

REFLECTION

On a flight from Sydney, a well-off white skinned lady, found her allotted seat next to a dark -skinned indigenous man. She called the cabin crew attendant and complained about her seating. 'What seems to be the problem Madam?' asked the attendant. 'Can't you see?' she said. 'You've sat me next to an indigenous guy. I can't possibly sit next to him. Find me another seat!' 'Please calm down Madam,' the flight attendant replied. 'The flight is full today, but I'll go and see if we have any other seats.' The attendant returned with the news for the woman. 'Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. However, we do have one seat in business class.'

Before the lady had a chance to answer, the attendant continued, 'It is unusual to make this kind of upgrade, and I had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person.' The attendant then turned to the indigenous man and said: 'So if you'd like to get your things, Sir, I have your seat ready for you up the front.' At which point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the indigenous guy walks up to first class at the front of the plane.

Well, here we are looking at the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The title of this story is 'the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector' is a little misleading. Although the two characters are a Pharisee and a tax collector, the parable itself is addressed to 'some who trust in themselves that they were righteous and who regarded others with contempt' (v.1).

An interesting picture can be worth a thousand words, but in the hands of Jesus words became pictures. These 'parables' are stories that answer big questions. They give us snapshots of the Kingdom of God which show us how we are to relate.

In this week's gospel snapshot, the good-living, well-meaning Pharisee and the tax collector are set up as ideal types of the 'acceptable' vs. the 'other.' The contrast couldn't be sharper.

The Pharisee examines himself and finds no fault with himself. The tax collector allows God to examine him and throws himself on the bar of God's justice – and receives mercy. Ironically, the Pharisee treats God as a debt collector and the tax collector, who IS a debt collector, treats God as a Saviour.

The Pharisee does live a faithful life. He obeys the letter of the Law. He prays. He fasts. He tithes. He studies the ways of the law. These all seem like plusses in his pedigree. But the Pharisee's 'prayer' was not a prayer at all. He did not come to God with a spirit that stood humbly before God in acknowledgment of a gracious gift that only God could offer.

Like many he had been waiting for years for the long-promised Messiah who would come and open their eyes and bring freedom. But there was one problem. The leaders of the day were weary and so used to nothing happening that they simply sat in their rocking horse chairs of contentment, waiting for the Messiah as they imagined him to be, to come.

The only time true prayer was offered in this parable was by the tax collector. He didn't talk of his gifts and graces. This surprise 'person of the day' in this parable is, once again, one who has been classified by the 'in crowd' as one of those who is an outsider. Yet he addresses God face first. He pleads, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' No excuses. No explanations. He confesses his inadequacies to God, while seeking God's forgiveness and acceptance.

It seems he has an insight into a sacrificial life to which

the new Messiah calls his followers. Glimpsing that astounding new reality is what makes a prayerful, repentant tax collector. The Pharisee points to himself and declares himself deserving. Despite the trudging atrocities of his everyday life, the tax collector trusts that God is a God of love and mercy. His connection to the coming Kingdom is based upon his personal confession of fallenness and a plea for forgiveness.

God's not in the business of collecting or bestowing favours. Prayer should be a conversation, not a status report. When we pray in the way of 'proving' our righteousness, we only prove our pride. We deceive ourselves. True prayer is about giving up, not puffing up. Being in a right relationship with God is a gift to be received, not a badge to be earned.

The Pharisee, who spent his prayer time justifying himself to God and declaring his own genuinely good works but distancing himself from all those 'others,' who, for him, had no room in his heart for God's grace. He was already full of his own self-righteousness. There is no room for him to understand God's grace. On the other hand, the tax collector empties himself before God. His prayer confesses his weaknesses and asks only for mercy - not a stamp of approval.

I think the tax collector partly understood that entering the Kingdom of God depended upon being in a real relationship with God. He believes he has earned himself a ticket to the Kingdom of God all on his own, without God's help.

The Kingdom of God is not simply about an inversion of expectations - the last coming first, the first coming last. It is also about the realisation that above all else, beyond anything we can be or do, we need the power of God's grace to enter his Kingdom.

So how do those outside our worship, read us or understand us, our liturgies, our music, our prayer focus and other bits and pieces which creep into our worship patterns?

I want to throw a serious curve ball into our reflections this morning. I don't do it lightly, but I want to share something that troubles me greatly. Let me start by some revision of worship over recent weeks.

