

A Destiny Together

Justice for First Peoples

Reflections on the Lectionary Readings

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Sunday 16 March 2014
The second Sunday of Lent

This week the readings are about newness, rebirth and grace; about the promise of land, and how the promise is claimed. They are about the foundation of new community and the movement from law to grace as the foundation for blessing.

One of the challenges for us this week is to consider how we may have claimed God's grace in ways that excludes others.

Genesis 12: 1-4a

In the lectionary this reading is the platform for Paul's use of Abraham as an example of one who lives by faith. I want to suggest that while Abraham may be a model of faith, it is an ambiguous, even confusing model, as we wrestle with issues of land, identity and faithfulness.

God calls Abram (Abraham) to leave his land and family and move to a place that God would show him. There will be no known future destination; this is part of the message: 'trust God'.

The promise from God is that Abraham—this person without children—will be the beginning of a great nation (v. 2). Later he will be promised the land (v. 7).

There are two things in this story that leave us a little wary of simple claims about its meaning. First, the promised land was occupied by the Canaanites (v 6). The promise to Abraham that his people will live in the land would mean subjugating the indigenous population.

Second, the promise of blessing to Abraham and his descendants narrows the original promise to humankind. In Genesis 1:28 God blesses the man and woman made in God's image, and tells them to be fruitful and multiply. In our reading the promise and blessing of God are linked to ethnicity – to this group of Abraham's descendants. This is no longer about people growing in numbers to serve the earth, but the reproduction of a particular community. Being fruitful has become an instrument of colonisation, cultural survival and dominance.

Of course this is not the whole of the story. God offered Abraham, landless and childless, a blessing so that he and his offspring could be a blessing for everyone.

The temptation faced by Israel was that they would cling to the blessing and to the land, and not be a blessing to others. They would not act as guests of the grace of God, but owners who could exclude others from God's grace and welcome.



This is the church's temptation. We have the blessing of Christ for the world, but we claim it for ourselves, and build walls to keep others out. In Australia too, we have fallen to that temptation by claiming the right to occupy the land, and ignore the people of the land who were here before us, not understanding what it means for us to be guests.

Psalm 121

Here is a psalm that highlights two of the deep tensions of the Christian life: living in trust of the care and protection of God, and yet knowing that for many humans there is no care or protection; and understanding that there is very little relationship between people's faithfulness to God and what happens to them. Tsunamis, poverty, death and disfigurement, failure and pain, confront the just and unjust. This is the theological battle at the heart of Job.

There is no easy response to this dilemma, but it does challenge an overly simplistic view of God and the world, or the desire to construct a world of simple reward and punishment. It also poses for us the question that lies at the heart of Job: can we remain faithful to God if there is nothing in it for us?

I believe we are forced to read psalms like this in the light of the suffering death of Christ. It is this that reveals the real heart of God, rather than some image of a distant God who acts as a puppeteer fixing every moment and event in life. God has a purpose and plan for the world, but it is not one that God mechanically enacts and human beings fall in with. In creation God has given us the freedom and space to love God; without that space there really cannot be genuine love. So God calls and nurtures and renegotiates and seeks to bring the world along God's way.

The faithfulness of God that is spoken of in this psalm is the faithfulness of presence and deep friendship, of the care of the Spirit when we open ourselves to that Spirit. It is a faithfulness that tends and nurtures the claim that we are made in God's image and are infinitely valuable even when the world declares otherwise; and God does not make junk. It is a faithfulness that holds to the dream of the reconciliation and renewal of the whole earth and which gives us a glimpse of that promise in Jesus, the Spirit and the Church.

One of the challenges to the church during this week is to trust that God is faithful to all people and not just us, and that this God who cares, nurtures and protects calls us to reach out to others, without distinction, as faithful expressions of this boundless love.

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

In this passage, Paul keeps building on the central message of righteousness, a righteousness which God attributes to Jews and Gentiles alike because of their faith. To illustrate his main point he turns to the example of Abraham, one who is seen as a person of great and faithful works, and makes the claim that this great ancestor was considered righteous because of faith.

Paul's evidence for this is Scripture, and he quotes Genesis 15:6 "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness". If Abraham had done good deeds, then he would have earned his righteousness as a worker earns their wages, but he gained it as a gift because of his faith.

Paul was in the midst of a debate in his community about the importance of law and circumcision. He did not want to dispute the place of law and circumcision among his people, but neither did he want to make that the basis of life in the Christian community or use that criteria to exclude Gentiles. His point is that circumcised or not, it is the example of the faith of Abraham that is to be followed (4:12).

So Paul continues his argument, making the point in verse 13 that Abraham and his descendants gained the promise of God through faith and not law. If law determines our life with God, then faith is nullified and the promises of God do not rest on grace but our faithfulness.



