

Pushed to strange places

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 January, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Day of Mourning B

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Mark 1: 14-20; Contemporary Reading: “*The Hill We Climb*”ⁱ.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

The story goes of a conversation between a mother and child on a bus in Britain. To be precise, it was in Newport, Wales. The mother, wearing a hijab, was chatting to her son in another language. After five minutes of this, a man suddenly snapped: “*You’re in Britain, you should speak English.*” At this another passenger turned round and explained: “*We’re in Wales. And she is speaking Welsh.*”

Another story closer to home. Within a few days after the Cronulla riots in December 2005, a man with a dark complexion was walking in the Cronulla shopping centre, and an agitated young white man, yelled at him and said, “*why don’t you go back to where you come from ... go home.*” The dark man responded, “*I am home, I am a Dharawal man of the Eora Nation, I am Aboriginal.*” He continued, “*But you are welcome here.*”

In my relationship with Aboriginal people, welcome has been the first word spoken upon meeting them. There has been a ground-swell of confession by the second-peoples of Australia, that the welcome as extended by the First People of Australia has been abused.

The response to welcome has been violence and attempted genocide. And until recently, even school text books have hardly revealed the long history and culture of the Aboriginal People of this land, and it is with little surprise that there remains vast ignorance among the broad cross section of the Australian community of this ancient culture.

As we approach once again the 26th January, the 233rd anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet and the day of white settlement in this land we call Australia, we remember.

Some call this day, “Australia Day” that is a relatively recent development, others call it “The Day of Mourning”, while others call it “Invasion Day.”

So once again, the appropriateness of the date to celebrate the 26th January as Australia Day is heavily questioned once again.

It is with this short prequel of story and history, we can note that the stories from the scriptures that we’ve just heard have connection in our present context.

The stories that you have just heard from the Welsh lady dressed in a hijab and the Aboriginal man from Dharawal country, may leave you laughing with a degree of vicarious embarrassment, but at the same time admire the honesty and temerity of these truth tellers who acted with courage and risk taking.

That is what we are called to today, and the story of Jonah from the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel passage in Mark makes that same call.

The two passages of scripture are ones that are about being pushed into strange places. Both have a no-nonsense approach to telling the story and they are meant to make the hearer uncomfortable.

I must admit that every time I read these stories, I squirm in my seat. Being pushed into a strange place is a situation that most find familiar. I'd say that everybody in this congregation has been pushed into strange places.

Life does that to you. You are pushed away from the familiar and the routine, and pushed into the strange. God does that, and so does Jesus.

So God calls Jonah and we are pulled into this impossible story filled with mystery and metaphor. Jonah feels as if he is being pushed into a strange place. But that is the nature of call stories. The call is away from something and to something else.

There is an awakening from a short slumber of sameness, to a strong physical shaking that does not allow stillness, but indeed a response to move.

Nineveh is the place that Jonah is called despite his objections. What led to that was a litany of Jonah's objections to God's calling. When God said go east to Nineveh, Jonah went west to Tarshish, even to get on a boat to the chaos of sea travel, a place of dread in Jewish mythology and storytelling. A place where Jonah thought God was absent.

Jonah chose the opposite of God's presence. But God was there, and to cut a longer story short (read it for yourselves – the book of Jonah is not that long!)

After being thrown overboard, Jonah found himself in the belly of a big fish, God was there as well. We know the story well, and know that after Jonah's confession of faith within the belly of the fish, God prompted the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land.

Jonah was called into a strange place and eventually did what God called him to do.

For the disciples, the story is entirely different. Their response was immediate.

What took Jonah a few chapters to finally take up God's call, the future disciples of Jesus took up a single sentence. That is the way it is with the Gospel according to Mark. It is known as "*the gospel in a hurry.*" It is only 16 chapters long and the word "immediately" occurs 33 times. The gospel was written with a sense of urgency, proclaiming that the time to respond to God is now, this very moment, immediately.

Jesus met Simon and Andrew and James and John on their home turf doing what was most familiar to them. They were fishing. The imagery of disciples fishing is firmly etched into our minds, and the stories are familiar.

