

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Australia Day

26th January, 2014.

“My Love is Otherwise”

Readings: Deuteronomy 8:5-14a; Psalm 125; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:1-12.

A Long Weekend in Search of an Identity

*When gallant Cook from Albion sail'd,
to trace wide oceans o'er,
true British courage bore him on,
'till he landed on our shore.
Then here he raised Old England's flag,
the standard of the brave;
with all her faults we love her still,
"Britannia rules the wave!"*

- Peter Dodds McCormick (c. 1878)

That is verse two of the song from which is taken our national anthem. The song *Advance Australia Fair* was written in the mid 1870s by a Scot named Peter Dodds McCormick because he thought that Australia lacked songs with a suitable national fervour. Yet, clearly an emerging nationalism at that time was still tempered by affection for the ‘old country’, as his words suggest.

In 1984, the Australian Government accepted only two of the original five verses to create the National Anthem, and even these two were significantly edited to make them socially acceptable. Indeed, the first verse was originally ‘Australia’s sons let us rejoice’, which would be hardly acceptable today.

Of course, at the time of writing this song, Australia (as a sovereign nation) did not exist; we were instead a collection of six self-obsessed colonies, which the promoters of Federation, such as Sir Edmund Barton (who was baptised in this church and later practiced at the bar nearby), sought to overcome.

We Anglicans inherited this colonial self-obsession, which is reflected in the tribalism of our church governance with its structure of provinces and dioceses. Indeed, it is also echoed in the difficulties we have in encouraging much cooperation with each other – even today!

By the early twentieth century cultural attitudes had begun to change. The following famous lines were penned in 1904:

*The love of field and coppice,
of green and shaded lanes.
Of ordered woods and gardens
is running in your veins,
strong love of grey-blue distance
brown streams and soft dim skies
I know but cannot share it,
my love is otherwise.*

*I love a sunburnt country
a land of sweeping plains...
(and you know the rest)*

- Dorothea Mackellar (1904)

Dorothea Mackellar had learnt to love this land and expressed it in verse. In the poem *My Country* she described the great diversity and contradictions that exist in our land. While she described these features in terms of the physical landscape it was no less visible in the social landscape as well.

Dorothea is close to us here at St James' for the image of her brother Keith oversees our activities and his image is the face of St George in the stained glass window to my right. This window is a memorial to Keith Mackellar, who was killed in July 1900 during the Boer War. He was part of that transitional generation still committed to the needs of Great Britain but who was also a product of our emerging nation, which was only created in the year following his death.

Through the twentieth century; two world wars, Korea and Vietnam; the Great Depression and a number of other financial crises; our waxing and waning sporting achievements; economic good-fortune through the availability of numerous natural resources; disasters because of droughts, cyclones, floods and fire; and perpetual immigration and a growing cultural and social diversity have shaped us and made us who we are today.

The nature of Australian culture and society is complex and unresolved. As noted in our national anthem, we are a country made up of people from many nations; which is likewise observed in the policy of multiculturalism. Yet we also have blind-spots about many aspects of our history, customs and values. Indeed, our anthem makes no mention of indigenous Australians, social justice, or God. Likewise, just as many in the United States cannot accept the destructiveness of their love of guns, many in Australia cannot see what the love of alcohol is doing to us. We are still a work in progress, and perhaps that is the way it should be, for we are far from perfect.

Living in a Land Down Under

The tradition of Australia Day is a recent one. It was not until 1935 that all the Australian states and territories marked the date, and it was not until 1994 that it became a national public holiday. Indeed, the 26th January is not the date that Captain Arthur Phillip first arrived here; that event occurred a week earlier in Botany Bay. It was, in fact, the day he first arrived to set up camp at Sydney Cove.

Moreover, the proclamation of the Colony of New South Wales happened almost two weeks later on 7th February; upon which date the British ‘rule of law’ was officially established here – perhaps a greater cause for celebration! The proclamation also included a direction from King George III that the colonists should attempt to engage and live in harmony with the aboriginal people; a policy that Arthur Phillip pursued.

One thing we need to realise about ourselves is that, apart from the Aboriginal people, we Australians have all come from somewhere else – we are all boat people. Convicts and jailers, free-settlers, explorers, Chinese gold prospectors, Afghan cameleers, post-war immigrants and refugees; all have their origins in another land. This is not a new story, but it is nevertheless one that lies at the heart of our own. As the writer of the Book Deuteronomy acknowledged of the immigrant Hebrews:

“For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

So take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.” (Deuteronomy 8:7-11)

This was written several thousand years ago, but is applicable to us today. Indeed, we too have failed to remember the Lord our God! As Australians we have lived well, but we have not done religion very well.

Catholics, Catholics Ring the Bell!

There is, after all, much ambiguity surrounding religion in Australia such as the overt sectarianism of the first one hundred and fifty years after European settlement. This resulted in deep political and social divisions between Protestant and Catholic and an accompanying tension between those of English, Irish and Scottish ethnic origin. Much of this broke down as a result of inter-ethnic marriage and later on from post Second World War immigration that made such ethnic divisions far too complex to be sustained to any general degree.

As a nation born in the enlightenment, we have been all too keen to maintain a division between the secular and religious perspectives of life. This has pervaded much of society to the extent that we tend to fragment our lives between family, work, cultural and spiritual activities, resulting in one having little effect on the other. Yet it is dangerous; for example, when a person's faith ceases to have an effect on their approach to work or family life it is likely that ethical dysfunction will result.

On the other hand, as religion has become more marginal to our day-to-day lives some expressions of it have made the mistake of slipping into a mindless fundamentalism and/or exclusivism to defend itself, thus further alienating its place in society.

The writer of Deuteronomy described a land of great blessing – a place of beauty and abundance – to which God led his people. This is an image and a hope that has motivated people in all times to seek a new world in which to live and flourish. In this respect Australia has been a place of hope for many people down through history - leaving behind poverty, economic hardship, persecution or war to find a refuge of peace and prosperity.

For those who've come across the seas we've boundless plains to share!" - Australia has often been a place of generosity and hospitality, but it is not always so - even in our own times.

To Us Remains the Kingdom

We are reminded to *'take care that you do not forget the Lord your God'*. How then should we live? As Christians we are encouraged to make a difference to the world in which we live. We are called to bring God's loving presence into people's lives and transform them, which is also about integrating the spiritual life with the world in which we live. Indeed, both a person's 'outward' and 'inner' life need to work together if we are ever to grasp the concept of the 'peace of God that passes all understanding'.

The clue is in the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading, for blessed are those who know their need for God rather than the need for power, or wealth or status; for they will receive the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not a place, but rather the presence of God's love in humanity and it is this love that gives us the power to change and become better people.

The answer is not to be found in where we have come from, nor the tribe to which we belong, nor in our political, philosophical or religious allegiances. We need to focus on love in action, as demonstrated in the life of Jesus, if we are to become the loving and transforming community that God wants us to be.