

Reflection Notes – 20/8/17

- Geoff Stevenson

The Content of Character Over Colour of Skin!

These words from Martin Luther King jr's famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 have rung loudly in my ears of late: *"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they are judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."*

I wonder what it would look like if the policies of the USA (or Australia or any other nation!) were built around the content of character rather than the colour of skin – or religious tradition or social status or political or other ideology or sexuality or gender or age or ethnic background or culture or...? I wonder how our parliament would be different if politicians looked at the content and quality of character rather than other attributes. I wonder how the corporate world might change if content of character were a more decisive quality in leadership and decision-making than other motivators. What might a corporation that was more concerned about the content of its corporate character as a just, fair, community-minded entity, rather than profit, power or prestige look like?

As I ponder these words of King's I know that they confront me and challenge my own prejudices. They push me to ask questions of myself and how I respond to various images and stories I see on social media, the mainstream news and current affairs or in popular culture. How do I respond to the plebiscite issue that has gained much attention lately? How do I think about the people involved? Is there a 'content of character' perspective or is it all about ideology? Where would questions regarding content of character lead me? Am I willing to go there and experience the 'content of character' of people who are involved in the debate?

I ponder the extraordinary scenes in parliament yesterday when Pauline Hanson appeared in full burka during question time. I am not sure what she was really thinking and why she took this path. It is clear that Muslims worry her, as they do a lot of Australians. I suppose that we hear about ISIS and Islamic terrorism and that plays into the fears and uncertainty we have about the world. She raises security issues about the burka and they need to be considered in the current context but there is something more in Hanson's rhetoric and ideology. She quite clearly has judged the people who are different on the basis of skin colour, ethnicity, religion, language and a range of other attributes, including dress and presents them as different and dangerous. I wonder how the 'content of their character' criteria informs Pauline Hanson and others like her. I wonder whether she has sat and chatted to Muslim women. I have had the opportunity to sit with particular Muslim men and women and found them to be genuinely faithful and spiritual people. We hold different religious views but all seek a better world of peace and justice. I am sure that not all who claim the name 'Muslim' are as peaceable and compassionate as those I have met. Certainly not all who act in the name 'Christian' are gracious, just, loving people – the Royal Commission has shown us the truth of this! In fact not all people whether religious, atheist, English-speaking or other ethnicity, ideology... are loving, peaceful people. We are all different and every creed, culture and people group has a mix of personalities and character traits. So I wonder whom Pauline Hanson is

really attacking and why? Would Australia be instantly safer and a better place if we banned all Muslims or people of other religions or language or colour or sexuality or...? Obviously not! There are people of good character who work tirelessly for the common good and well-being of society from all backgrounds, cultures and contexts. There are also Australians of Anglo background, white 'Christian' etc whose content of character leaves much to be desired.

This week, in the Gospel reading (Matthew 15:10-28), Jesus speaks to his followers and indicates that it isn't the stuff we put into our mouths that defiles us and renders us unclean, but what comes out of mouth, action and attitude. What we do is far more compelling than what we eat, drink, take in. For Jesus' Jewish culture, there were various laws, dietary and otherwise, that defined people as 'clean or unclean'. These were about holiness and rightness before God. Various foods were considered unclean and contaminated the body if eaten. Various forms of illness, dress, work, lifestyle also defined people as clean or unclean. There were also barriers between cultures that separated people and kept them pure from the contamination brought by those who were different – Jews didn't associate easily with Gentiles (non-Jews), for example.

Clean and Unclean were categories – then and now. We have various food outlets that provide Halal food, which is required by particular religious cultures including Jews and Muslims. For them, the manner in which food is prepared from the slaughter onwards can render that food clean and acceptable or unclean and unacceptable, defiling to the body. Codes of dress and standards in other areas of life are also elements of such practice. Whilst most of us from Anglo background feel confused by this and regard it as unnecessary, we have our own particular codes that are render a person 'in or out' in terms of societal acceptance. There are various barriers that exist to exclude various people and protect those inside from those outside. Women know how difficult it is for them to break through in various professions and be seen as equals. Pay and other benefits are often less for women than men in similar situations. Sexuality, gender, age all have their own sets of barriers. Sometimes young people cannot get a toe hold into an organisation or profession and sometimes it is the older generation who feel excluded. Sometimes we discriminate on dress, expecting suits and ties or other particular forms of dress code. There are myriad ways in which we restrict others from accessing that which we want to hang onto or control or exclusively benefit from, whether as individuals, organisations and corporations or as a nation. We readily exclude some and welcome others and we use particular rules, taboos, cultural norms and expectations, language, colour... to do it.

In Matthew's story of Jesus there is a movement towards Jesus opening God's Reign to all people and welcoming all into the grace of God, regardless of background, culture, creed or colour. The stories of previous weeks include the inclusive feeding of all gathered. This was in Jewish territory but in chapters to come we will hear about another inclusive feeding story that welcomes people from all over the world. The story of Jesus is very challenging at this point because it is an open, inclusive welcoming of everybody. It is about the content of character rather than outward appearance. It is about building that content of character, grounded in love and justice, in all people. It is about all of us coming together with our diversity of being, experience, belief, hope, despair, struggle, joy and learning to live together in love, compassion, peace, justice and hope – in God!