Towards the end of our reading there is a comment about law that helps us to keep the value of law in perspective. Paul suggests that law is meant to guide how we live, and show how wrongdoing is a transgression against God, but when people seek to escape their sin by relying on the law rather than God, they don't find life but the wrath of God. What is required is confession of sinfulness, and the understanding that righteousness can only be a gift from God. This, truly, is the source of freedom and hope.

The point of the week of prayer and fasting has not been about doing good deeds or gaining some kind of godly credits. The aim has been to bear witness to the claim that life and salvation is an act of grace open to all. We have been witnessing to our belief that injustice and racism are not of God, that all life is sustained by the grace of God, and that God calls all to share in that life without false distinctions or claims.

John 3: 1-17

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. In the conversation that follows Nicodemus struggles with what it means to be born 'from above' as a way of entering into the kingdom of God.

Jesus offers people a glimpse of flourishing life. In this passage Jesus tells Nicodemus that to claim this life he must be born for the second time, 'from above' (v. 5). Nicodemus's problem is: how can a person be born after having grown old? (v. 4).

To be born is to enter into life shaped by relationships, culture, country, and story, and by access (or lack of access) to wealth and power. It is to be immersed in values and beliefs, in the cultural meaning of gender and race, and in freedom or captivity. As we grow older we challenge, shift and settle into this identity and life.

Jesus says that if we are to enter the world of God then we must begin again and become a new people. Life is to be shaped by our relationship with God, love of neighbour and love of enemies. We must live lightly in our culture for we are part of the whole people of God, carry the story of Jesus, and are aware that wealth and power can drag us from his company. Gender, race and class have no meaning in this new life; at least not as ways to divide and discriminate and exclude.

It is such a profound shift that those who know us can only see it as a re-birth and a new beginning.

In his ministry, John the Baptist said that people must prepare for the coming of the kingdom or reign of God by being baptised (1:26). Jesus says that water baptism is not enough; such a radical change also requires the Spirit which comes as a sign of the new age.

Note one further thing in this passage. Verse 16 says: "For God so loved the world". That is the heart of the good news. It is what lies behind Luke's image of the father who runs down the road to welcome home his lost son. It lies behind Jesus' comment that he has come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus came as an expression of the love of God, the God who seeks out those who were lost (a people without a shepherd).

To seek for justice, to enter the journey for reconciliation, and to stand alongside others in their struggle does not simply require moral effort. It is a journey that depends on the transformation of our lives through the Spirit, who alone can bring life for the whole world.



Sunday 23 March 2014

The third Sunday of Lent

The readings for this Sunday are a timely reminder for us that in even in the face of thirst, despair, prejudice and injustice, God is with us. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, during this week in the Uniting Church we have called out in faith to a God who is hidden, but who we trust to provide for us. In the Gospel reading we are reminded that love triumphs over judgement and that the love of God in Jesus is offered to all without distinction.

Exodus 17: 1-7

On their journey out of slavery the Israelites came to a place without water, and they cried out against Moses for bringing them to that place. There is even some suggestion that being back in slavery was preferable to this wilderness struggle. Their real argument, of course, is not with Moses but with God. The heart of their questioning or testing is in verse 7: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

In Israel it was generally assumed that when God was actively at work there was no desperate need among the people. God made all the difference, and when God was absent, life could get difficult. But if they could involve God, if they could get God to act as only God can, life would be put right. The pleading question of verse 7, while it may sound like an expression of unbelief, is actually a lament: the Israelites were calling God out of hidden-ness—often the way God’s providence is expressed—to real action; they were calling on God to be the God they knew – the God who provides.

The Israelites were seeking a closer match between their core testimony of God’s faithfulness and their current experiences of life. The affirmation of this passage is the claim of God’s provision for God’s people, and the recognition that in the face of God’s apparent absence, we can cry out for God’s care.

As the passage suggests, and our Psalm reminds us, there is always the danger that our crying out will become about lack of faith and trust. We will doubt God’s care and compassion and faithfulness in the face of the injustices and unfairnesses of the world.

Australia’s First Peoples have suffered grave and repeated injustices over generations. This week we come together across the Uniting Church, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, calling out our faithful lament to God: “Be with us, O God, in the midst of our troubles”.

