

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 26 APRIL 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 24: 36-49

“Beyond Discourse that Alienates Community”

1. In our children's story we read today, *Rose meets Mr Wintergarten* (Bob Graham), two different communities interact because of a mutual interest! A football that they kick into Mr Wintergarten's overgrown yard! One community is inhabited by Rose and her friends, the other is the unknown Mr Wintergarten who lives next door in a dark house with an overgrown garden.

But what makes the connection complex and fearful for the children is a third Other-space, a discourse about the Other. It is as if a third community stands between them. This third-space develops chaotically as the kids add their scary stories onto the already existing neighbourhood stories about this dark, overgrown, unknown other, the Wintergarten space: that he is mean, has a dog like a wolf, a saltwater crocodile, and the worst thing, he eats kids!

Even Rose, who represents the caring, sensible person and who tries to avoid such fabulations, internalises this discourse. She represents the human need to belong and identify with her own community, which pushes her to believe this discourse.

This third space about this Other, internalised within us, provides a way for us to express our desires and project our fears and anxieties. Even in Rose's home where the sun shines and the flowers grow, fears and anxieties exist.

2. Who had the power to produce this constructed truth about the stranger, and to shape the knowledge that divided two communities?

This group of kids/people/community. And this construction both connects and separates! It creates powerlessness because it brings anxiety and suspicion to relationship!

I would be more than comforted to conclude that what I am dealing with is a children's story. Sadly, all too sadly, this story is a very tame version of the way human communities deal with each other.

This week we remembered the Holocaust. It was the result of the Nazi German “Final Solution”, a systematic and planned extermination of a whole people. The Final Solution emerged in 1941 at the Wannsee Conference. Before this, the strategy was deportation. That the Jewish people were dangerous and to be feared became a discourse, a third-space, created by leaders and their media over time. This discourse gave some German people rational reasons to fear the Jews and support their leaders in these shocking acts.

However, we need to own that Western civilisation has created its own truth about Others. Edward Said, who has sadly passed away, a postcolonial writer, wrote *Orientalism* (1978) in which he concluded that the Orient was constructed by the West based on its desires and fears. In other words, it does not exist except as a fantasy construct of the West.

Yet, there are challenging truths even closer to home. Andrew Lattas, a cultural anthropologist and a former activist in Redfern did his doctorate on the discourse that shaped 1830s Sydney about

Indigenous people. He explored what influenced the social and cultural perceptions that circulated in the media about indigenous people; what civilised them and what made the uncivilised. They were civilised if they lived within the perimeter of geographical Sydney, wore clothes, were being educated. Being outside that perimeter, they were like animals and could thus be shot. Underlying this was a discourse about the superiority of Western Culture, and notions of civilisation and primitiveness. Evangelicals at this time understood their mission was to bring Indigenous people into the cultured geographical perimeter. Yet, they never critically evaluated what the power dynamics were or what the third-space was about: about the hidden but operative discourse of Western superiority!

3. This third-space, a discourse constructed as truth, power and determining knowledge, to use Michel Foucault's terms, exists to connect and separate us.

It can happen at every level of human existence. Even at the individual level, we can internalise thoughts and feelings that can disempower us. This week ABC Radio National featured how we judge our own bodies on Talkback, including women's struggles with body image, eating disorders such as anorexia and the damaging influence of women's magazines. Young men also struggle with their body identity/masculinities. We struggle with how society speaks about us in our various abilities, age, gender, sexual preference, socio-economic status, race and so on.

4. We meet the followers of Jesus in our story in Luke 24: 36b-49 inhabiting a third-space, a discourse about what has happened around the events of the betrayal and execution of Jesus, and they inhabit grief and retreat from life. They are a troubled community, closed in by questioning minds, startled hearts, and a faith infected by doubts. They must have felt they were a failed and faithless community. Anger, fear, guilt and inadequacy in its various shapes must have defined them: expressed at each other; blaming others, for betrayal, for not doing enough; shame at what they did; anger at the political and religious leaders; and disappointment at God and Jesus for letting them down.

How will they deal with this discourse that disempowers, this fast-growing, imploding third-space?

Again, as we read in last week's reading in John 20: 19-31, the crucified-risen Jesus takes the initiative to meet this troubled and grieving community. Jesus appears. Unexpected! Uninvited! Grace and peace seek to encounter this community, to address the discourse they now inhabit.

The Gospel writers have included these stories not to provide rational proof that the crucified Jesus is alive, but to confirm that God was at work in Jesus' life and death and raised him from the dead. Additionally, and what most commentators do not notice, is that Jesus is here not just being fancy about faith. How can the risen Jesus not be sensitive to these anxious, grieving followers, when as the historical Jesus he was so perceptive about the suffering of people he met, and compassionate to those who were excluded from society, and wept when told of the death of Lazarus, his friend?

In addition, would not the unjust suffering of Jesus, and would not the suffering of God the parent who experienced the suffering of Jesus, would they not have released within the divine life a powerful desire to support and process grief!

The risen crucified Jesus reveals himself to offer grace and peace. Grace and peace are the foundation, the crucible out of which to begin to process failure, fear, blame, anger and doubting faith, their debilitating discourse. Out of a relationship of love, this is time to do business. Processing means learning about ourselves, as individuals, as a community. And this means to learn the deeper sources of our blame of others, of our projections, denials, rationalisations, the reasons for our

gossip. It is an intentional journey. They must unpack this third-space, this discourse that binds them if they are to move on share the message of new life.

We read that Jesus opened their eyes and their minds to who he really is. As William Loader writes,

“For Luke, to fulfil the hope of the resurrection is to tell the story of Jesus (testimony). That means telling what he did, how he was rejected and then vindicated; and it is at the same time to live it by the power of the same Spirit, by doing good and bringing liberation for all. This includes forgiveness of sins. It is radically simple. ... Its inspiration is in the parables, like those of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son - ultimately in Jesus, himself.”

Conclusion: To return to Rose in our children’s story. For her to cross over, to meet this supposed scary Other requires community reflection, the externalising of these inner stories, symbolised in Rose talking to her mother. It involves Victor Turner’s third stage in the process of grieving. This is the **redressive** (to remedy or set right) or **reflexive** stage (looking back at ourselves from a different place), where resolution and new meaning evolve. Now Rose finds her power. Power is the ability and willingness to act publicly. As it was with the disciples, being overwhelmed with the third-space discourse almost stops her from being in mission. But, let us pause, for this is next week’s story.