

Reflection Notes – 29/1/17

- Geoff Stevenson

The Revolution/Reign of Love

I am writing this on Australia Day. It is a somewhat strange and diverse day from where I sit. There will be patriotic pride exhibited across the nation, some sentimental nationalism and some deep gratitude. Some will wrap themselves in the flag, which always seems a strange, perhaps disrespectful, use for this national symbol. There will be much of the metaphorical ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi! Oi! Oi!’ as people swoon over anything that makes us feel good about ourselves, brightens life somewhat or looks better through alcohol-fuelled eyes. Other people will grieve this day and wonder what might have been had those tall ships not entered into Sydney Harbour all those long years ago? The indigenous people who inhabited this land for millennia before European and other Australians landed here bear much pain at the loss of culture, wisdom and so much more. This power of Empire dominating more vulnerable, even powerless locals is a story that has been repeated so often that its pain and sadness encompasses peoples of every continent. It is a dominant human story.

There is, of course, much to be grateful for across this nation and most of us have benefitted wonderfully from the lifestyle, the natural beauty and the good will of so many people. In Western Sydney, where I live, the story of ethnic people coming together in a multicultural mix is quite profound and one of the great successes of multiculturalism across the world. We embrace the diversity of colour, culture, food, flavours, music and the delights of people from all corners of the earth who share this lump of dirt with us. After all, modern Australia is the story of convicts, exiles, refugees, immigrants all in search of a better life. Over the years, most have come by boat like those First Fleeters. Some have been pilgrims and exiles seeking something new away from the politics or conflicts of the old world of Europe and elsewhere. Others sought refuge from racism, ethnic rivalries or persecution from their homelands; a better, safer life for their family. Some came out to try their luck in gold rushes or engineering schemes such as in the Snowy Mountains. Many made it good and prospered in lives of freedom and opportunity, of hard work and a new multicultural community. Others came and found little. They were lost and alienated before and these feelings grew when their language and culture became barriers and their expectations and hopes remained unfulfilled.

Modern Australia has much to celebrate. There are many great and wonderful things about this country. Those who travel abroad often realise that there is much to be thankful for back home. There is such a diversity of natural beauty and wonder, from the white sand beaches to tropical rainforest, deserts and rocks (such as the iconic Uluru) and ancient mountains to flora and fauna that is unique and strange. We have creatures that are deadly and others fluffy and cute. We have a radiant sun that is warm (hot!) and long days of light that draw us outdoors to plant our feet on the earth and feel its oneness with us, God and all creatures – at least that is what it does for me.

Amidst all of this is also the underside of living in a land that is conceivably prosperous for all. Modern Australia is a lonely place for many people as individualism

and materialism define our lives so powerfully. Lost in climate-controlled homes, we communicate via screens sharing information and often superficial ‘news’. We have more than previous generation but haven’t discovered the pot of gold at the end of affluenza’s rainbow – the promised land of ‘Happiness’. More people are anxious and discontent and seek refuge from their existential longing. Addictive lives that seek distraction from the mundane or boring, the painful and sad, are pandemic in the land of Oz.

In my mind, as I write, are the stirring and simple words of Jesus that are contained in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 – this week’s reading. They speak of blessedness but blessedness that surprises and seems contrary to what we know and are told. In our world, the blessed are most surely the rich, the powerful, the famous A-listers invited to all the good gigs in town. Surely those who live in luxury and have everything they ever dreamed of and more, are the blessed?! That’s what most of us believe anyway. Then Jesus comes along and states the opposite! Blessed are the poor in spirit, the humble, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who mourn, those who seek righteousness (= justice) and peace. Blessed are those who seem to be on the bottom of the pile but know in their deepest hearts that they need God and all God can offer because they cannot do it on their own. Those who feel the weight of injustice and pain and grieve for the world or who seek justice and righteousness in everything. The ones who show mercy and seek peace are people who are free from the impositions of a society hell-bent on putting up barriers to keep others out – out of our personal lives and away from our nation.

I believe that most of us truly want a community where we can belong and be free to be ourselves rather than put on the mask of conformity, pretending to be what we believe we need to be to be acceptable – to ourselves and others. I believe that most people truly want a world of peace where all can live in harmony rather than the constant tension of conflict. The daily news disturbs us at a deep level. The affairs of the world are upsetting and overwhelming and there is something in Jesus’ words that offer an alternative, Plan B as Dave Andrews calls it. He suggests that Plan A, the one we’ve been adhering to isn’t working and it is time to try another way – Plan B, the Beatitudes of Jesus. This was the way that Ghandi, a devout Hindu followed. Jesus’ words and way appealed deeply to him – the church let him down but Jesus’ way didn’t. We see it in Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and many others. It is a way that I think modern Australia is primed for – we speak of egalitarianism, a fair go, mateship and we’ve been ready to give a hand up to one down on their luck. We put our hands in our pockets when there is deep need. Are we ready to believe in this all the way?

The Beatitudes are about community because every one of them points to the building of relationships that are compassionate, liberating, inclusive, just and peaceful. They are a beautiful and hopeful and for everyone. They are about a fair go for all people and finding joy and hope, meaning and purpose in attitudes and actions that create blessing because God is in the midst of such love and compassion. All who live in such ways are blessed and are a blessing to others as God embraces human life through relationships of love. On this Australia Day I am hopeful that we will embrace this other way of life, of hope and peace. The truth for which we yearn is before us – not in money, power or violence. It is in love, community, compassion, justice, mercy and openness to all.