyone knows what it means without really knowing what it really means. Just the sort of word that Mal Brough, who reached the rank of captain in the army before going into politics, was probably using automatically even 15 years ago. Strictly, it means squinting through the telescopic sights of a rifle to get a broad idea of the terrain and the range before using the cross-hairs to fix on the target and squeezing the trigger to let go the bullet.

I don't think Mal wants to shoot the blacks. The scoping here is travelling, in parties of people with interests, to make some assessment of the range of needs, the priorities, and essential if subsidiary tasks, before deciding what to do, in what order, how, and with what resources.

By essential, if subsidiary tasks, I speak of something that always bedevils Aboriginal affairs. one can go into a remote Aboriginal community and decide, immediately that one needs a few more teachers, a few more nurses, and probably a cop or two. Indeed, it is hard to think think of an NT community where here this does

not apply.

But to put them there means being able to house them, and, perhaps, their dependents. It means making sure that they have clean water, sewerage, and transport. Each worker, at minimum will need a \$60,000 Toyota. A serviced dwelling will cost a minimum \$500,000.

A scoping party which, thus, determines that three teachers, two nurses and one cop are needed urgently in a community, must arrange \$3 million of accommodation which did not previously exist, \$300,000 worth of vehicles, and \$1million a year of ancillary services (air fares, salary subsidy, back-up, communications and other on-costs) as a necessary condition precedent for dealing with the problems which have been seen.

If experience is any guide, that new \$3 million upfront, plus that new \$1.3 million of running costs, eat up anything, available by way of actually making a difference in the community. I note, for example, that when the emergency was declared, two months ago, the Prime Minister said he expected it would cause only a few tens of millions in new expenditure. There is now nearly \$600 million allocated in extra costs before the end of June next year. It seems like a lot, and is. But divided among about 150 communities, it will not be enough for the houses, the cars, the salaries and the air fares which is to say some employment and perks for whitefellas, not new expenditure "on" blackfellas.

Never mind, perhaps, because after some suitable interval, the scoping parties and the new officials will appreciate, as apparently no one has done before, that many of these communities urgently need extra --housing, more school rooms, better water supplies and so on. And that will be the take-off point for the delivery of such facilities and services. And then everything will be well, and perhaps, finally, Aboriginal Australians in the Northern Territory, will have base level services somewhat similar to those other citizens will take for granted.

But there are some problems with deep optimism on these counts, or even to factoring in some of the better ideas among the Brough ragbag. Neither Brough, nor the Government, have made the slightest indication that the intervention is the precursor to a higher level of spending and resources, once the scoping is done. Yet the idea that the base-level resources could be delivered from a rearrangement of, and better administration of, the money available is nonsense. The backlog in housing investment alone is a minimum of \$1.3 billion, in the Northern Territory alone. In schools facilities it is, I estimate, at least \$200 million - a measure of the money that successive Country Liberal Party and Labor Governments in Darwin has misappropriated from money given them for Aboriginal education and spent instead on middle-class white suburban schools in Darwin. (At the moment, there is not a high school in any of the communities covered by the Brough invasion, which have a high-school-age population of, say 4000 kids. Funny they are not going to school.)

The other pessimistic factor is that an undertone of all of the Brough rhetoric is not only blaming the victims, but the assertion that Aborigines have to stop expecting handouts, stop sitting around, and that they will not get anything until they "deserve it". That also underlines the punitive social security changes, and the one-size fits-all assumption that every Aboriginal parent in the subject communities is abusing his or her children. In that case, the scoping is to no purpose whatever. Except in buying the Government delay and in giving Brough some temporary sense of deep personal satisfaction. That's shameful enough, if nothing compared with the disgraceful Labor cowardice on the matter.

Perhaps I don't get it. I have always thought myself somewhat better informed than most on Aboriginal issues, but I must be missing something. But then again so, on the basis of reading Brough's statements, are a good many diplomats and other foreign observers. And not a few Aborigines themselves.

Further note from Linda (web deacon)

The legislation was passed unchanged through both houses of Parliament in the following week (week ending 18th August 2007). Our political action must now ensure adequate public housing, public schooling and public health in these communities. Not just extra demountables from Baxter immigration centre (with their ghosts and shocking stories), which will presumably be used to house the new white personnel (defence, police and hopefully medical, but probably not educators or trades).