Jesus says to them (and to everyone, actually): "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" Then Jesus said to them, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*"

That seems to be enough information for the disciples to immediately leave their nets and follow Jesus. As we listen to this story, we wonder what will happen next, because it is not every day that people leave their livelihood at the prompt of a stranger.

Many interpretations of this story take us into the space of leaving our comfortable and predictable ways of life and encouraging others to do the same. That seems to be the tenor of the story. Many use this passage of scripture of ticking the box of accepting Jesus into one's life and encouraging others to do the same. Many use this passage as a blue-print for filling church pews and having alter calls.

But I believe the story of the disciples' call has strong tones of political activism. It is a snub to the Roman Empire. It is saying to the Roman Empire: Take this! Because we are changing! We are moving into the strange place of putting our lives in danger and objecting to what you are telling us to do. This is the definitive call to oppose the powers that be.

To quote from another source (and I'm quoting because I couldn't put it better myself:

By the time Jesus starts recruiting disciples, the fishing industry in Palestine is fully under the control of the Roman Empire. Caesar owns every body of water, and all fishing is state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite. Fishermen can't obtain licenses to fish without joining a syndicate, most of what they catch is exported — leaving local communities impoverished and hungry, deprived of the dietary staple they've depended on for centuries — and the Romans collect exorbitant taxes, levies, and tolls each time fish are sold. To catch even one fish outside of this exploitative system is illegal.

I don't know if things have changed that much!

Debie Thomas (who I quote many times) - speaking of Journeying with Jesus, says these words:

*In this context, what is Jesus saying when he invites the four fishermen to leave their nets and "fish for people?" In his book, *Binding the Strong Man*, theologian and activist Ched Myers (some of you may have heard of him – it would be good to have him here at Pitt St at some stage) argues that we narrow and distort the radical nature of this text when we interpret it as an invitation to issue altar calls. Jesus isn't talking about filling pews or baptismal fonts; he is hearkening back to the Hebrew Scriptures, in which "the hooking of fish" is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and the powerful (Ezekiel 29:4).*

In other words, when Jesus asks Simon, Andrew, James, and John to "fish for people," he is asking them to cast aside the existing social order of power, privilege, exploitation, and domination, and to help usher in God's kingdom — a kingdom of justice for the poor, mercy for the oppressed, and abundance for all. He is, in Myers words, inviting commoners "to a fundamental reordering of socio-economic relationships," to a new and God-honouring way of life that blesses all people.

We can use the imagination that God gives us to plant ourselves into the story, and ask the question, if Jesus were to ask the same question of us, what would our response be, and would we do it immediately?

Would we be willing to go and leave our familiar places, our familiar ways of thinking and expression, our familiar life-styles, and go to the strange places that Jesus is calling?

What is that strange place for you?

With the 26th January just the day after tomorrow, the call is to revise and to re-think what that day means for us. Even the relatively conservative institution of Cricket Australia is not calling that day Australia Day, out of respect for the First Peoples of this land. They are sticking with calling it by its date, the 26th of January. Even Cricket Australia is doing that! Conservative Cricket Australia is doing that!

The activist organisations of GetUp and change.org have offered invitations to join the story of reconciliation and communion with the First People. I invite you, if you don't belong already, to get onto their web pages and put in a click for "Yes, we support the change of date" (that is, if you do support it).

The call by many of the First People of Australia is to join their story. Karyn has already started telling the story. It was when Karyn and I were leaving Dubbo, the Aboriginal employees of Uniting bid us a farewell and gave us a blessing. It was a very emotional time for both Karen and me.

They were the Tabbagah people of Wiradjuri Country and they said that over the past five years, we had made story together. We had been on journeys together, therefore we'd made story together with them, and that story would continue, they said to us. They gave gifts (the rhythm sticks) then blessed us in our continued journey and story making.

Pushed to strange places?

Called into community - whether at Nineveh, into Aboriginal story or the community of Christ - are all strange places away from status quo and popular existence.

That is where God is.

In the strange place where we are called.

So be it.

ⁱ *The Hill We Climb* - written by Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate, recited at the inauguration of USA President Biden on 19 January 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38Rn5WULjmc> or <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a35279603/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript/>