

SERMON 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 7 July 2013

2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6: 7-18

Luke 10: 1-12, 17-24

---

May our worlds be reframed so that we see you clearly, O God of surprises.

John Shelby Spong, retired American bishop and arch-enemy of Biblical literalists, argues passionately that Christians today are trying to sell the 21<sup>st</sup> century a 1<sup>st</sup> century product. The Biblical texts which form so much of our teaching and which we exegete week by week are, he argues, so imbued with the mindset of the first few centuries of Christianity, that they are virtually meaningless to modern Western people. When we add to that difficulty, the many problems encountered in translating ancient texts, the immediacy of the Biblical narratives is pushed even further away from us. It is no wonder, he believes, that modern, thoughtful people have trouble coming to grips with Christianity.

Normally I sit fairly loosely to the point he makes here. It may be my highly literate upbringing but I think it doesn't do us any harm to do a little work in order to access the full meaning of a text. We have to learn a bit of language and a bit of history to understand Shakespeare or Chaucer, why not the Bible?

But this week's readings have given me pause! Spong, I apologise! The story of Naaman's miraculous healing in the Old Testament reading slots solidly into a category very familiar to its readers at the time but quite alien to us. In the Galatians reading we contend with Paul's arguments about the Jewish Law. It is an argument that he simply doesn't need to have with us. With the Galatians 2000 years ago, yes. With us now, no. I have never, as a priest, been called on to give an opinion about whether someone should be circumcised.

And the Gospel so clearly comes out of a different world view to ours that it is hard to find something within it that connects us with the God we know to be loving and compassionate. Power over supernatural enemies, threats of retribution, and power over snakes and scorpions may have persuaded first century people

that Jesus was of God, but I'm not sure of the impact it will have in Canberra in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Or rather, I fear that it will turn people off the text, rather than intrigue and inspire them.

These texts do not sit outside their times – they are deeply immersed in a culture. At times that is not a problem – the deep themes, the underlying message speaks to our humanity. But there are times when the worldview within which the texts are framed threatens to overwhelm the eternal message. If anything, such readings, as Spong so acutely observed, act as barriers to our understanding, rather than as lenses through which we gain a greater understanding of God, of humanity and of the relationship between them.

Once I had recovered from my initial reaction to the three texts for today, I realised that they are all, in their own ways, pointing to the counter-intuitive quality of God's dealings with us. Whatever we may think, whatever we have learnt, in God, things are otherwise.

Naaman is confronted with a very ordinary remedy for his intractable disease. He has sought out Elisha, believing, hoping, that through Elisha, Elisha's God will cure him. But he is disappointed and sceptical that it could be as straightforward as bathing in the river Jordan. He wants God's intervention to be spectacular. But such is not God's way.

The Galatians, for their part, are having trouble believing that Christianity frees them from the Jewish Law. All that they had believed was undone. Righteousness comes not from living righteous lives but from faith. Righteous lives flow from righteousness, not the other way round. Action follows the desires of the heart, we aren't loved by God because we do good things. We do good things because we are loved by God. Everything is upside down.

The Gospel reading also points to the unexpectedness of the way things work in the kingdom of God. Jesus says to his disciples: 'I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.' In any ordinary human society it is the leaders who know what's going on. Knowledge is power and those who are powerful are those who are in the know. Kings can be expected to be at the centre of what is happening in the temporal world, prophets at the

centre of what is happening in the spiritual world. But here Jesus tells his motley band of disciples, sent out without purse, bag or even sandals, that they are blessed to have seen what they have seen. People who are not used to being in positions of power suddenly find themselves at the heart of God's action in the world.

Paul tells us that in Christ all things are made new. We could well also say that in Christ all things are turned upside down.

This is an object lesson to us as we sit comfortably in our particular worldview. As is abundantly clear from today's readings, not everyone construes the world as we do. And, perhaps even more importantly, God does not necessarily act in the world the way we might imagine. Indeed, one could argue that God necessarily does not act in the world in the way that we expect.

It is also an object lesson as we begin NAIDOC week. NAIDOC stands for National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee and all around Australia there will be celebrations this week as we acknowledge the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander cultures.

Over the last 50 years there has been an unfolding of understanding within Australian culture about the richness and meaning of the indigenous cultures which have existed here for many millennia. I vividly remember patronising newsreels from my childhood showing us the dances and hunting skills of, and I quote, 'the primitive peoples of central Australia'. Those of us with Western upbringings have been blinded by our own understandings and have failed to see the depth, intricacy and beauty of the lives and social systems of those who came here before us.

Thankfully this is changing. Bill Gammage's wonderful book 'The Biggest Estate on Earth', with its painstaking and insightful analysis of the land practices of the aboriginal peoples, is part of a wave of reassessment and appreciation of indigenous life. That which seemed totally other, quite impenetrable, is being opened up and our common humanity, diversity and differing insights are being shared and celebrated. Just as our common humanity and humanity's relationship with God speaks through the difficult Scriptural texts we have read today, so too does our common humanity speak through difference and distrust, if we can but sit

patiently with each other, as fellow human beings, listening humbly to each other.

Let us not then be too arrogant about scripture, about what is acceptable to us and what is not. These texts are not just for us here now, not just for our society now – they are for all people for all time. What speaks to us may be utterly meaningless to someone else, somewhere else, sometime else. Conversely, something we reject utterly, may well speak with clarity of God's love and compassion, of the good news of Jesus, to another person in another place at another time. We do well to recognise our own limitations.

As we grapple with scripture, as we seek to hear the voice of God speaking through the word of God, let us be humble and open to the unexpected, the counterintuitive. As we grapple with the limitations of our own understandings, let us celebrate human diversity and all that we can learn from each other. And this week, let us celebrate and learn from the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Amen.

Sarah Macneil  
July 2013