

Letting Go of Story

Epiphany 3C 2019. Nehemiah 8, Ps 19, 1 Corinthians 12.12-31, Luke 4.14-21

When I and David spent time in the Philippines traveling around to various villages we were often asked about Australia. What it was like? Where was it? How big was it? We would answer their questions with various degrees of confidence and sometime disagreement.

I would say something about Australia and David would say 'no, its not quite like that' or I would do the same thing when he said something. It was all particularly strange when the villagers would ask us to sing an Australian song, something that was from our culture.

I remember being a bit confused. Did I sing Waltzing Matilda? Was that Australian enough? Did that give them an idea about our culture? Well only if you were an 18th century sheep rustler who preferred death to capture. Did I try and tell a dreaming story from the first peoples - and I knew a few because I had Aboriginal relatives. But that wasn't really my culture. It felt like cultural appropriation. What does it mean to be an Australian? When did Australia start? You are not going to get an answer to that in this sermon. Instead I invite you to consider the ways in which any nation or community tries to answer the question of who they are.

You may be surprised, or not, to know that questions of cultural identity are woven throughout the bible. In the background to our reading from Nehemiah is just such a question. We heard how the priest Ezra read from the book of the law of Moses, the TORAH. He reads to all the people gathered together in the square before the water-gate. It took a long time to read the TORAH and then a long time to interpret it to the people gathered. The story itself says about 6 hours. Yet apparently they all listened attentively. Later on they all confess how they have failed to follow the law and they again renew the covenant with God.

What was motivating them? What was going on?

The book of Nehemiah is set in the period when the Jewish people returned from their exile in Babylon. They had been overrun and sent into captivity by the Persian empire. But now they came back to Israel and Jerusalem. In Babylon they had been strangers in a strange land. There they had wept and struggled to understand who they were and what had happened. But now the Persian king had given them permission to return. Not as independent peoples but as his subjects. Under his jurisdiction they were to rebuild Jerusalem that would become an outpost of his empire.

However, there was a problem. In fact quite a few problems. Firstly, not all the Jewish people had been taken in to exile. There were many Jewish people who remained behind. Secondly, the exiles had married non-Jewish women and had families. Thirdly, they were all firmly under the thumb of their Persian masters. It was not a simple matter to bring all of this together and find a way forward.

The big question that preoccupied their minds was “who were the proper Jews?” Was it the ones who had stayed behind in the Holy Land? Was it the ones who had left and come back bringing their foreign families with them? What made a person Jewish now that the nation of Israel was no more? Could you call yourself Jewish when you and your people no longer had control over the Holy Land?

So what did they do? How did they handle all of this? Well they did what many communities do when they are in a state of change and fear. They became obsessed with cultural purity. Communities in danger, communities in conflict, perceive purity to be the great antidote. And people in power and authority in such communities use purity and questions of cultural identity to control and drive the conversation. After all, if you can get everyone in a lather about who is a true patriot you have effectively stopped energy and thought going into perhaps more pressing concerns.

It seems Every community of meaning tries either to assimilate the ‘other’ or to eliminate the ‘other’. Ezra and Nehemiah choose the second option and they come up with a very clear sign of national purity. It’s not the reading of TORAH although that is a key part of setting the scene. What Ezra and Nehemiah and their co-leaders do is urge those who have foreign wives and children to send them away, to send them back to where they came from. The foreign women and their children do not belong in this newly covenanted, newly purified community. These foreign women and children are unclean and they must be expelled to keep the community pure and undefiled. They are simply and tragically just not Jewish enough. Their lack of true blue Jewishness means they are turned out and rejected.

When you think about this it is appalling isn't it? Families are broken up. Women and children are shunned and ejected from the community. All for the sake of cultural identity and purity.

But here’s the killer question. For Jews, how much Jewishness is enough Jewishness? And for Christians, how much Christianity is enough Christianity? And for whites, how much whiteness is enough? And for Aboriginals how much Aboriginality is enough? And for men, how much maleness is enough? And for Australians how much patriotism is enough? For the insiders in any crisis over sameness, there is never enough.... except for our own. There is never enough signs and symbols of national identity and purity.

All around the edges of that sameness are the disqualified waiting. They wait along with the for an alternative reading of the scroll. All around are those on the outside waiting for the One, someone, anyone, who will be their voice and bring them home. For there is more than one reading of the law of God, there is more than one way to view and engage with scripture and sacred writing. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Jesus certainly didn’t.

