

### Epiphany 3: CCSY, 24 January 2010

Neh 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Ps 19:1-6; 1 Cor 12:12-31a; Lk 4:14-21

I've always been tickled by the ambiguity of the last line of our national anthem: 'Advance Australia Fair'. If you didn't have the text in front of you, and hadn't heard that refrain in its context, then you could be forgiven for wondering whether 'fair' was spelled 'f-a-i-r', or 'f-a-r-e'. If the latter, then being berated by Sam Kekovich in between sets of tennis to eat lamb on Tuesday [26 January] becomes slightly more tolerable, as long as you're not a vegetarian! If the former, does f-a-i-r mean fair as in 'beautiful' or fair as in 'just'?

Historian Benedict Anderson argues that – in an exercise not unlike the use of an extended metaphor by Paul to form community in our second reading – nations have to be imagined, because they consist of numerous members who do not know each other, yet share what he calls 'the image of their communion'.<sup>1</sup> This image might be biological, as in Paul's case, or even biographical, as has been said of biblical Israel, for example:

conceived in the days of Abraham; its miraculous birth took place with the . . .  
parting of the Red Sea; then came a long period of childhood and restless  
adolescence in the wilderness; and finally adulthood was approached with the  
conquest of Canaan.<sup>2</sup>

Born in exile, however, the recurring shadow of displacement "is construed as an essential rift in the nation's biography, as if the journey through the land of the other were indispensable to the emergence of Israel . . ."<sup>3</sup>

In the context of this extended metaphor, or imagining of nationhood, we encounter Nehemiah in our first reading: an exiled Jew who was granted leave from the Persian Court to return to Jerusalem in order to oversee Judah's rebuilding exercise. Its walls were in ruins from a series of sieges and sackings which had left the city decimated.

We pick up the story in the fifth century BCE at an opening ceremony of sorts, as the city is rededicated. This very long service consisted of reading the law – Torah: lengthy passages mainly from what we would know as the books of Exodus and Leviticus: pity the poor scribe, Ezra, rostered on to read that day!

We're told the people wept as the law, better translated perhaps as 'teaching', was being read, and assuming this sorrow was born of something other than fatigue or boredom, we can reflect on the impact on that congregation of being reminded of the story of their origins. Recited for hours in the blazing sun at the refurbished Water Gate, this account clearly has something to do with 'place'. But as the hearers look to reclaim their sense of nationhood – to recapture the image of their fragmented communion – the thing that moves them to tears has not to so much do with the walls they've just rebuilt, as with the promise of their identity as God's people by virtue of nothing other than God's gracious calling.

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<sup>1</sup> As cited by Ilana Pardes, in *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

In a few minutes Max Nelson will embody this for us at the font, our own 'Water Gate', which sounds a bit like a political scandal – and, in a sense, it is! I'm sure in the arms of his adoring grand-mother [The Revd Jenny Nelson] he won't be moved to tears, but the rest of us may well be, if we really attend to what is being promised – by God and by his godparents – and if we can grasp the significance of what this rite says about our own primary and collective identity as God's children.

The passage from Nehemiah ends with that day being declared a kind of national holiday for the Province of Yehud, as Judah was known in the Persian empire: a holy day on which – yes – to eat lamb and drink the good stuff, provided those who don't have the resources to do so also have something to celebrate, and something to celebrate with: 'Advance Yehudi fair', as it were.

Not surprisingly Paul, schooled in Jerusalem a few centuries later at the feet of the Rabbi Gamaliel, and Jesus, worshipping at synagogue in Nazareth, share this vision of how identity is formed: a truly Levitical instinct that a society is to be judged on how its weakest members fare – that's f-a-r-e, as in 'get on'.

As a light to the nations in the vision of Isaiah, Israel is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed; to manifest the Lord's gracious will and favour towards all people, starting with those most in need of that assurance.

It's a vocation boldly assumed by Luke's Jesus, and inescapably thrust upon the baptised of Corinth by Paul: if one suffers, all suffer; if one is honoured, all rejoice. That's how this body corporate is to be imagined; that's the image of communion we're asked to share with friends and strangers alike in the kingdom that has no borders to protect or expand, in the common weal that is experienced as such – that is, as being held in common and as weal, or well-being – indeed that can only be experienced and described as such when good news is delivered concretely to the poor, and the captive – who, in Australia incidentally, is thirteen times more likely to be Indigenous than non-Indigenous – is set free.

How, I wonder, would we judge ourselves by those standards as a nation? And how, more locally as a faith-community in the business of baptising people into this challenging vocation – do we sit with that index of our health?

As we turn to face our Water Gate – as this foundational image of our communion as church is enacted in our midst, and we hear again God's gracious covenant with us in the waters of the font – may we be reminded of the story of our origins: who and whose we are.

And in the gift and promise of this identity – one that cannot be claimed or held apart from the need we have of one another – may we rejoice to advance in every place the fair kingdom which Jesus died and lived proclaiming.

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