

Lent 1

If nothing else the Season of Lent is a time to reflect upon our identity: our identity as Christians, our identity as people of the Easter faith; our identity as members of West Hawthorn Uniting Church, even as Australians. Our readings today are about this question of what is our identity – and as we shall see, it can be a little tricky.

Let us begin with an obvious starting point – this famous passage from Deuteronomy in which in just a few short verses, Jewish history is recounted and Yahweh's place and role within it is established. A particular identity is affirmed.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction and oppression.” (26:5 ff)

The history then continues with what we know as the Exodus and how the Hebrew people received and entered into this land flowing with milk and honey. Indeed they are to recall this identity each year as they bring the first fruits of the harvest to God.

To this day, if nothing else, Jewish people know their identity. God saved them from oppression and bondage, formed them into a nation and gave them the land. Not much “identity” reflection required. But that is too simple. Identity is reduced to nationalism; being a particular people over and against other peoples. Indeed what of the Canaanites who lived in the land prior to the invasion; the indigenous people who gave up their land for this new people to be formed so that they could have their identity?

Of course this is our struggle too as Australians. What is our identity as we endeavour to incorporate into our story those who were here first, the indigenous people and those who were a part of the extension of the British Empire through the 19th and much of the 20th century; and then in later generations those who have come from all over this small planet of ours. Who are we as Australians?

A book that helped me with this is James Boyce's **1835** which has the subtitle “The conquest of Australia”. As Boyce shows, the Melbourne settlement began, with virtually no government sanction or oversight and there then ensued a land grab that overran and decimated the indigenous people of this area and beyond. The state, the British Crown, could not keep up with this invasion and just had to accept what we know now as the State of Victoria was occupied. As Boyce says

“Between 1835 and 1838 alone, more land and more people were conquered than in the preceding half century. By the end of the 1840's squatters had seized nearly twenty million hectares of the most productive and best watered aboriginal homelands, comprising most of the grasslands in what are now Victoria, NSW, South Australia and southern Queensland. It was ‘one of the fastest land occupations in the history of empires. In little more than a decade, the continental pinpricks which represented the totality of British occupation in 1835, became a sea of red.” (p xiii –xiv)

And so our identity as a nation was born – farmer, pastoralist, pioneer against the ruggedness of the Australian bush. We conquered a land and became a nation. We quoted Deuteronomy 26 “the Lord brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (26:9) But as Boyce so tellingly shows, this happened without any regard for the indigenous people, or if we did have regard for them – the vested interests unleashed in this great land grab overwhelmed the Crown which may have even wanted to do the right thing by Aboriginal people.

As a nation, only now we are beginning to turn back this invasion.

So is there anything we can learn from the treatment of indigenous people within Cana all of those years ago? Well, this question has long puzzled (and disturbed) Norm Habel, a Lutheran Old Testament scholar from Adelaide. Indeed he has written a book about it: ***The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies***. What he notes is that, yes, there is this view expressed in Deuteronomy 26 that the land was a gift from God and that the dispossession of the indigenous people was affirmed. However, Habel also notes there were other “land ideologies” evident in scripture. So, for example, in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis there is an immigrant ideology: the land is a host country that welcomes and integrates immigrants. So, even though Abraham is promised the land, he is welcomed by the inhabitants of the land and he in turn mediates blessing to these inhabitants. There are frequent treaties, covenants with these indigenous people. So in Gen 21:22-24 Abraham makes a covenant with Abimelech in which he swears “as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and the land.”

In other words there are a variety of biblical approaches to land – or really identity. Enter however, Jesus and Paul in our other readings today.

I would like to look at the temptation of Jesus – a familiar and well known incident in Christ’s life – through this lens of what do these temptations say about land, and this broader question of identity? Usually we consider the temptations in terms of the personal demands, temptations we might face - and the clear message is that we should not yield to sin; Christ didn’t. We could however, consider this story as a sort of charter about what a “child of God”, even the Son of Man, does about land. And I would suggest that in the process Jesus breaks any nexus with land and earthly rule.

The three temptations: turning stone into bread; the gift of glory and authority over all of the kingdoms of the world; and in the name of religion, the opportunity to perform a miracle that would prevent injury - relate to physical and bodily sustenance, political power and finally religious power. Jesus - by simply quoting from the scriptures – affirms that these dimensions of reality are important – but there are other more significant dimensions to his identity. One does not live by bread alone; we are to worship God and serve only God; and we are not to put God to the test – or see a spiritual dimension serving just our own needs. In other words, “identity” arises at a deeper level than just outwardly having food; or having power, political power and even religious or spiritual power. Identity concerns the inner life – that sense of peace, salvation or integrity. The temptations affirmed it was character and not trappings, that was at the heart of who Jesus was.

As Jesus hints at in his Sermon on the Mount teaching which we also heard today, it is the quality of the life lived and not the external things we may have or own which is important.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth , where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. “

Which brings us to Paul.

In this I want to refer to an interesting book by Selina O’Grady **And Man Created God: Kings, Cults and Conquests at the time of Jesus**. This is a fascinating and complex book about power and religion around the time of Jesus. Among the many questions it ponders is this one: why did Christianity prosper and thrive, when many other religious groups could equally have taken off, but didn’t? Why did Christianity indeed become the religion of the Roman Empire while Judaism suffered so much? In a word – O’Grady suggests the simple answer: Paul.

To simplify her argument, she suggests that the Jewish people were the most difficult of all the subjugated people of the Roman Empire. They did not compromise as to who was God. Yahweh was not in the Roman Pantheon; the Emperor himself certainly was not divine. (And these were also problems for the sect of Christianity.) However, it was about land and the temple that the greatest controversy arose – and the Jews were absolutely uncompromising. So from 70 AD on, the Romans indeed had had enough, and in the Jewish war, they systematically destroyed the Jewish state and the whole religious edifice based on the temple in Jerusalem.

Christians of course were caught up in all of this – but Paul had sown the seeds as to how they could survive, and as it happened, then thrive within Roman Empire. Paul was of course the apostle to the Gentiles – the non Jews. Paul was clear, one need not be a Jew before being a Christian. For Paul, Christianity was only about faith . . . and not works. So in our reading today from Romans, Paul says

“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” (10:10-11)

Simply put, no land was required; no temple was needed. Identity was formed through belief in God: faith; and not through inheritance, or external trappings or political power or conquest of a land. Your identity was between you and God. Jew and Greek were the same before God. According to O’Grady’s book – this suited the Romans down to the ground. There could be different ethnic and cultural groups across their vast empire; and they did not have to be all the same and linked to a particular place or one story of origin – as the Jews required. You were linked by faith in Christ.

For us today, on this first Sunday of Lent, we are asked to ponder who we are – and what does Jesus (and his passion and death) mean for us. What is our identity? Jesus’ temptation gives us a clue; the teaching of Paul perhaps helps, and certainly the experience of the ancient Hebrews affirms this an important question. As we today begin (again) this journey towards Easter – may we know our identity is involved with this man Jesus’ life, his so-called kingdom of heaven, his teaching of love, and the fact he was killed by religious and political forces (which he was tempted to use but didn’t); and that today, he still is relevant for us today. Enjoy your pilgrimage.