

Epiphany 3 - 23/01/22 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; **Psalm 19**; **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**; **Luke 4:14-21**

This Wednesday, the 26th January, will be a public holiday. Before 1938 this date had been known as 'First Landing Day' but on the 150th anniversary of European settlement the name shifted to 'Australia Day'. This weekend's New Testament reading does not speak about backyard cricket, Bar-B-Qs, or citizenship ceremonies but it does speak helpfully about a Christian understanding of healthy community.

From what I understand Corinth was a great city in the first century. It was an east-west trading hub in the Roman Empire, and the capital of Roman administration in Greece. It was cosmopolitan and wealthy, and it was here that St Paul lived for eighteen months to establish a new Christian community. From the subsequent letters of Paul to the Church in Corinth we can recognise that conflict developed within the community about a number of things. People who spoke in tongues thought they were better than everybody else; and those with a Jewish background thought they were better than those who had never been Jewish! Into this division and conflict Paul offered the famous metaphor of a community being one body with many parts.

He wrote that, "...the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ... As it is, there are many members, yet one body."

He continued, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it."

This was written two thousand years ago to a particular context and community but, I think it can still speak to our own lived experiences of Christian community. Does your current experience resonate with the ideal that Paul talks about when he suggests that, "...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; (and) if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."?

As we look at other members of our congregation, or Parish Council, do we value each person – and, do we think that each person has a contribution to make? Or, do we look at some and think – 'I have no need of you...' because that person, or that group, is too difficult, too different, or we simply don't like each other!

It is sobering then to remember that the peace greeting we offer each week in worship finds its origin in this letter to the Corinthians: "We are the body of Christ. His Spirit is with us. The peace of the Lord be always with you... and, also with you." We, together, are the Body of Christ.

But I think the core message of finding real unity in a conflicted church setting is also pertinent to the conflicts within the diversity of Australian society. There's a good chance that many of us will hear or sing later this week, 'I am Australian', written by Bruce Woodley in 1987.

When the Bicentenary census was taken, one year after the song was written, Australia found that it was the second most culturally diverse country in the world after Israel! Since it was written Australia has become more culturally diverse and I absolutely think we are richer for it. But, there are challenges that are often glossed over, and, there are issues we don't sing about, or talk about.

Remember, the Woodley song begins with an affirmation of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples...

*“I came from the dreamtime, from the dusty red soil plains. I am the ancient heart, the keeper of the flame... I stood upon the rocky shore I watched the tall ships come.
For forty thousand years I'd been the first Australian....”*

However, the song does not talk about dispossession, deaths in custody, or diabetes. It does not talk about ‘The Stolen Generation’, suicide rates among the young, and systemic inequality. But, it does acknowledge the humanity of Australia’s indigenous people and this is something our National Constitution has yet to acknowledge! Later, there is the recurring refrain we know so well:

*“We are one, but we are many, and from all the lands on earth we come
We’ll share a dream, and sing with one voice,
‘I am, you are, we are Australian.”*

It is a well-crafted song that powerfully appeals to the intellect and heart. When I sing, or hear it, I find myself standing a little taller, and I have a sense of national pride... even though I recognise, as a nation, we fall short of this ideal we sing about. It is an aspiration to strive towards, but really what does it mean to be both ‘one’ and ‘many’? And, what is that dream we share, and work to realise?

I think the principal in Paul’s challenge to the church in Corinth can help to inform our thinking about the ‘dream’ for he affirms that each person is of value; each person has gifts to bring to the whole... and, that the key to enabling this was mutual love. More than this, he suggested that the church community of Corinth would never achieve its potential until this happened.

The foundation of the mutual love unity that Paul described came from a common Baptism, for *“...in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...”* Well, we are not baptised into being Australian, but I think we are a nation of citizens that share belief inconsistently! At one level we affirm ‘mate-ship’ and ‘fair go’, but in practice these are offered to some and not to all. Perhaps, to an enfranchised majority, but not disenfranchised minorities.

I think we could do better by embracing some elements of the vision that Paul gave to the church in Corinth. An adapted vision that suggests we will become a better society when the equal value of each person is enabled by mutual love and respect, and by just and compassionate policies. Imagine this: ‘Jews and Greeks; slaves and free; male and female; young and old; indigenous and non-indigenous; Christian and Muslim; those born in Australia, and asylum seeker... all sharing a dream, and singing with one voice, ‘I am, you are, we are Australian’.

Let’s pray:
(Prayer adapted from APBA pp204)

We bless you, God of the universe, for this land, for its contrasts of landscape and climate, for its abundance of wealth and opportunity. We bless you for our history, with all its struggles in adversity, its courage and hope. Give us in our diversity - tolerance and respect for each other, and a passionate commitment to justice for all. We ask all this, in the name of Christ. Amen