Psalm 95

Most of us are familiar with this psalm through the words of the hymn “Let us sing to the God of salvation” (*Together in Song* 52). The psalm itself is a glorious call to worship combined with a prophetic call to the people. There are three calls to worship (verses 1, 2 and 6) which seem to suggest stages in the worshippers’ entry into the place of worship. They remind people that worship is an act of entry into the presence of the Holy God of Israel; it is not just a social gathering or meeting. It is as reminder

The psalm reminds us that the point of worship is not first of all fellowship or listening to a sermon but gathering to offer praise to God on behalf of the whole creation. The English translation of the opening line—“O come let us sing to the Lord” (NRSV)—does not convey the real sense of what is meant. The Hebrew suggests something far more energetic. It is a call to people to shout and make a noise, to be joyously and overtly enthusiastic in their praise of God.

The reason for praise is two-fold. First, the people are to praise God because God is great and is the creator of everything (verses 3-5). Secondly, they are to offer praise because God is their God and their shepherd (verse 7). God does not simply create everything and look after the most extraordinary vastness of the universe. The Psalmist knows that God relates intimately to the people, loves them and cares for them day by day.



The psalm goes on, however, because praise is not enough. From the final part of verse 7 the tone switches from a call to worship to a prophetic word. Praise leads to what one might call a renewal of covenant – the need to hear and obey God’s voice. Verse 11 says that those who only worship and do not pursue justice will find that the resting place of God is closed. Worship and justice go hand in hand, for our God is that kind of God. And so it is that for us in the Uniting Church this week, we seek to worship God and be participants in God’s mission of justice in the world.

Romans 5: 1-11

In the first four chapters of this letter Paul has been concerned about faith as the foundation for salvation, rather than works or law. This makes it possible for all people to be right before God, because such justification is offered by God’s grace as a gift which is claimed by faith.

In chapter 5 Paul begins to build on this claim as he explores how the gift of righteousness leads to hope. Paul says that since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God, are able to stand in God’s grace, and can boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God.

These must have been truly wonderful words for a Christian community that was having a far more difficult time than most of us usually have around our neighbourhood. Paul is reminding them that what is happening is not the final word – that belongs to God, and they can live with confidence.

Paul goes on to say that they can boast in their suffering, because their suffering will produce endurance, endurance will build character, and character leads to hope. There is danger in these words. They have often been used as weapons against women and black people and members of other communities. They have been used to tell people they are not to resist abuse, not to fight to end discrimination and prejudice, but to simply bear the suffering. I don’t think Paul is talking about that kind of suffering. I think he means the suffering that flows from discipleship. I think he is talking about people who are themselves persecuted or imprisoned for non-violent protests against racism, war and injustice in the name of Jesus.

Justified by grace, claimed through faith, Christians believe that the new age has dawned even as we remain anchored in the old age. The fullness of the reconciliation of the world with God remains hidden, and is grasped only in hope. It is this hope, built on trust in God that has been the foundation of this week of prayer and fasting. We have the assurance of faith and the confidence of hope that justice and reconciliation will come to be.

John 4: 5-42

It is no wonder that this story is a favourite one in the church and continues to fascinate people in each generation. It is filled with the breaking of boundaries, and the most extraordinary promises. Jesus has been in Judea and starts his journey back to Galilee – it would have been a three day trip. John tells us that he had to go through Samaria (verse. 4). Certainly it was the custom for Galileans to go through Samaria when doing this journey, but John may also have meant that ‘he had to’ as part of his mission. Jesus stops at a well, Jacob’s well in fact, and a Samaritan woman comes there. All the social boundaries should have forced them to sit on opposite sides of the well and studiously ignore each other. Men and women were not to speak in public and teachers of the Law in particular should not have been attempting to educate women. And national enemies, the Jews and the Samaritans, had no reason to speak to each other.

Jesus was a stranger in this place. But he asked for a drink, which led to a conversation – of which I am sure we have only an outline – that changed the woman’s life. Far from simply being a tired and thirsty stranger, Jesus is actually the Son of God who gives the gift of living water, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit.



This story is a lesson that sometimes the risk of talking to strangers, those who don't know us well or even those who usually shun us, is a risk worth taking. We are reminded here that while Jesus 'does' many things like healing and feeding crowds and teaching, sometimes he is concerned for deep conversations about life and meaning – spiritual conversations about what really matters. Another lesson in this story is that making moral judgements about people we don't know is not the way of Jesus. Jesus asks the woman to get her husband (verse 16), and then speaks of the husbands she has had. It is easy to assume she is a loose woman who is to blame for her own situation and that she has come on her own because no-one likes her. But the words Jesus uses do not suggest condemnation, only a statement that 'this is the way things are, and this is the life I offer'.

In this this week of prayer and fasting, we have been reminded that God's love in Christ is given to all without distinction and that whatever divisions there exist between people, Christians are called to a different path. We are to reach out to those who suffer prejudice and live with the shocking consequences of deep systemic injustice. We are to reach out across the boundaries that society prescribes and stand together in God's grace, praying and work for a just society where all people can flourish.

