

Third Sunday after Epiphany (& Australia Day ‘Eve’): CCSY, 25 January

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Ps 62; 1 Cor 7:29-31; John 1:43-51

It’s an interesting time, geo-politically, to be preparing to observe a national day. Recent news bulletins have set before us potentially the best, and arguably the worst, aspects of nation-statehood: the apparent rebirth of hope for many within and beyond the United States with Barak Obama’s inauguration as President; and the horrendous consequences of intractable conflict between Israel and Palestine.

What does it mean to celebrate Australia Day at such a moment, and how might doing so in the context of our gathering for worship, as those who – in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, ‘have no abiding city’ (13:14) – how might this context form and inform our celebrations?

The biblical witness to the relationship of God’s people to the land is typically complex. In one sense the entire covenant with Israel is predicated upon particularity of place; but from the outset, in the promise made to Abraham, possession of this land is not to be an end in itself, but rather, that by it ‘all nations of the earth might bless themselves’ (Gen 12:3b). This vision – echoed in Isaiah’s prophecy, and indeed in the more universalist text of Jonah – sits in some tension with the narratives of dispossession of the peoples of Canaan: a driving out in which the divine right arm is, from our vantage point, problematically implicated.

The creation narratives, of course, describe the relationship between humankind and the land primarily in terms of stewardship, rather than possession, and in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, the writer reminds Israel that God is the only landlord: ‘the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine [says the Lord]; with me you are but aliens and tenants’ (Lev 25:23) – a fundamental premise which determines how one must therefore treat the indigenous, the sojourner, and the citizen alike. Indeed, according to this code, and the prophetic literature, the health of Israelite society is to be reckoned by how its weakest and most dependent members fare: the poor, the widow, the fatherless, the newcomer, the labourer.

That same sense of having stewardship over non-ultimate realities sees St Paul, anticipating the imminent return of Christ, exhorting the Corinthian church to ‘hang loose’ from any deep sense of attachment to the present form of this world in our second reading. And in today’s gospel, Simon and Andrew, James and John, are quick to travel light as disciples of the one who calls them into citizenship of the kingdom of heaven – that ‘other country’ of Cecil Spring-Rice’s patriotic hymn text, whose pride is suffering, and whose paths are peace.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m as keen as the next person to see that battling underdog Jelena Dokic carry the last Aussie flag into the second week of the tennis! But, in ways more and less trivial, in sport as in politics, we are constantly reminded of the ugly side of tribalism: its fearful insecurity and violent othering.

‘O God who made this ancient land . . . grant we may guard its gen’rous gifts . . . in your great name may we proclaim ‘Advance Australia fair!’ So we sang of our stewardship of this common wealth, in that lesser known second verse of the national anthem. There’s a rather nice ambiguity in the word ‘fair’ here, I think: ‘fair’, as in ‘beauty rich and rare’, is the most obvious sense; but ‘fair’ also, one might suggest, in the sense of that good old Aussie instinct of a ‘fair go’ for all.

In his inauguration speech, President Obama was not shy about reaffirming the greatness of his nation; but he was careful to set out the criteria by which such greatness might be measured: stewardship and justice chief among them. He spoke eloquently of remembering one's identity, of remaining faithful to the ideals of forbears and to founding documents as keepers of their legacy, and of carrying it forward for future generations, using new instruments to cultivate abiding values in changing circumstances. It would be hard to find a better account of what the church understands by the stewardship of tradition.

Our own anthem speaks of wealth for toil, but "a nation cannot prosper long", Obama reminds us, "when it favours only the prosperous." Success is determined not so much by the size of an economy as its reach: "on our ability", as he put it, "to extend opportunity to . . . [all] – not out of charity, but because it is the surest route to our common good." So too security is less a function of the power available to solve a problem than of the justness of the cause taken up.

In his Australia Day media release, our Archbishop encourages us to feel a certain sense of pride this Australia Day, being the first since the parliamentary apology, given the possibility for renewed relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians which that action has created. Perhaps this has been part of our national 'setting aside of childish things' to which Obama enjoined his similarly young nation in the words of St Paul, in order to meet the challenge of what he described as a 'new era of responsibility'.

And yet, in these Sundays after Epiphany, we hesitate to put away all things childish – or, at least, all things child-like – mindful of the child in whom those God-given promises of unconditional dignity and regard he referred to are revealed to us, and who came to teach that unless one receives the kingdom as a child one cannot enter it, for it is to such as these it belongs.

As we reflected with the staff of the School when they returned to work last Thursday, it is so often a child who calls us to this new responsibility: be it the Christ child, the eternal Son of the one he called Father; or the innocent children of Gaza; or the child character in Baz Luhrmann's latest epic; or our own children, grandchildren, and students; or the son of that man who less than 60 years ago might not have been served in his local restaurant, who grew up to become the 44th President of the United States.

'Australians all let us rejoice for we are young and free.'

May our collective youthfulness be of just such a quality as this; may our freedom, revealed and shaped by our sharing at this table, be expressed in advancing justice for all who would likewise share the abundance of this land, especially the most vulnerable; and may we rejoice to follow empty-handed the call of him in whom we know ourselves to be first and foremost children of God, whose peaceable kingdom knows no borders.

Richard Treloar
Christ Church South Yarra