

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
EASTER 5
SUNDAY 28 APRIL 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
John 13: 31-35; Acts 11:1-18

“All God’s People”

Scripture, from the very beginning, has a dream. The dream of a peaceful, bounteous world where all God’s creatures live in harmony. It is seen as a dream that has divine origins. With scripture telling the story of that dream - and of God’s efforts to make it happen.

Throughout scripture, people, although forever longing for peace and wholeness, are seen too often to be less than helpful towards achieving this dream. Although God offers them opportunities enough, time and time again they fall short. That falling short is called sin. And an important part of the story, as it is told in the Bible, is not only the struggle of human beings with sin, but God’s struggle with sin.

Time and time again individuals are chosen, communities called, prophets sent in an attempt to bring the world closer to wholeness and peace. Time and time again sin interferes and keeps the dream from being realised. Time and time again, with endless patience, God seeks out others to partner with, sends new prophets who, in word and deed try to convince those around them to embrace God’s vision of justice and peace for the world and turn away from behaviour that leads away from the realisation of it.

Looking at the pictures of the dawn service in the paper this week, and reading about the thousands that turned up on Anzac Day, I couldn’t help but wonder why this service proves to be so attractive to such large numbers of people. Many of them young and, dare I say it, not overly interested in the Australian Army and what it is involved with the rest of the year. What one of the articles I read suggested was that it wasn’t so much in support of the military they came, but out of a longing to see an end to the ravages of war, and express their disappointment over the forever continuing death toll amongst young men and women who give their lives seemingly without bringing the world any closer to the dream of peace and wholeness.

I read somewhere that, apparently, there is less conflict and fewer casualties now than there were ever before in history (as far as we know), so presumably organisations like the United Nations, international law and cooperation are making a difference.

But even if we take that into account, the silent crowd on Anzac morning is, if the papers are right about why they turned up, still right: there is still too much killing, too much heartbreak, too much damage, too much grief, even for a nation like ours that is “only” involved in war in places relatively far away and enjoys peace and prosperity at home. It should not be like that.

And we probably all recognise that longing for wholeness, that dream of peace for the world, of people living in harmony, in loving acceptance of each other.

The bible tells us that that longing, that dream, has a divine source. It tells us it comes straight from God, who planted it in our soul and keeps reminding us, in every way imaginable, that life is meant to be whole. That peace and not continuing conflict and violence is what should be filling the world.

The bible also keeps telling us how we could help realise that dream and what things may prevent it from coming true. Not once or twice, but on nearly every page of scripture, we find God trying, in every way possible, to convert us to ways that will lead to a more abundant, peaceful, healed and healing lifestyle.

The story about Peter we read this morning fits this framework to a tee. The fact that it takes up more space than any other story told in the gospel of Luke or the Acts of the apostles (the story is told no less than four times) indicates it is central to the message of this two volume work.

Peter, one of the leaders of the early Christian movement, one of Jesus' closest friends, finds himself falling into a trance while praying on the roof of a house. Something not unusual in a Middle Eastern setting where houses were built with roofs where people could retire to if they wanted time alone, or if they needed to catch the breeze on a hot day. Peter is a pious Jew who would have taken time for prayer at least twice a day, and falling into trance as a result would not have been something too much out of the ordinary at that time either. Luke paints Peter here as an ordinary pious Jew who is attending to his religious duties in an appropriate way, as any pious Jew would and should. Elsewhere he paints him as an outgoing character who has shared the story of Jesus generously, in public, preaching to Jews and non-Jews alike.

Then, as now, there were strong religious laws that kept Jews and non-Jews from mixing freely. The food laws especially maintained clear boundaries between one and the other. As they still do.

From the story Acts tells us we gather that, although Peter (and others) may have been talking to non-Jews, and even sharing the gospel with them at this stage, non-Jews are not part of the table community that is so central to the Christian faith.

Members of the Christian Community are not unhappy with the state of affairs as they are. This is how it has always been. Their religious background is Jewish, and Jews have always kept themselves apart, and regarded that separateness as part of their call to be God's light to the nations. It has become, over the ages, an integral part of their culture.

That is not as strange, or unfriendly as it may sound. Throughout the history of Christianity there have been movements, calls, for the same separateness. For Christians, for God's people needing, to keep themselves separate of the world around them in order to be faithful. Separate from others who may have a different lifestyle, come from another culture, live with different customs and traditions. To keep the movement "pure" and true to its divine calling to be Christ's people. In the world, but not of the world, showing the world what a life of faith looks like by contrasting it with the lifestyle that surrounds it.

