

Humble Remembering

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28.

I don't always agree with the Prime Minister, but I was pleased to hear him say that we need to appreciate our history and know about it – that Australian history should be well taught in schools. Of course.

I reflected too on Australia Day, as no doubt you did, that the day and its celebrations certainly has a much higher profile in our community than it used to have. Awareness of who we are and where we've come from is an important part of our psyche and our sense of being a community. The Governor General wisely reminded us on that day that part of celebrating our nationhood is that we celebrate our variety of backgrounds, and resolve to care for one another all the more diligently, and for our fragile world too.

You may know the Hymn for Australia, written at the time of the bicentenary by the late Canberrans Michael and Honor Thwaites. It's at 672 in our hymnbook, 'Together in Song'.

'Lord of earth and all creation
let your love possess our land:
wealth and freedom, far horizons,
mountain, forest, shining sand:
may we share, in faith and friendship,
gifts unmeasured from your hand.'

Having a sense of our past and being able to draw on our story is important indeed. It can, of course, mean quite different things to different people. This was clearly illustrated on our television screens as we saw much evidence of our Australian flag being waved about in joy and exultation, and then being burnt in fury by one of our indigenous citizens and his community.

Michael and Honor Thwaites go on to say in verse 2:

'People of the ancient Dreamtime,
they who found this country first,
ask with those, the later comers,
will our dream be blessed or cursed?'

Indeed!

As I say that flag burning, I couldn't help reflecting on how much hurt lay behind that extreme action. How differently we can react to our past and how differently we might understand it. So teaching history and celebrating our national history is not always straightforward.

The first reading today from the Book of Deuteronomy purports to be the final speech of Moses before his death – the last words of that great man of God. We know that it is a later compilation – not all literally the words of Moses. But it was the nation’s way of understanding his story and their story. It’s about the dangers of forgetting – forgetting the lessons they had learned from the past, forgetting the one who had led them through all kinds of trials and difficulties, forgetting to keep humble enough and not harden their hearts against God, the source and giver of their blessings – becoming so complacent that they let their standards slip, and forget what it means to be the people of God, and their responsibilities to one another.

So the message of Deuteronomy is to remember your story, but not in a way that you glorify yourselves and think it is all your own doing.

That’s one of the danger of the ‘our glorious story about our glorious nation’ approach to history.

From chapter 8: ‘When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses to live in, and when your herds have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ...Do not say to yourself “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth”.’

It’s interesting that in Deuteronomy when the 10 Commandments are set out again in very similar wording to the version we usually read and know from Exodus chapter 20; there the fourth commandment – the one urging the people to observe the Sabbath, the seventh day, as a day to remember God our creator, and a day of compulsory rest because God rested on the 7th day. In the Deuteronomy chapter 5 version it doesn’t explain the Sabbath as a day of rest because God rested on the Sabbath day, but rather that it was a day to remember that they had been slaves in the land of Egypt.

‘Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.’

In other words, remember your history humbly. Remember what it is like to be oppressed. Remember what it is like to be the underdog, and make sure you treat others with care and mercy. Remember, said Moses, to treat the resident alien amongst you with the same treatment you extend to yourself and your own. This is a strong thread in Israel’s history and story. The emphasis is one that modern Israelis and for that matter, modern Australians might easily forget.

We might forget that we were a mob of exiled outcasts of Britain with very few rights and privileges as human beings. We should always have a special feeling and care for those we have dispossessed, or those who have arrived on our shores since, especially those who have been battered and oppressed and need protection.

Is this how we read our history?

Moses made a significant promise according to Deuteronomy as well as giving warnings about forgetfulness and complacency.

'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.'

We believe that Jesus was that prophet, but more. He came with God's living word and a note of genuine authority in his ministry, but many have rejected him because his word was hard and confronting to the powerful, rich, selfish or complacent. Yet we see that his words and actions brought wholeness and sanity to all kind of people, and his words, teaching and inspiration will continue on. Pray we don't hinder or fail him.

In the new ministry in this place, the church community of the Holy Covenant, may Jesus' way and word be heeded and his offer of healing and forgiveness be experienced, experienced indeed, by many not yet here.

Any may our nation be blessed by insights about ourselves and how we have come to be here and what our human and divine destiny might be. And so we turn to the last verse:

'Lord, life-giving healing Spirit,
on our hurts your mercy shower;
lead us by your inward dwelling;
guiding, guarding, every hour.
Bless and keep our land Australia:
in your will her peace and power.'