

Growing Mission

Matthew 15:21-28

In 2001 I attended a multifaith celebration of the Centenary of Federation. It was held in the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens, the site of the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament on 9 May 2001. Back in 1901, Australia was British to its bootstraps, with a smattering of other nationalities, mainly European, including the German settlers through which many of us trace our ancestry. There were also a small number of Chinese immigrants, many having come to Australia during the goldrush years. And the country was almost totally Christian.



100 years later so many things had changed. Australia was now amongst the most multi-cultural countries in the world. Wave upon wave of immigration had taken place since the Second World War, from Europe, Asia, the sub-continent, the Middle East and Africa. With these people have also come the faiths that they practice, especially Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. That's why the Centenary of Federation included a multi-faith celebration, called "A Sense of Place." It began with an acknowledgement of place from the first custodians of our country, the Aboriginal people, after which the major religious groups presented the history of their life in Australia, in voice, song and dance: Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish. It was an array of colour

and sound; traditional costumes, ancient music.

The Christian presentation, on the other hand, was somewhat underwhelming. All I can remember of it was that the young people who represented the Christian churches in Australia were dressed in different brightly coloured T-shirts, which lacked impact compared to the grace and beauty of the other presentations. But in hindsight I can understand what was being communicated: Christianity is not a religion that is tied to one culture, nationality or ethnicity. It is multi-cultural, more than that, the church transcends culture. There's not one way to dress as a Christian, or one style of sacred music, or one language for the sacred text. There's a plurality of people and practices but one confession: "Jesus is Lord."

The Church was born in a pluralistic environment like today's world. The worship of the emperor and of the Roman gods was the official religion of the empire, but other religions were jostling with each other for superiority, and different gods belonged to each region or city. All except one, that is, the God of the Hebrews, who created the heavens and the earth. In Psalm 67, God's people sang: "May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth may fear him." This God wanted the worship of the



whole world, and had called out of the world for himself a people to be his light to the world. In practice, though, God's people found it easier to set up barriers that excluded people, both those who they named "Gentiles" and even Jewish believers who didn't share the same ritual practices.

That was the issue with the Pharisees. They were passionate about God and his holy law. But their zeal had turned the law into a weapon that didn't shine the light of God's will but attacked out. They had become legalists- for them the doing of the law and the attached rituals rightly was more important than what lay behind it: a relationship with God. That's why, in the prelude to today's gospel, Jesus stresses how a relationship with God, a heart made clean by him, transforms behaviour, not the behaviour changing the inner person. That's why Jesus says, "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart."



Now we see how this plays out, in Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman. Jesus is in alien territory, a place where faithful Jewish people feared to tread, and even used the names "Tyre" and "Sidon" as a byword for evil. A desperate mother has sought Jesus out. It had taken a lot of courage to do what she did: she is a foreigner and a woman. She doesn't have a husband with her, nor a male relative to ritually approach Jesus rightly. But her need is greater than the niceties. Her daughter is demonised and suffering terribly. Hear what comes out of her mouth: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." This is a cry of faith, words that any faithful Jew would confess.

But what does Jesus do? Nothing. I'm shocked? Are you? But she won't let up, and the disciples plead with Jesus: "Lose this woman. She's driving us crazy." And Jesus' reaction just reinforces their position. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Where does that leave her? Still desperate, yes, but with nothing to lose. With dogged faith, she gets down on her knees, a sign of worship. She begs for help again. Jesus' reply is worse than blunt. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." But Jesus has met his match in this feisty, faithful woman. She can't, she won't, accept his words at face value. She adds her own interpretation. "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."



This lone woman, this outsider, who dared to challenge the orthodoxy of her day, in her faith and in the faith of God's own people, knew that she was right. Somehow she had heard the promise of God, like the one given to Isaiah: "Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain."

Jesus knew it too. Her behaviour contrasted with the religious leaders who didn't believe a word he said. Although Jesus' mission was to "the lost sheep of Israel," his life work would "create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body reconcile both Jew and Gentile through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." While the disciples don't yet understand the universal scope of his mission, the Holy Spirit will teach them clearly as the good news radiates out from Jerusalem in the decades after Jesus' resurrection.

What does it mean for us to believe in a God who loves the world, without exception? What are some factors standing in the way of our community being a place of welcome and safety for all people? Although the church as a whole is trans-cultural, different congregations and indeed denominations, have a culture that has been shaped by their history. What St Paul's is today is a product of the fact that we are part of the Lutheran Church of Australia, which traces its origins back to Lutheran immigrants who came to Australia on order to practice their faith freely. They brought with them the perspective that they were outsiders, in the land they left as well as the new land they came to. They set up mono-cultural communities in the mainly rural areas where they settled. They worshipped in their mother tongue and they set up their own schools, so that their children could be steeped both in faith and the wider German culture that supported it. Outsiders did occasionally manage to infiltrate the church, mainly through marriage, but it was immensely difficult.



This self-imposed isolation caused great damage to the church during the two world wars of the last century. Although Lutheran young men fought for Australia, the fact that the church self-identified as German meant that it was the target of suspicion and antagonism. This both reinforced the perception that the church was an outsider in the national culture, but this crisis also forced the church to make decisions that opened it up to embrace its place in this country and its mission to the wider Australian community.

By the time I was born, when the two major Lutheran churches in Australia had united, congregations had worshipped in English for 40-50 years. If you sat in the pews, you would have heard people speaking in heavy accents, the English of the "new" Australians. Today things have changed again, and as I look out across the church on a Sunday morning I can see people who've come from each continent.

Today as you walked into St Paul's, you may have noticed the row of flags placed about the courtyard windows. I counted 23 different flags, and I know for sure that we are missing some. It is much clearer across the churches in Australia today that Christianity transcends our cultures of origin. And our church is changing too, with the relationship we are forging with the Chinese Lutheran Church. We are seeking to be obedient to the call of God to welcome all people in the name of Christ. That's one of our core values as a congregation.





We are the people of God. All of us have been spiritually stateless, but we have been transformed by Jesus' death and resurrection into "a chosen people, a holy nation, God's special, treasured possession... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God." We are united by the Holy Spirit through the gift of faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, the great reconciler, so that we are no longer foreigners and strangers, first to God, and then to each other.

There are other barriers beyond race and culture. Poverty, educational level, health status and disability are other ways that we make judgements about who is in, and who's out. As a middle class church is an increasingly affluent area, we need to work hard so that we don't consciously exclude people who differ

from us in these ways too. God is no respecter of human origins or conditions when it comes to bestowing his gift of faith. May we be gracious and godly enough to grow and go with God in his mission of love to the world. Amen.