

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
11 NOVEMBER 2012, REMEMBRANCE

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Genesis 14:1-16, Acts 6: 1-7

“Building peace”



In today's Genesis Reading we get to know Abraham from a different side than most of us would be familiar with. We meet an oriental potentate here, who ruthlessly routes his enemies if they get anywhere too close to his possessions or family members. Living in a world not dissimilar to parts of our own world, a world where war lords reign and the survival of the one with the most wealth and military strength is the norm.

In that world Abraham is worth his salt. He is up there with the best of them. Fighting, routing, killing, and making sure he and his are safe. It shows Abraham, when push comes to shove, does not need a God to look after him, he can very well look after himself. Faith, dependence, a covenant relationship could easily be icing on the cake, like it is for most, then, and now. Abraham's faith does not grow from a situation of weakness and poverty and is not an opium to dull the pain of a hard life. It grows in the life of a self-sufficient, strong, imperiously wealthy man who lives in a world where self-sufficiency, strength, wealth and power are rewarded with more self-sufficiency, wealth, power and strength. That would be enough to keep he and his safe.

A world we all know too well. A world that has never been different. Not then, not now, not in Jesus' day, not any day. Where there are people, there is conflict, and people will fight. It will perhaps not always get as physical and violent as in the story of Genesis, but discord will still happen, no matter how hard we try and how good our intentions are.

In Acts 6:1-7 we hear how tensions arise in the Early Church. After Luke has been waxing on about the unity and harmony of the Early Church community, suddenly, cracks appear. The unity of the first Christian community as Luke describes it, comes under pressure through tensions between two groups: the Hellenists and the Hebrews. As a consequence of a difference of opinion about the care for the poor, the administration and leadership of the Church comes under review.

The book of Acts gives frustratingly little information about the characteristics of these two groups. It is possible the writer assumes his readers know the difference anyway? Or is he trying to smooth over some of the sharpness of the conflict because they don't fit in with the picture he is trying to paint of the Early Church? Commentaries are full of interesting deductions and fantastic guesswork, but for us, in the end, the groups remain an enigma. It seems plausible there may have been native language differences between the two groups. In what other respects they differed and what the origin and background of these differences was remains a subject where every theologian who loves solving puzzles can engage in to his or her heart's

content, but will probably never find a satisfying answer to, unless new evidence comes to light.

For the message Luke seeks to convey through his story it is not important for him to enlarge upon the characteristics of the different groups in the Early Church. For Luke, far more essential than the substance of the differences is how they are being dealt with.

The message Luke wants to give his audience is the same as we find in chapters 3-5: That in the first Christian community any threats to unity and harmony, any negativity is consistently conquered by the positive. That every time an issue arises it is dealt with swiftly, adequately and with integrity by the leadership of the Church. Difficulties, tension, and conflict are transformed into positive growth every time challenges arise. Where differences or discord occurs, ways are found under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to resolve the issues doing justice to all parties concerned.

In the book of Acts we find a community of people who have started out on a journey following in Jesus' footsteps. On the way all sorts of things happen, but, as Luke tries to show his readers, where the Holy Spirit is at work and people let themselves be led by that Holy Spirit, problems are solved and the congregation grows. This message seems very topical for a modern Church struggling with differences between groups and only seems to lose by it. The question is then: How do we deal with those differences and conflicts so they become a positive, productive force for growth and new life in our communities like those first Christians pictured by Luke were doing?

Although it probably idealises the historical circumstances and interactions of that first Christian Community, the message Acts gives is important for Christian communities who, in any age, try to live according to the values and ideals Jesus came to offer and the Holy Spirit seeks to propagate.

Not Abraham's way, of violence responding to violence, and power being met by power, but a community that seeks unity and harmony through understanding, consultation, and the exercise of care for the weak and vulnerable.

In Church, Acts tells us, there may be conflicts and discord at times. Church people will become involved in situations where tensions threaten unity and harmony. We are only human and nothing will change the fact that these things happen wherever people endeavour to live in community. But there are ways to deal with differences and conflict other than violence and assertion of power. The way of Christ, the King of Peace, is to find solutions that will do justice to all parties, including outsiders, take the plight of the poor and the weak seriously, no matter what their cultural or ethnic background or personal circumstance. So the challenges can be transformed into fruitful sources of growth and a precursor of positive change for the community.

In the story as Acts tells it there is no avoidance or denial of the issues. On the contrary, they are acknowledged and met head on, with clear, decisive

and positive action that creates solutions, remedies the difficulties in the status quo and helps the community to continue on its journey in a more positive way than before.

This is a good message for us, I think, who are part of a Church that too often confuses harmony and unity with the absence of conflict or even disagreement. A Church that often suppresses and denies the negative and difficult, and is convinced, erroneously, that keeping at least the appearance of unity and peacefulness is more important than facing the challenges and addressing the issues. This only stalls growth and prevents issues from being dealt with appropriately and eventually creating a much bigger mess than was there before.

The Christian way is not Abraham's way of crushing the enemy with might, but neither is it living in a make-believe world where conflict, difficulties and painful realities are avoided and kept silent. The Christian way is confronting difficulties confidently, trusting that the God of life, love and reconciliation will be alongside us and will help us grow through whatever it is that is threatening our peace and wholeness towards more grace, more peace and more wholeness of all.
Amen.