A few weeks ago, Lauleti was going to focus in his sermon on the need in Jeremiah's time, to pluck the nation from its plight of hatred, greed, hypocrisy and racism. These things needed to be cleared up before there could be a change of focus, heart, love, peace,

respect and caring.

In the opening responsive call to worship Lauleti said: 'We come to you, O God, weighed down by anxiety.' We all replied: 'Give us new dance steps to follow.'

Even within the synagogues of old there needed to be a change of dance tune, so what of our history, even our young history in our nation, our even shorter time for what seems to be a well-established UCA? Do we, need a new tune to enable us to pluck out the sins of the past – racism – yes, within the church, our attitude to women in ministry (even though we would send women as missionaries overseas), attitudes that proclaim we've always done it this way. Don't alter anything or I'll leave the church. Or we might seek to be change agents focussing on reconciling our indigenous sisters and brothers on our terms without consultation, sharing, asking, attempting to grow together into a richer fellowship of understanding. So, we sigh and sit back on our traditional rocking horse and feel no need to change.

Does it concern us how far out of touch we might have become, or how presumptuous we are concerning our indigenous brothers and sisters. As was said at the recent Synod meeting 'None of us were part of the

historical conquest of Victoria.’ The speaker then continued: ‘However, the Synod has been a beneficiary of the colonial conquest of Victoria. Concerning the churches, the Yoorrook Justice Commission (2025) particularly focused its attention on land seized from the Traditional Owners by colonial settlers which was then transferred to churches for little or no cost by the colonial authorities of the British Empire.

Our Synod has identified 127 properties currently held by the Church for which land was granted by the Crown in this manner, besides properties that had previously been sold. Approximately 10 per cent of Uniting Churches in Victoria have been built on land granted by the Crown. Are we aware of these things as we glibly acknowledge country each Sunday? Now, don’t get too comfortable sitting on your old-fashioned rocking horses built for bygone eras. I want us to rise like highly spirited horses and embrace new possibilities, no longer being purely repetitive like the Pharisee in our reading, or even have feelings of defeat of the tax collector.

Let me tell you something about me – it might seem like a time of confession. I conduct worship monthly at Creswick. I have explained to them why I do not acknowledge country. I believe the acknowledgement does not go far enough. and instead, I try to pick up

opportunities in the prayers by which we can pray for our indigenous relatives, seek forgiveness, and grow together, and support each other in new life-giving ways.

If I was to acknowledge country, I would need to lengthen it and acknowledge the fact that as congregations we are doing precious little to ensure we have a sense of being family together. I have been helped in this by conversations with my indigenous cousin Vince Ross, who for nearly thirty years worked within our Synod towards greater understanding, contributed to the Aboriginal Islander Congress, cared about the referendum and is vitally interested in the proposed Treaty being proposed by our Victorian government.

Let me bring to our minds some thoughts that Miriam raised just a few Sundays ago. She raised the question about how fair were our practices. She raised how we see injustice in our community. She asked us to consider the challenge the Uniting Church has made concerning the rights of our first nations people. I felt stirred when Miriam posed the question – ‘Do we go deeper than our weekly acknowledgement of country? She also suggested we could find out more about the aboriginal people, especially our Wadawurrung people. Miriam

also suggested some reflection on the new Treaty being proposed by the Victorian Government – which the Opposition has already threatened to throw out if they win the next election.

I still like checking the Synod page of Parish profiles and vacancies. It was interesting to read a local one very close geographically to this church. It is a two-pronged placement and both components indicated they had NO connection with any indigenous groups. I would hope that the Presbytery addition might have suggested that any new placement might work on this fact.

Which of course raises the question for us. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Census population for the City of Ballarat in 2021 was 2,100, living in 1,087 dwellings. That was a sizeable increase from the previous five years so we could assume in the next census a further increase. I have with me three addresses for different Aboriginal Co-operatives in Ballarat.

So, there is a challenge – have we enough confidence, fire and concern to widen our horizons a little for our next Congregational Meeting to take ownership of this privilege and ask the Church Council to appoint a small committee to seek conversations with the Aboriginal

Co-ops not with a view of being a rescuer, but with a view of getting to know each other and understand each other as joint occupiers of this land and grow as one by joint listening, dreaming and living? Well. Let's leave our comfortable obsolete rocking horse and soar the heights with the breath of the Spirit.

Let us pray:

God, give us a future, daring us to go

into dreams and dangers, on a path unknown.

Enable us to leave behind the sins of yesterday.

Love us into action, stir us into prayer,

till we choose Your life and find our future there.

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