

Resident Aliens

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 July, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Pentecost 5A

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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

If I were to say to you that we are living as resident aliens, you may be quite puzzled with that claim. But living in our present context is taking on a sense of long term, rather than short term. The existence of being home-bound most of the time, not being able to meet en-masse, having endless zoom-time gatherings for whatever reason, and not being able to even go to a movie, a show, a football match, seems eons ago when we could rub shoulders with even a stranger.

This time last year, our present condition could never have been imagined. After five months of COVID-19, we are hardly describing our time as being extra-ordinary any more. Social distancing and regular hand-cleaning appears to be normal behaviour.

Living in the world of COVID-19 has imposed a standard of behaviour for the safety and health of the entire population. The other day when going to my local BUPA office at the Penrith Plaza, I was asked a number of standard questions to ensure my allowing to enter into the office space. Something normal, we're used to that, also acceptable in our present situation. For the umpteenth time upon entering the Penrith Shopping Plaza, I sanitised my hands once again.

A couple of months ago, the ritual of ensuring public health and cleanliness, we could interpret as living as if a foreigner in our own land. Assumed habits of the past have been altered from the advice of medical experts and politicians, and if not observed, certainly in our local shopping centre, it is often enforced by the majority of the community. People scowl at you if you don't even wipe down your shopping trolley! Social distancing and constant cleaning of hands and equipment, are now a part of life. The sense of being a resident alien seems real amidst the rules that would have been seen as alien at the beginning of this year. Yes, we are living in strange and alien times.

A number of years ago, I bought a book called Resident Aliens. It was written by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Stanley Hauerwas is an abrasive, prophetic and witty Christian scholar. William Willimon is a renowned commentator on the contemporary church.

The book is essentially about the increasing irrelevance of the Christian church in the USA, so they're speaking out of their own context. And despite its once popular and accepted identity, the membership are now viewed as being resident aliens. Being a part of a church community is seen as rare.

Being the church in the USA, and indeed, in Australia, is a tough gig. The percentage of the population being a part of the church in Australia, according to the last Census, was less than 20%. As a matter of fact, it's probably closer to ten. The challenge to find relevance has been the call for many decades, and the church is in process at the moment of trying to re-invent itself.

One comment by a reader was made of the book *Resident Aliens* states that the authors:

offer a vision of the church as a colony, a holy nation, a people, a family standing for sharply focused values in a devalued world.

So, I'd like you to hold onto that image of Resident Alien while we look briefly at the scriptures.

The Hebrew scripture from Genesis that we've just heard is taken in the context of the recent death of Abraham. You will remember Abraham. He was promised to be the parent of a nation and that his ancestors would number the stars in the sky. Upon telling his wife Sarah of this promise, she laughed and scoffed at the thought, as she had never had children and was beyond child-giving age. As promised, Isaac was born, and it was up to him to ensure that the original purpose and promise would continue.

So the Genesis story of finding a wife for Isaac is one where we are meant to read and hear with our tongue firmly entrenched next to our cheek, and if you can, take a very large pinch of salt as well. This is a story that you hear and upon its completion, is meant to leave you thinking, "*Nice story, did that really happen?*" Women of today would roll their eyes to the back of their heads, and say, "*Yeah right, as if!!*"

Being asked by a complete stranger your family history and then given a nose ring and bracelets, would leave most today questioning harassing behaviour, social boundaries being impeded on and inappropriate relations being impeded upon as well. This is meant to be a far-fetched story that would leave even the original hearers with raised eyebrows.

But the Jews loved to tell stories with that sort of humour. One incident after another in the story would leave the listener giggling, if not raucously laughing at the unfolding of events. What young woman of the Middle East would boldly take up the invitation to offer water to a stranger from another land, and then offer to feed his smelly camels as well!? You've gotta be kidding! What family would take up the offer of a foreigner to take their daughter to another land and to marry a complete foreign stranger!??

Sure, the deal reeked of fiscal profit. That was the way it was. It was a no brainer for a family who would have been quite happy to let go of their daughter for a price. But is that what the story is all about? I think it's more. Is it that this story is about breaking boundaries and trusting God? The story revolves around several characters, each contributing to the purpose of the story.

This is a story of how God works out divine promises through the interrelationship of many people doing good but not exceptional things. They're small things which add up to something big. It is a story about many characters whose collective participation brings about one significant act — namely, the carrying on of God's promise to a new generation.

It is also a story about the faith and trust of a servant in a strange land who was willing to follow a hare-brained idea of finding a suitable woman to marry his master. And also, a young woman being willing and courageous to take up being a resident alien away from the familiarity of home.

The Hebrew Scriptures have countless stories about removal from home and taking up residency in a foreign land. You can count them yourself. We are constantly reminded that God's people are always on the move.

The familiar words, "*How can we sing our song in this strange land*" is said once more, and finds relevance over and over and over again for the people of God, then and now.

So as we turn to the gospel passage, we hear the invitation to dwell with God and find rest.

In the gospel the familiar words, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"

Another version says, "*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythm of grace. I will not lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you will learn to live freely and lightly.*"

You might already know that this version is using Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this text from *The Message*.

"Recover your life!" What a welcome invitation, and one many people who belong to congregations the world over desperately need to hear. We not only live in a world of busyness and obligations that we forget to slow down and breathe. And we also forget why.

Though it has come at a terrible and tragic cost for many – for many that price has been huge - COVID-19 has strangely prompted a slowing down and a revaluing of what really matters. Amidst social alienation, is it not true that the importance of community and care for others has been realised? Is it not true that a reprioritising of values has been provoked? Is it not true that the church has rediscovered the meaning of being neighbour even as resident aliens?

When Jesus call us to rest, it is not only a call the work-worn and the care-worn. Jesus calls those who have been burdened by the rigid demands of strict religious creed and regulations and statements, (sound familiar?), to come away with him where the air is lighter and faith is life-giving. Jesus shows us the ways to "*unforced rhythms of grace*".

Understanding what religious freedom looked like in Jesus' time, might help us understand what it means for us today. We need to look at the history. Jesus never called for the abolishment of the Law. Rather, Jesus' message was that love of God and others was at least as important as upholding the law — if not more so. While the Law was important (of course it's important), it was never meant to become more urgent than the needs of neighbour or the pressing invitations to relationship. Let us be mindful of our motivations to being the authentic people of God. Let us be real with ourselves about our relationship with God.

Jesus calls us to rest, so our bodies will be free for the work of serving others; we are called to free our spirits of constraint, so we will be free to love generously and extend mercy.

The promise that all who follow Jesus will “*recover your life*”, will mean one thing to the addict and another to the recently unemployed; it will mean one thing to the poor and homeless and something else entirely to the frazzled and stressed suburban parents. It will mean one thing to the frightened and misguided who stock up on toilet paper at the local supermarket - and another to the exhausted front-line service provider. This passage extends challenge on the one hand and comfort on the other.

We are all resident aliens, whether as the servant with the hare-brained idea, or the courageous young woman from ancient Middle East, or whether as the religiously burdened people of Jesus’ time, or whether as a people of 21st century COVID-19 times.

Indeed, also the faithful followers of Jesus who search for authenticity and truthfulness, we too are resident aliens who continue to wonder, as have the people of God for a long time. Being the resident alien is the calling from God to relationship and the calling from Jesus to come and rest for a while.

Jesus calls us to be a resident alien with Him.

May God bless you as you continue to be resident aliens.