

St. Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Sunday 17th September, 2017

Corroborree Tree – 15th Anniversary

NEW TESTAMENT READING

Acts 10:1-16 *Peter and Cornelius*

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES



When you see something like this, what is it you see?

Is it a basket? Perhaps something a little basic or primitive when compared to western technology (like a smart phone)? Is it something you like the look of, or perhaps it is not really your style?

What do you see?

Do you see colours, perhaps primitive earthy dyes?

Do you imagine this has taken an abundance of time to

make, from local grasses gathered, and local roots giving colour?

Do you imagine the people who have made it, and wonder why it is made at all?

What do you see?

What do you imagine it is worth? Does this artefact from the oldest living culture on earth have a dollar value in some gallery – where cash is exchanged giving a unique item place in your home? Does it then become its own talking point over dinner, a way to tell a story? Of holiday? Of beating down the price? Of people, culture and place?

What do you see?

There is a story here, one that cannot be bought. Rather it has to be lived. The story is one of grasses gathered since time began, fibres stained with roots and leaves, and hands that have rolled strands on

legs as has been done for tens of thousands of years. But there is more to see.

These colours give away a story, but only to those who stop and wait for the story to be told. The colours and the pattern proclaim clearly and boldly – I am from Langarra, this is my homeland.

On our way home from Arnhemland, a random man at the airport in Darwin sees and tells. 'You are from Langarra'. He is not from there, so we wonder how it is that he sees, how he knows the story.

Europeans couldn't read stories like this. Their eyes looked for sheep and found none. Their eyes looked for fences and found none. Their eyes looked for houses and were conveniently blind to what could be seen for it did not match the grand European plan.

What do you see?

A poem by Rev. Jennie Gordon:

it's time to listen

who has the voice
 to speak for country
 who has the right
 to speak for country
 for 48,000 years or more we have
 always
 welcomed
 those who came

they planted a Union Jack and claimed the land,
 the soil being bound in social contract
 by our ancestors

when they saw us living
 on country
 they made no agreement

they started

killing us
and making us prisoners
humiliated
exiled from our homelands

come and sit down with us
it's time to listen

The Uniting Church has history, First and Second peoples together. There have been highlights, but it has often been difficult. Rev. Denise Champion, an Adnyamathanha woman, reminded me when I was in Darwin for a conference, that the 'Creator gave us (Indigenous People) our stories. God is waiting for old stories to be told and revealed so God is finally being revealed in this land.'

Is that something we can see?

During the conference, we acknowledged our presence on the land of traditional custodians, the Larrakia. They have an ancient sacred story of the wind as creator. Second Peoples know these stories - the Spirit of God as wind and breath. These stories are at the heart of our ancient Hebrew Scriptures. But what of an even more ancient text, the dreaming, the songlines? Can we see God was being revealed in the life and culture of the First Peoples long before this country was a twinkling in the European eye?

In the Uniting Church, the constitution frames our understanding of the work of God. When we realised it didn't go back far enough in time, we added a preamble that says (in part):

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.

What can we see? What do we hear? What do we know?

Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra was ordained a Methodist minister in 1976 and was the first Aboriginal minister in the Uniting Church. A few months ago in Darwin he challenged us anew: *Does the UCA really think about Australian theology, Aboriginal theology?*

This week I was given a book that contains his reflections from 40 years ago. Djiniyini says, *“The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment, and provides for our needs – economic, social and religious. We have a human relationship with the land: Mother – daughter, son. When the land is taken from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it... When we become Christians, we see more clearly our relationship with the land and with God. It was God who entrusted the land to our ancestors. We were living in a land of plenty, like first creation people... The bad influence came in breaking our relationship with God, with man, and with the land. We never dreamed that one day the bulldozers would come in.”*

40 years later, either literally or metaphorically, the bulldozers still come in. At the recent Darwin conference, Rev. Gondarra lamented the state of our relationship. He was clear. We second peoples should know enough to see and change how we act. First Peoples have been telling us these things for a long time now. And yet I know I still struggle to see what even a simple basket conveys.

Rev. Gondarra invites us to learn from our mistakes. To learn we must see, we must hear, we must understand. To covenant is to journey together, and to take the time needed to allow the stories to sink into our very being and how we live.

A poem by Rev. Jennie Gordon:

precipice

we are on the
precipice
of a new thing
as a church

God is waiting
for the ancient stories to be
revealed
fully revealed
in this land

if you sit
with the people
they might
tell you

there is a pronouncement
that is waiting
for utterance

You may wonder why all of this matters, particularly because what is done is done, and we cannot turn back time.

You may wonder why all of this matters, when in your daily lives you do not encounter first peoples of this land.

In the name of Christ, I believe it matters. The story from Acts is one of invitation into Covenant, of journeying together. Peter is pushed to see beyond his culture, and welcome Cornelius, the outsider. God works beyond our own culture into a world we cannot easily see.

We also know that in the body of Christ, if one of us suffers, then all of us suffer. Rev. Gondarra argues that if the land suffers, we do too.

Our story as the Christian church in this nation is tightly wound up in the Indigenous story. We have tried to convert, protect, stand by and against Aboriginal people throughout recent history. Our identity as church is bound to the gifts and struggles of First Peoples.

So here is a chance to walk together in story, culture, heart and faith. Here is a moment to deepen our understanding, to have vision for things we may not have seen before. Here is a chance to stop and wonder about the power of a day – January 26, and be mature enough

to continue a journey together as first and second peoples of this land. Here is a chance to think deeply about stories of prejudice we have inherited, and look for a deeper view beyond 'what they do', or 'thank God we are not like them'.

It is wrong to believe that bad things done to Aboriginal people in this country belongs to the past. It continues – where truth is denied; in health statistics and incarceration rates; in stories told dismissing public drunks or trashing of houses; in the wealth we all have today, because in the words of Rev. Gondarra, this was a land of plenty.

In the name of Christ, let's see deeper than we even knew we could see. Let's weave rich stories and God's wonder and learn from each other. Let's invite a more just public story. Let's invite our leaders into spaces of compassion and a maturing of this modern country.

For black and white, first and second, we are all in the image of God. And when one part of the body suffers, all of us suffer ...

Today we gather around a Corrobboree tree, a tree of Reconciliation. Let us look out for each other, care for one another, and journey together in the name of Christ.