

A sermon by Roslyn Wright on Luke 4:14-21
27 January 2019

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and emerging. I pay my respects to any who may be here today.

I'm not sure if you know this but I read this week that Australia Day as a celebration of the founding of this nation only became a national public holiday in 1994. That's only 25 years ago. It is probably the most divisive and emotionally loaded day in our holiday calendar. It reflects the pride of who we are as a nation and our great diversity. But it also is remembered by our indigenous brothers and sisters as invasion day. I was grateful for the email sent by Alison Langmead this week that spoke about the pride and the pain that this particular date evokes in our nation.

Last night I watched the fireworks at Docklands and then saw some of the concert from the Sydney with Paul Kelly playing. I wasn't paying much attention, just had it on for background music, when he started with his iconic song about the Wave Hill walk-off. It's a song about Vincent Lingiari leading his people off the cattle station, and their struggle for the return of their traditional lands. You probably know the song – From little things big things grow.

What you don't know is that in 1967, when that walk off happened, I was 9 years old and living just 50 miles away from Wave Hill at Hooker Creek, now called Lajamanu. My father was the superintendent, the boss, on the aboriginal reserve. As a child I knew that there was something happening up at Wave Hill, and my parents weren't happy about it. The workers at Wave Hill had walked off the job, they were on strike, and numbers of them came to Hooker Creek to be with family. The dynamics around the settlement changed. There was a feeling of tension in the air. We didn't know what would happen.

The only road out of Hooker Ck passed through Wave Hill, so if the road was blockaded then we would be isolated, with only the airstrip and the two way radio as our means of contact with the world. As an adult I have a sense of pride about being so close to the action of that significant event in our national history. When the 50th anniversary happened a couple of years ago and the ABC ran a documentary on it I rang my mother to talk about it. I was surprised at her anger. Her experience was of fear and danger, feeling threatened and isolated, unsure of whether there was going to be violence and aggression. Were we going to be the first victims of a bloody fight? We were about 30 white people living amongst 500 indigenous. Where there is oppression, it is not just the oppressed who live with fear. The white owners and managers of the land had much to lose.

When Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth he was amongst people who also felt the pain of invasion and the loss of their lands, their nationhood, their sovereignty. The Jewish people lived under the oppression of the Romans. They longed to be saved, rescued, redeemed. They wanted their freedom and autonomy as a nation to be returned to them. They wanted their land back.

On the Sabbath it was the tradition that the men went to the synagogue to pray, to hear the scriptures read and explained. A synagogue needed just 10 men to form a quorum. Unlike the Temple in Jerusalem they were not big buildings. Think of a room just big enough for 10 or so men to sit around the walls on a bench seat, with a cavity to hold the scrolls of Scripture.

We are told in Luke's account that Jesus has begun his preaching ministry in the province of Galilee. On this Sabbath day he went to Nazareth, his home town, to the synagogue, and he stood to show he would read to the gathering. He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He stands there in the midst of these men, and he chooses to read the passage we know so well, a passage about freedom, release from oppression and abuse, a passage that said this is the time God has chosen to act. After reading he sits to explain or give his understanding of the reading. That's why all the men gathered watched him so intently. What was he going to say? Was this the call to revolution? Was this a call to repentance and renewal of the covenant so that God could bless them once again? What was he going to say? "Today this scripture has been fulfilled...".

Today, God's promises will be fulfilled. We love that statement don't we? But the reality is that 2000 years later we are still waiting. People are still being oppressed, abused. People are still blind and imprisoned unjustly. People still wait to have their land returned. The world still stands in need of the power God breaking in to make all things new. We are still waiting for the year of the Lord's favour.

How are we to make sense of this? How can Jesus say the promise of the scripture has been fulfilled? Like the people of Nazareth, the people of Galilee, we want God to break in and fix things now.

But it seems there is no quick fix. Like the issues in our own Nation at this time of the year there is no clear and simple way forward to resolve the tensions and divisions. What are we to do?

I have been known to wonder whether people come to church to get served up a ready-made answer, rather than work through the questions themselves. I could compare it to going to a fast-food drive through, where you pick up something that has been highly processed. It is food that feels good at the time, easy to eat, but with little nutritional value, other than a load of carbs and fat. It might look like an easy answer to your hunger. *Sometimes* going to church can be like that – processed and packaged and delivered while hot. But not necessarily giving you something of substance to sustain you. At least that is my experience in some places I have been. (Not here at South Yarra.)

I want to say that I can't deliver the goods like that. Don't look to me to give you the answer. I don't know how we are to heal the rifts in our country. Or how we can heal the wounds we have inflicted upon our planet. I don't know how to restore the damage done in family relationships, including my own. I'm not even sure what the problems are there. I just know that I am not in step with members of my own family and there is pain and anguish.

When I look at what might be needed, how we can make sense of Jesus' proclamation, I feel myself drawn back to something like the slow food movement. We need to start local, with what we have, and work with that. We need to go back to the kitchen tables and the ingredients and the recipes that will sustain us and enrich our bodies and our lives.

Looking at what is needed to redeem this world, bring healing and wholeness, it is going to take a long time and a lot of work. God wants to heal human hearts and human relationships. But God does not enter our world and force this healing upon us. As through all the ages of human history, we have choice.

We are the people of God. We have chosen to follow in the way of Jesus. And that means that we are called to continue the work he began. He began, and we must continue. Slowly, thoughtfully, making small choices to bring freedom and sight and healing in our own lives and in the lives of the people around us. I can't tell you what that will look like for you in your life and your relationships. But I can tell you that it is necessary work that we are invited to share, to celebrate, to follow.

Jesus' proclamation was provocative in his day – you just have to read on a few more verses in Luke to see that his ministry nearly ended before it was begun as they dragged him out of town to throw him off a cliff. Why? It could well be because of where he stopped the reading. Isaiah 61:2 reads: 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.' Jesus stopped short of proclaiming vengeance, and that would have not gone down well with the home-town crowd. They wanted vengeance. He didn't help by then reminding them of the ways God had given aid to foreigners and not to Israel.

I don't expect that following the way of Jesus will be easy. There is no pre-packaged solution. There is no one way that fits all. That's what the reading from Corinthians reminds us. We need a variety of ways to do the work that Jesus began. We need people with different abilities, different points of focus, different passions.

Just look around and you can see these differences amongst us. For some people the priority or focus is relationship with the traditional custodians of this land. For others it is supporting refugees and those new to this country. Others focus on the earth and how we can protect and renew this precious resource. As many different ways to bring God's dream to reality as there are individuals. There are many ways of following Jesus, many ways of joining with him in to make the proclamation real and visible.

It is a slow process. It takes energy and commitment. Today we heard how Jesus was handed the scroll and read. And then he proclaimed the scripture has been fulfilled. I think the invitation for today, for us, is to take up the scroll and read those words, and recognise that, 'Yes, this word has been fulfilled today'. This word is being fulfilled by those who choose to continue the work of restoration and healing. We work together, each with our own capacity and passion, our own gifts and calling. We work as one with Christ and each other so that God's will may be done, the kinship of God known in our relationships. From little things big things grow.

I trust that the fruit of that work will be that all will one day sit together at the table as free, whole and nourished people, united by the Spirit of the Lord, celebrating the gifts we share.
And all the people said: AMEN