Anyone who has been involved in interchurch or interfaith dialogue like me, will know discussion about identity and plurality, unity and diversity is an important part of the conversation. With some arguing that keeping clear boundaries is important. To show clearly what we stand for, to keep us strong and true to our calling. And others ready to mix and match whatever seems fitting. It is a discussion that is, in my opinion, very important to have. Because it teaches us about our own idiosyncrasies, and helps us decide what is non-negotiable in our convictions, and may be open to change in order to make more unity possible. While at the same time it will give us an opportunity to learn what may be non-negotiable to others, and respect it as part of their faith commitment.

What we encounter in earliest Christianity, as it is portrayed in Acts, is the development of a similar discussion. A movement has sprung up that is strong and well defined in its message and culture. It's successful, attracting large numbers. With non-Jews happy to embrace the Jewish law and lifestyle in order to join. So why change? Why risk dilution and compromise of the lifestyle of God's chosen? Didn't Jesus himself follow these laws?

That it takes three times before Peter "gets it" is an indication of just how hard it must have been to let this wall between Jews and non-Jews come down and let go of some of the laws, traditions and culture that have been so important so far.

A vision is something different from a dream. Or an idea. Or a gradually growing towards a new insight. A vision is an uninvited, unexpected experience that is so strong and convincing there is no escaping the consequence of what it tells you.

This happens, not only to Peter, and three times over, but also to someone who is on the other side of the fence. When Peter is asked to justify his actions to the other leaders of the movement, his main argument is that there was no escaping what he experienced, or ignoring the fact that he has found that experience, that vision straddling the fence.

What Peter tells the other leaders, and what the story tells us, is that even where we, in our community, in our view of the world, may be feeling comfortable and safe inside the boundaries of tradition, faith or culture have provided us with, this may not necessarily be concurrent with God's take on things.

And that, if it is not, we might find our complacency disturbed and our reality invaded by forces beyond our control. Unbidden visions with inescapably strong suggestions for change pushing us towards crossing boundaries we ourselves would never have imagined we'd cross.

"Kill and Eat!" Peter is told.

"Never!" Peter says, horrified.

And yet, only a couple of verses on, the fence comes down, and things change irrevocably for the young Christian movement. No longer safe within the boundaries of tradition and culture, they find themselves out in the world, embracing others they would never have dreamt of including had it been up to them.

Some may feel this message is no longer applicable to us. Aren't we a community that is open and welcoming to everyone? Haven't we long since moved beyond the days when Presbyterian youngsters were not supposed to mix with Methodist ones, and joint services with Baptists, Anglicans and Catholics as we are planning for Pentecost would have been unthinkable?

I don't know. You tell me.

Is our community open and welcoming to everyone? Or are there still boundaries, even now, that keep some people out, and others in? That allow us to feel warm and fuzzy about "our community" and "our Church", while making it difficult for any "outsider" to become part of "us"? Do we have rituals or traditions that keep us from including others? And if so, what are they? Do any of our Church policies exclude others? Any of our language? Are there any divisions that keep our church from true unity with others? Or is it all their fault? Are there any prejudices keeping us from full inclusion of people we perceive to be different from us and our congregation?

Personally I believe there are still things we might need to let go of in order to be more open and welcoming to "others" and get closer to the realisation of Peter's vision where everyone is welcomed into the community, no matter what their background, culture or religion may be.

And it may still be as simple as being prepared to open our doors and eat their food and drink their coffee. It may be creating room for their lifestyle and music, the rhythms of their life, their interests, their approach to things different to ours.

This can be as challenging as it was back then for Peter and the other leaders of the early Christian community. Change, opening up to other ways and ideas is never easy. And threat to our established ways and traditions is very real. Life was never the same again for Peter, or for the young Christian movement, after that meal with Cornelius. It changed everything for them, as well as for Cornelius and others who decided to become involved. It meant conflict, hard work, long and involved discussions about how this new, never before imagined community could shape itself. It meant swallowing prejudice and judgemental

comments whole, and refusing to be offended, even by the most blatant of insults to what was precious to either side. It meant misunderstandings, hurt feelings, painful toes, tension and irritation. As it still does.

But it also meant that barriers that were preventing God's dream for the world, God's peace and wholeness expanding and infecting a much larger community than previously possible.

What we see in Acts is that, in spite of human limitations and fear at imagining the scope of God's vision for the world, there is a force inexorably pushing towards more inclusion and unity. Crossing boundaries, bringing down barriers, and bringing people together, calling them to live the dream towards peace and wholeness for the whole world and all creatures in spite of their personal fears and limited imagination.

A call to embrace the movement of the Spirit towards more openness, more unity, more inclusivity and more trust and faith in God's ability to bring and hold it all together, no matter what may be keeping us from letting go of our fear and insecurity.

It tells us there is a way to bring the world together in a way that is stronger than violence and death can ever be. The way of love, the way of inclusion, the way of unity. A way actively supported by a force way beyond our imagination. A way to change the longing we all feel, and not only on Anzac day, into lived reality. Amen.