

Third Sunday after Epiphany (A) & Australia Day: CCSY, 26 January 2014

The Revd Dr Richard Treloar

Isa 9:1-4; Ps 27; 1 Cor 1:10-18; Matt 4:12-23

In this morning's epistle, Paul addresses the early church in Corinth much as would a political leader, appealing for unity – for an end to the tribalism and factions which typically lead to the disintegration of the polis, the city-state.

On this national day, what is it that binds us together, or – at least – prevents our social fabric from completely unraveling?

Is it the anthem we have just sung, a text forever tilted in a slightly comical direction for me since Fr Paul pointed out that it can be sung to the theme tune for Gilligan's Island!

Last week Michael Danaher reflected with us on Walter Brueggemann's thesis that the USA in our own time resembles ancient Israel in terms of its vulnerability to socio-economic pressures, and the fragmentation they bring – the sort of cultural conditions that, in the eyes of its prophets, made Israel ripe for the plucking by nearby imperial forces. In doing so, Michael also raised the question of the spiritual health of our own nation: where are we headed? Where might the prophetic imagination, the prophetic witness 'bite' for us?

In one of those visions of hope interspersed between warnings, the prophet Isaiah – in a passage echoed by Matthew in his gospel – celebrates the rise of an unnamed leader, probably Hezekiah, who will help realize God's vision for Israel's southern kingdom of Judah, effecting a transition from darkness to light, restoring the states of Dor (the way of the sea), Gilead (the land beyond the Jordan), and Megiddo (Galilee of the nations) that had been annexed by Assyria in the eighth century BCE.

The yoke and rod of military oppression are ended, as on the day of Midian, a reference to Gideon's famous victory in the Book of Judges over one of the indigenous peoples of the region, when with 300 trumpets he frightened the poor Midianite army half to death in the middle of the night. Good for old Hezekiah, then, or whoever this next champion may be.

Except that Israel's vocation – its essential identity – is not just to have light, but rather – as we will be reminded next week on the Feast of the Presentation – to be light. In God's vision for it, Israel's success as a nation goes beyond its own survival, or even flourishing, to the extent to which it contributes to the survival and flourishing of the nations, plural. And that vocation and identity, spelled out later on by Isaiah (49:6), goes all the way back to the call of Abraham to be the father of a nation by which all the families of the earth shall find blessing.

Israel it seems, like the brothers Zebedee, has bigger fish to fry than simply mending her own nets.

And what about us? What of this nation, which references God in its constitution – specifically a dependence upon God’s blessing as the source of our unity? Are we, in fact, just a very big Gilligan’s Island, preoccupied with mending our nets, that is, with our own survival, fearful of perceived threats from within and without, uncertain of how to relate to the land or its first peoples having been cast upon it by dint of good or bad luck, colonial ambition, or any other circumstance capable of being dressed up as divine providence?

Certainly Jesus’ call to ‘fish for people’ sits uncomfortably alongside images of people caught like fish in the nets of our well-patrolled borders, with those who don’t quite measure up being ‘thrown back’, as it were.

And yet, our history boasts instances of great hospitality: the post-war European settlement program; the popular pressure that generated a wave of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s; more recent acceptance of African immigrants. Local Jesuit, Andy Hamilton, writing in *Eureka Street* last week sees in this contrasting and recurring pattern of inclusion and exclusion a deep ambivalence in Australian identity: a crisis of confidence; a loss of centre.¹

For those of us who have been baptized into that other commonwealth and citizenship, who bear the sign of the cross as a marker of identity, how do we reconcile the sometimes competing follies of the emblems under which we stand?

For all who are in some sense children of Abraham, whether history’s pages will judge Australia Fair to have been advanced at every or indeed any stage, must surely depend on the extent to which the families of the earth – including those Indigenous to this corner of it – are able to bless themselves. Like God’s people before us, our identity is grounded in a calling, a vocation, not only to have light – ‘wealth for toil’, ‘nature’s gifts’, we might say – but to be light.

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
[w]here the love of Christ shall end divisions . . .

Imagine these words of our opening hymn serving instead as a national anthem:

Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God’s grace.
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard,
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word,
built of tears and cries of laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace.
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

¹ ‘Celebrating Diversity on Australia Day’, 22 January 2014, www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aid=38793#.UuMjqv3OjJw, cited 25 January.

Confident that the call to build such a canopy serves the world God loves, and not first or foremost the Church, here in the household of faith we have the opportunity – indeed the responsibility – to model and to champion this polity, this ‘economy’ or ‘law of the house’, and nowhere more so than at this always open and never exhausted table, which binds us, welcome strangers all.

There is much to celebrate on Australia Day; much to rejoice in, be proud of, and give thanks for, including the lives of all who, as Hamilton put it, have ‘worked to establish a more generous and self-assured Australia . . . encourag[ing] our better selves’ – kind neighbours of migrants, teachers and social workers, nurses and civil servants – ordinary people, like you and me?

And there is much to pray about, to reflect on, to repent of, and to bring into the searching light of God’s transforming grace. May we have the time and space, the courage and integrity to do a little of both on this holiday weekend, and in the year ahead.

Fr Richard Treloar