

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 28 OCTOBER 2012

REFORMATION SUNDAY

Commissioning of Elders and Church Councillors

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

The story of Noah, Mark 6: 7-11

“Two by two”

In today's gospel reading Jesus sends his disciples out two by two. Traditionally I have always been told that was so they could help and support each other on the way. I am sure that is true. Because, as our pups on the front cover of our order of service say, it makes things much easier when you are in it together.

Because you see, ministry is dangerous.

In Luke's version of the text we read from Mark this morning's gospel Jesus speaks of sending his disciples as “lambs among wolves”. Something which would hardly meet with current health and safety regulations. There are wolves out there, and those sent by Jesus are sent amongst them, while they are as vulnerable as lambs. Ready to be torn to pieces.

Of course, in the context of first century gospel writing this most probably referred to persecution at the time by both Jewish and Roman authorities. But I don't think it is limited to that. Anybody who goes out in the name of Jesus, living the faith and walking his way is at risk. Not only because choosing the way of non-violence, service and love will make you vulnerable to those who have not chosen that path. Also because it is a way and a faith that goes against the grain of our instincts.

The hunger for power and dominion, for self preservation and ego-centered prioritising runs in our veins. We are programmed to want to be on top, to be seen to be strong and capable. We have a deep need to feel secure and safe. Because we all know we aren't. “Life is a punchbowl full of people fighting for as much breathing space as they can get on the surface, and your Christian faith tells me to let go and let God? Come on, that would only mean I would be certain to drown” a non-Christian friend told me once (and if it is a quote I really don't know where she got it from). And I think she was right. It takes a lot of courage

to conquer the fear and insecurity that tell us to protect ourselves, to save ourselves, arm ourselves, to fight and to let God shape our lives in imitation of Jesus instead. Because it means letting go of a lot, if not most of the things that make us feel secure and provide us with the confidence we so badly crave.

My biggest inspiration for this part of living the Christian way comes from Bob Randall, an aboriginal elder I met at a retreat near Alice Springs some years ago. He is one of the stolen generation and has been a political activist for aboriginal rights all his life. He is also one of the guardians of Uluru. When he told me his horrific story I asked him how he could possibly be the lovely, loving, gentle person he was after what he had experienced. His answer was “love”. He, as someone who, from a very young age had every boundary violated, maltreated and disempowered, well and truly drowned in the punchbowl of others fighting for dominance and power, assured me that love is the only answer that is able to make a difference. So, with his gentle smile, he explains, he advocates, he pleads for his people, without taking up arms or gathering power, just by walking the way of compassion and care. Making peace wherever he goes.

He also told me he would never have been able to do what he does if it hadn't been for others sharing his pain, supporting him in his suffering, opening their heart and minds to the cause of him and his in the way people have done. “Love breeds love” he told me, and brings inspiration and strength of a totally different order than power and the use of violence do.

And that brings me to the second part that is guaranteed to make living the Christian way hurt. If we stop fighting to stay on top and in control and start looking around and down towards others, open ourselves to love and care, the pain and struggle of others will get to us as well as our own. We will start to identify with their powerlessness, their plight, their suffering, and will suffer because of their suffering and will feel compelled to do something. And there again we will need to be together. To give each other support and care, to keep each other from losing hope, to nourish love and compassion in each other.

Two by two. To support each other and care for each other where while we enter into a lifestyle that is bound to lay us open to the experience of pain and suffering, be it our own, or that of others. Because the world is full of “wolves” and those who follow Jesus choose not to meet those

wolves on their terms, but to choose a different path. The path of love and compassion that seeks to care and love the world into a different way of being.

There is another more sinister side to this though, one that we tend to want to “forget” when we talk about ministry, because it makes us uncomfortable and doesn’t tend to fit in with the more romantic view of call and service that is prevalent in our Church.

The “wolves” are hiding amongst us, and even inside us.

The cases of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church that are in the news today are a sad case in point where those who were supposed to be sent out by Jesus to minister, to care and to love, to heal and to help, abused their power to violate and hurt. By pure coincidence Harmen and I are reading a book about the abuse written by Chrissie Foster at the moment called “Hell on the way to heaven”, telling the story of two of her daughters who were abused by a Roman Catholic priest for many, many years. As a result of that abuse, one lost her life and the other ended up severely disabled. It is a gruesome tale and we both have had to put it aside a couple of times before being able to continue reading. There are no words for describing the pain and hurt afflicted on both by the priest, as well as by the Church Authorities.

Being in the Church, being called and sent out, being ordained or commissioned does not safeguard us from being vulnerable in that respect. Vulnerable to abusing trust, power and authority given to us in our ministry, lay or ordained. And I don’t think any of us is totally exempt to temptations in that respect, although some are more vulnerable than others through their history, their genetic make-up, or their character. To protect each other we have to protect ourselves, make sure we are accountable and made to be accountable at every turn. So love, compassion, healing, peace-making and care are protected in our community. So that the body of Christ will not be desecrated more than we can help by what humans can, and unfortunately, will do to each other.

The Uniting Church has been one of the first Churches to make support available independently of its governance structure to critically watch and care. We as North Balwyn Uniting Church can be proud to be involved in that by providing the centre with a home, as well as through our participation in the council that runs the centre.

It's not enough though. At every turn we need to be vigilant, hold each other and the Church to account, realise we are vulnerable people in community with other vulnerable people, tempted and tempting.

Talking about Genesis 1 a couple of weeks ago we found that God created humankind in community, two by two. To love, to support, to care, to be responsible for each other, and hold each other to account.

By the time the world is drowning in its own evil, Noah is summoned by God to call Creation two by two to join in a new community that leaves evil behind for new hope and new trust by God's promises. Time and time again we see that happen throughout scripture: where humanity starts to drown, God calls people to instigate a change of direction. Never alone, always in community, always together. Abraham and Sara, Moses and Aaron, Ruth and Boaz, David the King and Nathan the prophet, to name but a few famous duos that appear in the first Testament. A trend that continues with Jesus and his community of disciples, expanding in every direction from the time of Pentecost, through the ages in a diverse range of communities and councils.

Never alone, always together. To support, to inspire, to bolster, but also to keep us safe, responsible and accountable, well aware that wolves are on the prowl, both outside and inside our community. To make as sure as we can that the Church, that our community, is a place where people will be safe, where they can feel secure enough to be vulnerable and practice vulnerability so we can all grow in our practice of the Jesus way, a practice of love, compassion, wholeness and peace.
Amen.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Randall_\(Indigenous_Australian\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Randall_(Indigenous_Australian))
<http://www.creativespirits.info/resources/movies/kanyini>
<http://www.hellonthewaytoheaven.com.au>