

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
PENTECOST AND RECONCILIATION SUNDAY
SUNDAY 31 MAY 2009
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John 15: 25 – 16: 15

Cross-cultural negotiations, an impossible possibility

The impossibility of Middle Eastern politics was graphically described by Kim Beazley, Chancellor at ANU and former leader of the Australian Labor Party, when he spoke on the **ABC Radio National, Big Ideas** programme, *In the Name of Civilisation*, last week.

I got lessons early about involvement in the Middle East when I was a student. ... The first essay I had to write for the MPhil course in Oxford was on, The Arab position in the 1973 war, which had occurred a month or two earlier. The lecturer in Middle East Studies and Politics at the time was Albert Harani, a Palestinian. He had written a history of the Arab peoples.... I thought I had got the various motivations of the Egyptians, Jordanians and the Syrians and the others well and I thought I had done a really good job.

The lecturer said to me, "Mr Beazley you understand nothing about Middle Eastern politics. I was crestfallen." He said, "Mr Beazley, the first thing you have to understand about the Middle East is this, in the ME we practice pure politics. Do you know what pure politics are Mr B?" And I said, "You had better tell me because I used to think I did".

He said, "It goes like this: I hate you because you're my brother but I am with you against father; but I am with father against the rest of the family; but I am with the rest of the family against the rest of the clan; but I am with the clan against the rest of the tribe; but I am with the rest of the tribe against the neighbouring tribe; but we are with the neighbouring tribe against the capital city of our individual Arab state; but we are with the capital city of our individual Arab state against our Arab neighbour; but we are with our Arab neighbour against Israel. What you have to work out Mr Beazley as you consider every decision taken by statespersons in this region is, which is the prevailing hatred that is underpinning the policy. And, when you comprehend that Mr Beazley you need to comprehend this too, the prevailing hatred at nine o'clock is unlikely to be the prevailing hatred at five."

So I said, "That suggests we should never be involved in the Middle East." He replied: "Absolutely!" http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2009/05/bia_20090524.mp3

We may find Albert Harani's philosophy disturbing, but it effectively taught Mr Beazley that thinking one knows is not enough, that there is a depth of complexity that takes years to appreciate. And there are politicians who make policy on the basis of such lack of cross-cultural understanding!

This anecdote also helped me realise that this is what we experience in our cross-cultural negotiations with Indigenous people all the time.

The seeming impossibility and complexity of cross-cultural relationships and understanding was even more graphically presented in the movie, *Samson and Delilah*.

The movie stunned and disturbed me, even though I had experienced this world in my work with Indigenous communities over the last thirteen years.

In one scene, the camera, which functions as the silent, critical, anthropological narrator, throughout the film, (the Spirit of Reconciliation?), places the viewer alongside Delilah in Alice Springs. We know the inside of her life, as she walks up to the non-indigenous people eating at tables outside restaurants. They turn away, refusing and rejecting her. She walks up to people to sell her paintings for food. We know that she is the actual artist who painted the paintings being sold for thousands of dollars in the art shops nearby. We know that her battered and scared face is the result of the rape and bashing by white men a few days ago. We know that they are sleeping under a bridge with no money or food. They misrecognise her, and can only relate to her through their own inadequate discourse about Aboriginal people. No bridges will be crossed here!

The camera accompanies her to the various institutions in town, including the church, where she receives the same reception.

The Spirit is the go-between God

What insights about cross-cultural negotiations does we receive from our scripture text, John 15:26, 27 – 16:4-15 this morning?

We learn that the departing Jesus will send the Paraclete, the Spirit of God, who will accompany us once Jesus dies and is resurrected. Francis Moloney in his commentary *The Gospel of John* writes that,

“The Paraclete ... exposes the darkness of the world and thus brings it to judgement... The Paraclete continues the critical, judging function that flows from the revelation of God...” (440).

What does this mean? The Spirit is the go-between God, our companion. As William Loader writes,

It entails exposing sin as the killing of love, God in Christ, or wherever it occurs. ... It entails setting this up as an option against rival power systems that kill love. Spirituality is advocating for the life of God in the world. Ask John and he will define that life not by lots of commandments, not by many beliefs, not even primarily by scripture, but by the story of Jesus, and then not by many stories, but by one over-all story: God so loved the world.
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPent.htm>

The critical Spirit of Reconciliation, with us making the impossible possible

Yet, we need to go beyond these biblical generalities if we are to build and negotiate bridges of reconciliation in seemingly unbridgeable contexts and relationships.

The Spirit as Paraclete needs to challenge Christians as well, exposing the forms of darkness we may inhabit, performing its critical, judging function revealing the inhibition of love and structures of disempowerment. In addition, part of this exposing, critical function happens when we apply insights from the human sciences about cross-cultural relationships. Through our learning and critical thinking the Spirit inspires us in our mission of building bridges of reconciliation in our complex world. As Kim Beazley learnt in 1973. The Spirit is the go-between people and cultures!

However, we need to gain ongoing understanding about this “darkness” that keeps us apart! As Robert Frost in his poem, *Mending Wall* writes with a touch of humour about two farmers who maintain a wall between them:

There where it is we do not need a wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours".
...
He moves in darkness, it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying...

One of the strongest indicators of being truly connected to the Spirit of Truth is having the desire and courage to go behind and learn about what has shaped and influenced personal identity, group identity, and culture, our own and of others.

Heteropathy, risking being halfway on the bridge

Janet Wyatt in her book, *Risking Difference: Identification, race and community*, deals with the challenges of identifying with someone from a different racial or cultural background. She alerts us to the psychoanalytic notion that "identificatory processes tend toward a unity of self and other that erases difference" (170) and confuses perspectives and interests.

This is what the white people did in the scene I described from the film *Samson and Delilah*. They looked at Delilah from out of their own lack of relationship and discourse in which Aboriginal people are signified as homeless, drinkers, and petrol sniffers. The camera, of course, gave us an insider's perspective, a perspective Christians should learn to develop. The Spirit of Christ in this context advocates for the other, as Jesus taught in Matthew 25, "When I was hungry you did not feed me!" Whose darkness is being addressed here?

Heteropathy is about identifying with the other who is different in racial and cultural background. But Wyatt warns us that identification always has the twin traps, "risks falling into assimilation ... or idealisation", making the other the same as us or romanticising them, both reducing them to someone other than themselves. The Spirit of Reconciliation calls us to learn that our "social location determines what one knows: persons in different class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation positions have different understandings of reality." (Wyatt, 176)

The Spirit of Truth lures us to grow beyond our limited social location, urges us to develop a multiplicity of perspectives. This happens by association with others in their contexts, with having an openness to challenge our own views and to learn what life is like from the other's perspective and interests.

What would this look like? Last week, in the reading I used in the witness, Jurgen Moltmann suggested that Christ was the bridge on which former enemies could meet:

Then a group of Dutch students came and asked to speak to us officially. Again, I was frightened... The Dutch students told us that Christ was the bridge on which they could cross to us and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all. They told of the Gestapo terror, the loss of their Jewish friends, and the destruction of their homes. We too could step on to this bridge, which Christ had built, from them to us, and could confess the guilt of our people and ask for reconciliation. At the end, we all embraced. For me that was an hour

of liberation. I was able to breathe again, felt like a human being once more, and returned cheerfully to the camp behind the barbed wire. ...