

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

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

Third Sunday after the Epiphany — 25 January 2015

*Jonah 3: 1-10; Psalm 62: 5-12; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20*

It's the Australia Day long weekend. There are ceremonies all over the country welcoming new citizens. We will 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 people behaving badly with copious amounts of alcohol and there will be lots of flag waving and cheering. All the paraphernalia has been in the shops for weeks. Nearly thirty 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 is 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 all not quite as simple as that of course. There is 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, oppression and violent 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.

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. In our Gospel, Jesus hears that John has been arrested and he goes 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 begins his public ministry there, proclaiming this message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near".

I love this in the Greek. *Metanoieite* that is translated in our version as 'repent' really means 'you repent' and is addressed to more than one person. It is 'you' as in plural. So Jesus is traveling through this region saying to the people as a whole, those who a 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 his 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. 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 realization of this picture of the Kingdom of God is not dependent on our efforts at social justice. If we do that we will 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 through Jesus Christ.

The most important thing I discovered in my research, 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" are the 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 I? 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 to repent ourselves, 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 might 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. 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.

The characters in our bible stories today present us with two different ways to respond to God's call to his Kingdom, his way. 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.

The response of the disciples in Mark's gospel is different. When Andrew and Simon, James and John are called their response is unequivocal and immediate. They leave their nets and follow Jesus. Unlike Jonah they had focus and they put God's Kingdom first, not their own misguided thinking and desires. For them the vision of Jesus was a guiding light.

And this repentance and change is not a one-off event. It is a continual, life-long, spiritual practice. Andrew, Simon, James and John had reason over and over again to turn their hearts and minds to the way of Christ and follow. They all failed him one way or another and learnt the hard way that being true to the call was not always straightforward. 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. We must work at it with God, 'work out our salvation' as Paul puts it. We do the work, little by little of prayer, meditation, bible reading, listening to wise others and caring for our wondrous bodies and souls. The transformation will happen while we are doing the dishes and taking a nap. Seriously it does. We are changed

from the inside out. Given hearts of flesh and spirits of courage. Never underestimate what God can do with you if you let him!

As transformed people our task is to proclaim not the sovereignty of Australia but the Kingdom of God. We do that through word and deed, by example and prayer. We remind our communities and politicians there is another way to live in this world, one that mirrors the love and mercy of God.

As bearers of the light of Christ it is our task to keep shining in the dark, even when no one seems to be listening anymore, even when it seems hopeless and difficult, even when we are confused and anxious. 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 weekend, 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.