

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain  
Sunday 19 July 2009**

**READING**

**2 Samuel 7:1-14a**

**Mark 6:30-34, 51-56**

**Place**

Many years ago now, I went to an exhibition of Australian Aboriginal artist Emily Kngwarreye's work. As I was wandering around with two friends who grew up on rural properties, an interesting discussion arose about 'place' and our relationship to the land, and how this might differ from Indigenous folk.

My friends described their deep love of the land where they grew up knowing every nook and cranny, where they knew stories associated with every square inch. They spoke of their heart-felt connection with the land, and somehow being owned or claimed by the land. They belonged, they were at home in their particular place, one in the Barossa Valley of South Australia and one in Western New South Wales at Myall Park, Armatree.

As someone who has moved around a lot I don't have such a deep connection with one place, though I did have a strange experience of homecoming as Nikolai and I travelled through the hills from Bathurst to Cowra to explore the possibility of moving to this, the place of my birth, where I lived until I was just over 16 months old.

Maybe I was being sentimental, I don't know, but I certainly had a strong sense of the familiar – of coming home.

Here is a different story of land and home ...

## God's Place

*By Adele Halliday*

**K**enya, in East Africa, has more than 40 different racial and ethnic groups – each with its own language, distinct culture, and way of life. One of these ethnic groups is the Maasai people, who live in both Kenya and the neighbouring country of Tanzania. The Maasai people are nomadic – that is, they travel from place to place, settling in one location temporarily before it is time to move on. When they move, they take with them only one thing: their cows, which are considered sacred.

One day, some Christian missionaries from Europe decided that the Maasai people needed to hear the gospel. And so, the missionaries came to the land of the Maasai and did what they traditionally did: they built a church. They told the Maasai that the church building was an important place to come and worship God.

The Maasai people were excited, and they came to church. They worshipped and celebrated and knew God. But, when it was time for the nomadic Maasai to leave this location, they left this place of worship behind and wandered into the desert to find a new place to call home. The Christian missionaries were confused, and wondered what had happened. Didn't the Maasai people like this church? How could they leave it behind so easily?

The missionaries searched until they found the same group of Maasai people again, living in a new place. The relieved missionaries build a new church there and invited the Maasai to come. For a time, the Maasai people came and worshipped and celebrated and knew God.

But, one day, the Maasai left their new place of worship and wandered into the desert again to find a new home. This time the missionaries were upset. They had now built two churches that the Maasai had walked away from. The Maasai seemed happy to be in church; why would they leave it for the desert?

The missionaries looked around again until they found the new location where the Maasai were not living. And, for the first time, they asked the Maasai why they kept leaving the church house. Wasn't God's house important to them? Didn't they respect the church? And, for the first time, the Maasai responded. They said they loved God and they were excited about God's promises. But, they said, they didn't need a structure in order to worship God. They would always move from place to place. Buildings have never been important to them.

What is important, the Maasai explained, is that they carry God with them in their hearts. And so God's place is always with them. As they move from place to place, they worship God and celebrate when they come together – with great joy in the open land – without a building. They carry symbols in their minds, God in their hearts, and celebrate their place in God's household.

Then, the Maasai asked the missionaries, "If God is always with you, why is a church building so important?"

*Adele Halliday, a member of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, is an African-Canadian educator and has served as writer of youth resources for Seasons of the Spirit. She currently works in the area of racial, ethnic, and intercultural ministries with The United Church of Canada*

*Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Pentecost 1 2009, p.67*

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Where are you at home?

I tend to travel weighed down with so much luggage – things ...

What is really necessary?

For the Maasai, it is their cows.

For me?

Where are you at home with the Divine?

I wonder what God's place might look like?

Could it be somewhere comfortable with lots of cushions? Or somewhere formal and beautiful, everything in its place, stained glass windows, ... choir and all.

It depends on how you understand God, I suppose.

This building, Holy Covenant, is a multi-purpose space. During the week you'll find people learning to cook, children playing, mothers chatting, older people exercising, Rainbow Fellowship, hearing stories of God, praying, a funeral in progress, you'll see women and men meditating, people meeting to plan, staff working, the Bulletin being produced, people gathering to worship God, to share community, to receive bread and wine – not all at the same time, of course.

I think that God is present; God is at home here, in all these activities ... as well as at Ricardo's and Canberra High School across the road, at the service station and Aranda Nursing Home ...

Here, we have a space, open for the community to come and go, a sacred place, soaked in prayer, an open space, a place of simplicity and beauty, and light, and, I hope welcoming. There are some simple symbols to remind us of the story, to remind us of the presence of God – look around you, what do you see, what do you hear?

Maybe God is in this place and we never knew!

God is within us, and between us, 'whenever two or three are gathered together (in my name) I am in the midst of them ...

'Come aside to a deserted place and rest awhile ...'

In the reading from 2 Samuel, we notice that David and the Israelites have settled in Jerusalem. They are at home. David, in his house of cedar decides it is time to build God a house – a place to house the Ark.

'Bayith' the Hebrew word for 'house' occurs seven times in this passage. I understand that 'Bayith' can also mean 'palace', 'temple', or 'dynasty' – giving a much richer texture to the significance of 'house' in this passage.

*(Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Pentecost 1 2009, p. 62)*

David wants to build a permanent place for God ... but is pulled up short by the prophet Nathan who reminds him that God has been the people's 'place' wherever they have been. He offers the promise of a 'place' through an ongoing 'house' or 'dynasty'.

The 'no' to building a temple is because of God's history of moving freely among and on behalf of God's people.

God will not be confined to any location. The true home of the people is in God's presence, wherever God is, not vice versa.

Yesterday at Jamison I saw once again the generosity of the people of this neighbourhood; some purchasing a whole trolley load of food for St John's Care, others, one tin of beans or some tuna. I made a donation. Later at Belconnen I purchased a 'Big Issue' magazine of the homeless. I greeted a man pushing a shopping trolley full of junk.

Reflecting on this Samuel reading and on Jesus and his disciples has heightened my awareness once again of the homeless in our midst in Canberra and strengthened my desire to build relationships with them, to learn from these brothers and sisters, to look for God's presence with them, to be challenged and blessed by them, to let the homeless teach me of God's place ...

'Our true home is in God's presence, wherever God is, and not vice versa.'

This encourages me to travel lightly, and to support those who are homeless – spiritually or materially.

You too are a dwelling place of God.