

(Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:[1-9]10-18)

The new year is often a time for reflection – we look back on the past and we also look to the future. Many of us might yearn for the good old days. Let us reflect on the things that we yearn for, and the kind of things that we wish were different.

The reality is that things were not all that perfect in the good old days:

I remember the Christmases we had when I was a child. I have fond memories of the family gatherings at my maternal grandparent's home. There were threepeppercorns in the pudding, all the family was together and I had all my maternal cousins to play with. We had fabulous food and sleepy afternoons. But the reality was often quite different than my fond memories. In Perth it was often 40 degrees on Christmas day, people's tempers were also hot.

When we visited my grandmother during the year, we often sat for a meal in the kitchen which was in the middle of the house and always seemed to be cool. At Christmas we sat in the dining room at the back of the house. It was a fibro add-on, and just seemed to get hotter and hotter in the baking heat. There was nearly always an altercation between my Auntie Ann and her husband Harry, and then in the afternoon all the children had to sit quietly on the lounge room floor while my grandfather listened to classical music.

Despite this I looked forward to the Christmas gathering, so that as Christmas approached each year we either forgot what it was like the previous year, or maybe we hoped against hope that this year would be better.

This Christmas, I was in a very peculiar situation. Most of you will know that I have been in a protracted custody and access litigation with my son's mother and her partner. During 2010, their relationship broke down, and out of the blue, the ex-partner invited me to join her for Christmas lunch with her and the children. She then invited my son's mother as well, so we were all together for Christmas lunch. We were of course on our best behaviour, but unbeknownst to me, David's mother had had an aggravated violence Order out on the ex-partner just 2 weeks earlier. It was a very odd day, but I think the children will have very fond memories of us all being together despite the undercurrent.

Today, we are presented with two apparently opposing perspectives in our readings. Firstly, Jeremiah wishing for a return to the past – the good old days – when everyone was

together – the twelve tribes of Israel reunited – one big happy family in a world of strangers and of difference

Let us have a closer look at the Israelites experience of apartness and of their yearnings to be back together. The story we have in Jeremiah tells us that there were 10 of the 12 tribes taken away into captivity. The 12 tribes representing the 12 sons of Jacob. However, the tribe of Levi did not have a distinctive area of land within the nation – they were a priestly tribe and performed religious and ritual functions. To make up for this the Israelite's (descendants of Jacob) believed that descendants of the two sons of Joseph constituted the two tribes.

Jeremiah was longing for a time when all the lost tribes would return and there would be a united Israel again. The reality was however that they were never really truly united – they were tribes and like all tribal situations there were conflicts. Even the stories that we have about their forebears shows that all was not well. There were squabbles about inheritance, and we all know the story for example of Jacob and Esau, and how Jacob tricked his older brother out of his inheritance, and it seems that the same type of favouritism occurred between Joseph's off-spring. You will of course remember the jealousies Joseph's brother had towards him because he was his father's favourite. The good old days of Israel were not as rosy. These stories about the antecedents of the 12 tribes come from a time centuries if not millennia before the Babylonian captivity. Nevertheless what comes across very clearly is a kind of ethnocentricity and exclusiveness, which also comes across strongly in the psalm.

In reality, the 12 tribes were never restored, and we still talk about the 10 lost tribes of Israel, with some religious sects claiming to be one or other of the lost tribes even in this day.

The tendency remains in the church to take the same exclusive approach – of being special or set apart – rather than to see the gospel as primarily about inclusion. The Ephesians reading is a little problematic in this regard as it has been used by some protestant traditions to promulgate exclusion in the name of the predestined chosen people. It is steeped in religious jargon such as “redemption”, “salvation”, and being “marked with the seal”. The Calvinists certainly seized on these concepts to define those who were considered “in” and those who were “out”.

In closer reflection, however, what is being defined is inclusion rather than exclusion. The people of Ephesus were being told – it is not what you have done, but it is all about God's rich grace – it is a mystery – not fully explainable, and so we are only getting a glimpse of this mystery – it is a feeling for the “hope that we hold”. The underpinning idea is not about exclusiveness but about God “gathering all things”. They were reminded that they were the first to set their hope in Christ, so presumably there are others to come and presumably “all” if God is truly gathering all things.

This is in contrast to the Jeremiah reading and the Psalm and probably the contrast between the fundamentals of aspects (though not all) the Jewish Scriptures and some of the Christian canon - no longer a focus on a specific ethnic group in a specific location, but a move to a focus on all people in all places.

The New Testament message gives no opportunity to reflect on a glorious but lost past – the focus is rather on a future which is full of inclusion and open to all.

We are a mixed bunch here at Pitt Street Uniting Church, with an array of beliefs and understandings of Scripture. The one thing that we do however have in common is a willingness to allow difference – different cultures, genders, sexualities, abilities, and yes, even different theologies. When we read the emphatic but beautiful opening paragraphs of what we call John's gospel, some of us may have difficulties with Jesus as the only son of God. I have to admit, I feel some relief when I see in the New international version of the Bible, footnotes which pluralise the concept and state that the meaning is not 100% clear, referring to Jesus as "one of the sons of God". However the need to qualify or explain really does not matter because there are as many theologies in this church as there are people in the pews. "The essential message is: To all who received him he gave power to become children of God"

I would like to finish with a reflection of the words of a Powderfinger song which we used in the Mardi Gras float some years because I believe that it captures the essence of the ground on which we stand:

This will be an uncertain time for us, my Love
I can hear the echo of your voice in my head
Singing my love

I can see you face in my hands, my love
I have been blessed by your grace and care, my love

There's a place for us – sitting here waiting for the Sun
And it calls me back into the safe arms that I know.

For every step you're further away from me, my love
I grow more unsteady on my feet –
Singing my love

There's a place for us – sitting here waiting for the Sun
And it calls me back into the safe arms that I know.

Des Perry
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