

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SERMON: Who do you say I am?

15th July 2012

The Rev Deacon Jenny Preston

Imagine – a group of 40 plus Deacons, plus 6 Deacon Interns and some semi-retired Deacons – all focused on the theme “God is *where?*”. Acknowledging that we are in a secular, but strangely, multifaith culture, in a world adversely affected by human activity. We are no longer in the time of post-modernism, or post-colonialism – we are in a very complex world in which we are called to give an account of the hope Christ has placed in us, and always to work towards the Common Good.

How do we get our bearings? Rev Professor Clive Pearson, of the United Faculty of Theology, in Sydney, was the leader for the five day conference in Parramatta: what does it mean for us to be Christians in North Balwyn, in Sydney’s Auburn, in Swan Hill or Broome? Public Theology, taking some of its lead from the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is re-shaping the question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”, to “where is Christ to be found today?”

The question comes from our Gospel reading, Mark 8: Who do people say that I am, who do you – my community of followers – say that I am. And our context is totally different from the 1940’s, 60’s or even the 80’s; and different from the context of the first century Galileans. What does Jesus’ life, death and resurrection make for us now in North Balwyn, in Villawood detention centre, or community detention in Penrith, or in Kalalasaka villages in Zambia?

In theological terms: ‘what is the soteriological necessity?’ in each particular context in which Christians live and work. Put in everyday words, it’s about us examining our communal context and asking the question: what is it about the human condition as lived out by a particular people in a particular situation that requires healing, wholeness, saving, peace-making, wisdom, for Jesus’ sake. What is it about the way in which we live out our lives that requires the Jesus of our New Testament stories to be speaking.

Let me describe the context in which some of the 160 plus UCA deacons minister: Three of the deacons present work for Frontier Services, in remote parts of Tasmania – in the central plains, and the western coast villages. The third, Rev Dr Deacon Alison Macrae serves the isolated region of Omeo Swift’s Creek. The people of that area are glad to have the Deacon sharing some of their struggles.

Sue Langham is in congregational ministry in an outer suburb of Adelaide, where the majority of members are refugees from Africa. Sue spends much time assisting with residency applications. Emma is a passionate young deacon in the West, chaplain at the top UCA school there, where most of the school families live behind locked gates, and the children focus on a dystopian understanding of the world: wondering why secular living is lacking in happiness and contentment. They see no evidence of humanity heading towards any form of Utopia. Emma’s task is to give the young people an understanding that all human beings are made in the image of God, worthy of respect, and suggesting that 21st. century unhappiness is actually what sustains materialism, the disease of ‘affluenza’.

Young Miriam works in being Christ's presence among those shunned by society, the people living with mental illness, intellectual or physical disability. John Dacey is Deacon in Bidwill- Mt Druitt – a scruffy western suburb of Sydney where the people are 'dumped' in housing areas, suffering rejection and condemnation; they feel they are victims, have been 'knifed' by the system.

Jesus spoke about his desire to see humankind "flourishing"; the flourishing Isaiah speaks of which Jesus altered slightly in the synagogue at Nazareth: Luke 4: 18f "I am come to bring good news to the poor and alienated, release for the prisoners, the recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." Recall how the people of Nazareth were frightened by Jesus' proclamation, and wanted to kill him. Working for the Common Good in Jesus' name isn't always popular!

For pre-conference reading we had this book by Clive Marsh, a Methodist theologian from the UK. *Where in the World is Christ today*. Marsh suggests that individual piety and religiousness is not where Christ is today.

Marsh urges us to look closely at the social context in which the particular Christian community lives. To locate traces, resonances of God's presence and activity in the world through checking in on the stories and parables of Jesus, and certain motifs taken from them.

Marsh selects: wherever people suffer innocently or for a just cause; when solidarity is shown with those who are mistreated, wherever forgiveness occurs: in the home, at work, in prison; whenever, or wherever people experience a transformation in life; wherever people discover what they believe to be their true identity; whenever truth is told, however painful truth-telling may prove; whenever the abuse of power is challenged; when creativity blossoms; whenever people renounce reliance on wealth; and at meal times.

We visited Sri Lankan families living in community detention, we received their hospitality, ate cake and drank juice with them, we heard their stories: of being caught in crossfire in Sri Lanka, fleeing to Singapore, making the trip to camps in Indonesia, and sailing in unsafe conditions to Christmas Island. We heard of the fear of the pregnant women, of their gratitude for safety, and their challenge for the world to take notice of the continuing conflict in Sri Lanka.

"Who do people say I am?" In this passage from Mark, Jesus is asking: Who do the people of your community say that I am? What may be the answer of these people from Sri Lanka – they know Rev John Jegasothy, and Frances Milne, the two UCA persons leading UCA groups which are currently petitioning the High Court over the prolonged detention of some Sri Lankan asylum seekers, who are drifting rapidly into mental oblivion. They see Jesus as the one who believes what is their true identity – persons seeking refuge from danger and death.

To assist us to understand public issues, Clive asked us to find an image from our heart – which story or parable of Jesus described our visit to these homes? The image which came up for me was the story of Jesus being accosted by the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7: 24-30). This needy woman, abandoned by all and wanting healing and health for her daughter, appealed to Jesus' current understanding of humanity: "Are not the dogs also worthy of the food which drops from the table?" Her persistence, her courage in pushing the barriers, brought a new understanding to Jesus just as he was having a day-off.

The word “flourishing” was the in-word at our conference: and it’s a vital word for this congregation: how does this Christian community contribute to the flourishing of our city? Where in the City of Boroondarra are we called to throw away our ‘churchy’ language of salvation and sin, and to be present where there is brokenness in this community.

North Balwyn and Balwyn are transitional suburbs again. They began after the unbearable losses of World War 11, and the hopes of post-war Australia. There is transition happening all around us. Surrey Hills and Box Hill are under-going another transition, since the one in the 1970’s when we moved in to a mostly 1920’s context. Homes to fill the blocks, and a multi-cultural population.

What’s it like living in this city for the younger families, the teenagers, the overseas students, and the older people who came in the 50’s and 60’s? Who are the people we are most likely to avoid, or see as an enemy? How does our community receive ‘the stranger’ in its streets?

Is the spirit of Boroondarra a spirit of hope, or is there anxiety, or loss of meaning like Emma finds among the families at her school in Perth? How might we think about Jesus from the perspective of women and cultures and faiths which are other than our own. The parable of the Good Samaritan is pertinent to us here. Who is the neighbour in need: can we offer a word of wisdom, try to heal a wound, help with letters from the school, to interpret Council by-laws?

Those of you currently in the work-force have another context in which to be a neighbour --- you’re surely working in a multi-cultural, multi-faith place; hopefully you get into some of the current issues like climate change, refugees etc. Ask yourself if your ‘private faith’ concept of every person being made in the image of God translates into your understanding of these issues.

When you make a cup of coffee to re-read the sermon during the week, spend some time thinking which of Jesus’ stories speak to your life these days. Maybe one or two parables have stayed constantly with you. It’s really possible that from your life experience you have begun to change your form of engagement with Jesus.

Paul, in his Letter to the people of Galatia, reminds them of their responsibilities as followers of Jesus Christ, in their context, a responsibility which talks to our context today: So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, that is, the common good, and especially those of the family of faith. AMEN.

A postscript: a brief understanding of the difference between the Minister of the Word and the Ministry of Deacon: MoW role is to call, to remind the people of their faithfulness to the God of Jesus Christ; the Deacon’s role is to call the church to authentic orthopractice – to living out the faithfulness of God’s people in the world.