He too reads from Jewish sacred writing but he doesn't choose the TORAH. In fact he doesn't choose a particular scroll at all. He is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He knows his scripture well because he finds the exact place he wants. He reads the passage and declares that its words are now fulfilled. They are fulfilled because *He is here. He is here.*

He is here to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, to bring sight to the blind. He is here to let the oppressed go free. He is firmly on the side of the outsider. He is the one who will speak for them and to them. He is the one who defies all purity codes and scandalises just about everyone by his friendship with prostitutes, corrupt tax collectors and roman soldiers. He is the one without judgement for as he says judgement belongs only to God.

Initially his listeners delight in what he is saying. They are amazed at *'the gracious words'* that come from his mouth. Gracious words is what they hear when he speaks. Yet within a few moments everything goes pear shaped. They begin to question him about his family and his background. They begin to wonder - is he one of us? Can his words be trusted? Jesus response is to suggest that God's gracious words are for all people and that all people have a key place and role in God's creation and plan. At that point they run him out of town. If he is on the side of the 'other' then he is not one of 'us'. The question of religious purity and cultural identity is what derails this encounter in the synagogue. From a crowd in amazement and delight at the gracious words of Jesus to a crowd in rage and violence is where this story goes and continues to go right up to the cross.

Who are we really? What is our identity as Australians and people of faith? For what picture and story of nationhood are we prepared to commit acts of violence? For what picture and story of religious identity are we prepared to exclude others and be judge and jury?

A huge part of the reason we are in such a mess about all of this is because we are all, from various sides of the debate, from various positions, all caught up in our story. We are all caught up in the pictures we have about our cultural identity, our religious identity. Whoever has a story and believes it to be the absolute truth is caught up and trapped. It is like being in a maze and the more we believe the maze is real the more we are trapped. All of us. The more we are unconscious of our deep fears about loosing some part of ourselves the more we are wedded to hanging on for dear life to the myths we tell about ourselves and others.

I think it is time to do something extraordinary and courageous!

I think it is time to let go of our story and instead live out of the deep truth that we are all ONE. I mean really live it out. The biblical writer who plays with this idea most clearly is of course Paul. Paul who by his own description is the most Jewish Jew you can get, is the one who describes the new creation, the deep reality. Paul asserts that although there are significant differences we are in essence one body. Deep down this is true not just of the gathered Christian community. It is true of all creation. For the Creator is both three, the many, and the One. And so is the Creators creation.

One of the most profound gifts of Jesus Christ is that he brings consciousness to this deep reality. He reveals this reality to his followers both then and now. Christ and God are One, Christ and the Spirit are One, when we love, are love, just as Jesus, we are One with the eternal Divinity. But to enter into that reality you have to first let go of the story that you are separate. You have to let go of all your stories. You have to let go of the story that there is some earthly Shangri-La where you get to be a true blue Aussie but at the same time silence dissent, lock people up in detention centres simply because they were born in the wrong country, did not have enough money to bribe their way on board a plane and had to go by boat instead. You have to let go of the story of national sovereignty, cultural purity and economic scarcity. There are so many stories that must be sacrificed to the deepest truth of life - that all of humanity and creation is fundamentally one.

Where will you be? Where do you choose to be? You do have a choice. Will you be in your story or in the deep truth of life? Will you be on a side or the place of no side at all? Will you be caught in the story of your past or the reality of this present moment? That right now and every moment you are one with God - love and loved, acceptance and accepted, complete and whole - and so is everyone else. Will you be caught in the story of an imagined future where somehow everything is so much better or the reality of this present moment? That right now and every moment the abundance of the present moment is yours to experience. That right now, in God, in the silent presence of all things present, beyond all words, concepts and stories, there is only silence and oneness.

I know I have taken us on a journey through Old Testament theology, national identity, first century Christianity to the deepest part of the Christian mystery. I hope I have not lost you along the way! But let me finish with this.

When I was preparing this reflection I used a book on the Old Testament written by Walter Brueggemann, one of the foremost biblical scholars on the Old Testament. At the very beginning of the book, before even the table of contents, Brueggemann has a quote by someone called Anthony G. Amsterdam. The first two sentences are these:

All cultures are, inherently, negotiated compromises between the already established and the imaginatively possible. Cultures in their very nature are marked by contests for control over conceptions of reality.

You know what conceptions of reality are? - They are our stories. We end up in disagreement, conflict and violence because we all have different concepts of reality, different stories. Different words. We get lost in contests of control because we are lost in our concepts. We are lost in our stories of what makes an Aussie an Aussie, a Christian a Christian, a priest a priest, an anglican an anglican or an anything you care to name.

I vote we all let go of our story. At the very least let us hold our stories very lightly and don't believe a word of them. There is no freedom in holding on. There is no peace in duality. In the words of Jesus, 'we must die to ourselves'. We must die to any story we have about ourselves and dwell in the eternal truth of who we are - that we are one with God, love and loved, one with creation, one with all. This is my prayer. For this is the way.

Amen.