

A Different Point of View

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 24 August 2014. The preacher was Brian Brown, Moderator of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT. Readings were Isaiah 51:1-6, Romans 12:1-8 and St Matthew 16:13-20.

Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect."

It's amazing what you can see from a different point of view. As a wise person once said: "What you see depends on where you stand"

I experienced this phenomenon in the early days of one of my congregational placements. After my first service, where I used the lectern instead of the pulpit, a lady of small stature approached me in an agitated frame of mind. "Why did you not use the pulpit" she asked. When I explained that I wanted to be closer to the congregation, and not so high above them, she retorted "But I couldn't see you!" The following week, I made a point of looking for that woman as I stood at the lectern. I finally spotted her sitting in the second back pew of the church, directly behind the tallest man in the congregation! "What you see depends on where you sit". So I picked up the lectern, and moved it about two metres to the left, where I had direct line of vision with the person in question.

I don't think I actually solved her problem, which I suspect was about more that whether she actually had line of vision, but I did solve mine. It depends on being prepared to move, or more profoundly, as

St Paul puts it in Romans 12, to “be transformed by the renewal of our minds”. When we see things differently, we are in a position to act in ways that show we are not simply conforming to the ways of the world- just going along with the status quo or popular consensus.

A few weeks ago we heard the story of how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. They might actually have killed him were it not for the oldest, Reuben, arguing for a more humane alternative. That ‘standing up’, born of Reuben’s compassion as the firstborn of Jacob, influenced the course of history. Joseph was later put in charge of Pharaoh’s affairs and prevented mass starvation due to his prescience and conserving action. Ironically, his brothers are also saved by Joseph’s actions.

This week’s lectionary includes the story of the saving of many Hebrew baby boys by the bold civil disobedience and impudent misinformation of two Egyptian midwives. The text gives an explanation for their behaviour- they “feared God”. This was where they stood, and their non-conforming actions, risky though they were, stemmed from this different point of view, this Godly conviction.

When Jesus questions his disciples about what people think of him, they cite opinions such as “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets”. It is interesting to note that the people can only make sense of Jesus by looking back and trying to place him in the context of what they know. From where they stand they can see nothing else. The disciples, on the other hand, have moved with Jesus. They have seen and experienced him doing things that remind them

of past prophets but also discern something new and different. So Peter can proclaim "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". It is this different perspective, this new angle of sight, this nonconformist attitude to the community consensus that will eventually enable their new and inspired action in the name of Jesus that will change not only their lives but change the world.

This is not an opinion that Peter dreamed up, a flash in the pan inspiration, but a conviction that was formed in the following; putting his feet on the ground with Jesus, walking with him through heat and cold, adulation and hostility, listening to him, seeing his power and his compassion. What you see depends on where you stand, and sometimes, literally so.

There are many who will try to influence our point of view, tell us how to see things on the basis of where they stand. Journalist Tim Blair of the Daily Telegraph had a two page spread last Monday about his 24 hour experience of Lakemba, which he called "Muslimland". He saw there only a monoculture, he heard only one language, he noticed some extremist literature in a bookshop. He did not see the many other cultures that dwell in that place nor was his ear attuned to the different languages that are foreign to him. He actually went there with an agenda, and his point of view determined what he saw and heard and then wrote. Helen and I spent a morning in Lakemba recently. We wanted to buy an appropriate gift for our hosts at an Iftar dinner, the evening meal of Muslims as they break the daily Ramadan fast. We had coffee at a Turkish coffee shop, where we also bought the gift. We came away enriched and enlightened by the experience. We too were influenced, but in our case it was from our viewpoint about the positive nature of multiculturalism in Australia,

and that we should be doing all we can to promote harmony rather than fear that inflames racial stereotyping of communities and cultures.

We do well to reflect on what influences where we stand and what we see from there. I realize that, while I get a lot of really good information on Twitter, because of who I choose to follow the material is selective and biased to my own position. That is not a bad thing, as long as I am aware of it. On the other hand, I am going to read certain material with a hypercritical eye because experience tells me that some voices and particular writers are prone to injection poison into the social system.

But is it just a matter of point of view? Are there no objective points of reference to guide us?

So much depends on standing on firm principles. If we start from expediency, or what we want for our own benefit alone, so much of the action that flows from that starting point will be in terms of the ends justifying the means. This is nowhere more true than with the asylum seeker situation in Australia. A policy that stands on biblical principles such as “welcoming the stranger” and “do to others as we would have them do to us” could not end up with people in what former Australian of the year Prof Patrick McGorry calls the “mental illness factories” of Manus island and Nauru, not to mention the poverty-stricken and politically fraught Cambodia. This is where you end up when you start with self-interest and ‘border protection’ based on the fear of the outsider. From there you cannot see the pain of asylum seekers or hear the cries for help of fleeing refugees.

Other tragic stories also reflect a society that has lost some of its important bearings, such as a commitment to the Common Good – The story of Thai surrogate baby Gammy, the shooting death of an Environmental Compliance Officer Glen Turner, the death of a homeless woman who lived in a cave at Middle Cove on the North Shore of Sydney. The brutal beheading of an American journalist James Foley is the extreme, hyper-dramatic demonstration of what can happen when people lose all sense of the value and humanity of the other. This comes from sitting or standing too long in a place where the humanity of the other is not in clear view. From that dark place, our relationships become, as Martin Buber put it, “I- It” relationships, rather than “I- Thou”.

We have to locate ourselves, and hopefully others, in the place where our common humanity is in clear view.

Isaiah puts it well when he says “Look to the rock from which you were hewn”, and holds up Abraham and Sarah as paragons of faithful obedience to God. For them this meant literally getting up and going to a different place so they could fulfill the promise and the hope that God had placed in them. Standing on new ground can be uncomfortable, even dangerous at times, but nothing new can come from sticking to the same old guns.

So where do we stand, what are our vantage points, and how do they affect what we see and how we act? More specifically, how do we in the UCA come to the point of affirming and living out of an ethos of inclusion, hospitality, pastoral care and social justice?

The scriptures seem almost too obvious to mention, but our disciplined, intelligent regular reading and reflection is critical and central to our faithful life as a Christian community. Today, for example, we are reminded by St Paul to see ourselves as a community where people's many and varied gifts for ministry are recognized, valued and put into practice as we live out our calling to be the Body of Christ

The traditions from which we have come are in some sense also "the rock from which we are hewn". For example, the Methodism in which my faith was formed in South Africa provided an alternative biblical and theological narrative and community to that which justified and promoted the ruthless racist policy of Apartheid. It taught me that following Christ and treating people as chattels was both logically inconsistent and morally unjustifiable.

The Uniting Church's Basis of Union contains many lookout points from which to view our common life, including the centrality of Christ, being a community of reconciliation, and being open to new ways of biblical and theological understanding.

The various documents of the Assembly, with their incisive social analysis based on Gospel values guide us through the maze of issues that face us in the life of our world, our nation and our wider community. For example, the foundational Statement to the Nation of 1977 calls us to stand in a special place, when it says:

"We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian principles,

such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.”

Our ability to stand consistently in these places, in our worship and in our daily lives, flows from a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ, of whom Peter rightly proclaims “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God”. Such convictions also flow from what St Paul declares as a willingness to not be conformed to the ways of the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. From this sacred ground we will continue to speak truth to power, comfort and advocate for the weak, see people as people and value all creation as sacred.

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