

Pentecost 3A, Sunday June 21st, 2020

Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10, Romans 6: 1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

Uncovering the Limits

Introduction

This week we celebrate 43 years of the Uniting Church in Australia. Why do I continue as a minister of this church? What is it that I perceive within it that is Christlike? I was ordained two and a half years after the Uniting Church's birth. Through the last 37 years of ministry, it has carried me to the ends of the earth: Latin America, North America, Africa and Asia. It has also directed me into bureaucracy, academia and congregational ministry. Let me tell you that the journey has not been without its difficulties. At three different stages of my life I have been at the point of letting go, leaving, for other traditions. Each time I have turned back to the Uniting Church. Why? Let me say, it is not because of the Church's governance: I think we have been trapped between bureaucratization – invisible leadership – and excessive conciliarism – diluted leadership. Let me say it is not because of the Church's capacity to engage meaningfully and incisively with its corporate structures: it does not. Let me say, it is not because it is outrageously successful: it has not been so. The struggle of a liberal Protestant church in what has been since soon after church union, an extraordinarily conservative age, has taken its toll.

That said, I stay for one reason, an overwhelming and persuasive reason: the Uniting Church's world-view: summed up in a word: "hospitality". There are those religious critics who contend that the Uniting Church, stretches the idea of God's hospitality too far, toward a sort of limitless inclusion; that the Uniting Church has simply internalized this idea from modern secularism, and in so, doing has become secularism's victim. The truth I think is the reverse of that proposition: rather that hospitality in the ethical lexicon, has come to modern secularism, *precisely* from the West's Christian foundation. Broad, generous hospitality, is at root a thoroughly Christian idea, long before it became secularised. Secularism has mistakenly claimed it as a discovery of its own, while many Christians have forgotten that Jesus furnished the foundation,

What I want to do today is to think through the biblical roots of hospitality and its ethos, expressions of hospitality, as they present themselves in our readings.

The Readings

The Hebrew reading from Genesis is a surprise. Earlier on Sarah had been advised that she would bear at an impossibly old age, the child Isaac who would be heir to Israel. You may remember that she laughed, as did God. It was after all risible. Today, we move on from that, to an altogether more nefarious episode. Abraham has fathered a son through his servant Hagar, agreed to by Sarah, so as to hedge his bets: what if the child thing with Sarah does not work? And so, there are two sons, not just one: Ishmael born to Hagar, and

Isaac born to Sarah: both of Abraham...in effect half-brothers. No surprises at what happens next. Sarah, using and abusing her power over the junior and socially weaker Hagar, jealously and brutally claims the mantle of Israel for *her* Isaac alone, assuring their deaths by organizing the expulsion of Hagar and her son into the desert. Abraham, distressed, goes along with it. But, and here is the thing: God does not, God breaks in, God protects Hagar and Ishmael, arranging another nation to which Ishmael will be heir. The name Ishmael means, "God hears": that is God has heard Hagar's misery and desperation, even though she is an outsider. The conclusion to this theological narrative is this: God's generosity is not restricted to the covenant with Israel, to the Hebrews, as much as Sarah may want it, as much as Sarah may engineer it, through the exclusion and attempted murder of Hagar and her son. The weight of this story is clear: God's hospitality is open-ended, extensive and inclusive.

And so, to the New Testament reading: one that on the face of it is difficult, one where Jesus talks of the sword and division which *he* brings. How so? This sits at odds with what Christians believe about God and what we believe we are to do: to promote human community, equality, fellowship. What does this mean? To get this, we need to begin from the real world: that is always Jesus' beginning point. Jesus begins with a criticism, a critique. His insight is this: that the construction we human beings place upon community is always partial, always self-interested, always incomplete. We always exclude someone in order to give expression to our togetherness. The peace we build as cohesive communities, is founded upon and grounded in those we reject, in those we repudiate. Those we exclude do us a service: they *hold us together*, because in our togetherness, we know who we are not. How do we know that we are Aryans together? Because we are *not* Jews. How do we know that we are Jews together? Because we are *not* Palestinians? How do we know that we are of the elites? Because we are *not* of the masses. How do we know we are men together? Because we are *not* women. How do we know we are heterosexuals together? Because we are *not* gay. Our conditional hospitality, our clannish inclusiveness is what Jesus challenges. He comes to put an end to it.

Jesus uncovers the limits of our deceptive constructs, he exposes our distorted sense of community, our fictitious and contrived peacefulness for what it is. Inclusion, to be God's inclusion, must transcend clannishness, must be victim free.

This magnificent theological and ethical obsession of the Uniting Church; the Gospel priority, the Biblical imperative of hospitality, Christ-like hospitality is why I remain within the Uniting Church. This is the gift of the Uniting Church in Australia to the Australian churches and the Australian community. Needless to say, it does not make us popular in some circles.