

Harvest Time

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 7th July 2019 [14] Year C

Galatians 6.7-18, Luke 10.1-12, 17-24

The words mission and missionary derive from Latin translations of the Bible – in English versions, as in this morning's reading from Luke, the language is that of *being sent*. Unlike the language of labourers being sent to gather the harvest, the language of mission, first used by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, has over the years come to be overlaid with associations that are not always positive.

Especially here in Australia where the Christian missions were among those institutions involved in taking children away from their parents and suppressing indigenous culture, the whole use of the word has become, for me personally, quite problematic. I feel it to be insensitive to this very recent and painful history. I acknowledge that the history of missions is varied and complex – some missions were keen to preserve indigenous languages, and opposed the hostile racism of the wider society. But we cannot ignore the fundamentally flawed approach of seeking to replace one culture with another. In many cases, the harvest of the missions was a bitter one.

As well as this history, the word mission is employed in military settings suggesting some sort of intervention, and corporate or institutional settings where it is associated with goals, tactics, and measurable results. All this is a long way removed from those Jesus sent out “like lambs into the midst of wolves” carrying “no purse, no bag, no sandals” to seek the hospitality of those who shared the peace they offered.

I'm not going to dwell on the instruction to shake the dust from our feet as a protest against those that do not offer welcome but we might quickly recall Jesus rebuking his disciples in the previous chapter for wanting fire from heaven to consume the village that would not receive them. Or his teaching to: “Love your enemies ... bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Do not judge, and you will not be judged ...” (Luke 6: 27-38) While in this passage Jesus points to the darkness that awaits those that turn from the light – it is clearly not up to the 70 he sent forth, nor any of us to condemn. They are to simply leave and go where they are welcomed as guests. The point I would make is that European missionaries came to foreign shores, and some contemporary evangelists even now come to our doors, assuming they will find pits of darkness instead of wells of light.

The last time we had this set of readings in 2016, it was a few weeks after the visit of the of the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir who sang Lutheran hymns, as well as their own compositions, in both English and Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara. Their director, Morris Stuart, himself a descendant of African slaves, said we cannot talk away the harm done, but the Arrarnta people must be given credit for having the wisdom and the grace to discern what was valuable and beautiful in the tradition that was brought to them, and to blend it with their own spirituality, to make it their own, and to share it with us all – and ironically with a western culture that has forgotten its own tradition. Now who are the missionaries? And what better manners they have than those of earlier times.

This time, three years later, it is a few weeks since we had Noongar elder Eugene Eades, and *Mixed Mob* play at our Festival of Voice service. Mixed because there are Noongar and wadjella (white people) making music together (and it became increasingly mixed this year as several of Eugene's relative's went and got their guitars) – and mixed because they sing gospel songs from mission days, country western, their own compositions – some in Noongar language, others in English – all wonderfully and joyfully mixed - we finished with a Celtic blessing set to a Slim Dusty tune sung by cousin Fred. It is the third year they have shared this service with us, but it is worth re-capping the story of Nowanup, where Eugene lives, as it is one of the projects that Parish Council has supported with offertory and Mustard Seed funds.

Nowanup is a Greening Australia property, about one hour north-east of Albany (near Box Hill / Ongerup) The “marginal country” was unwisely cleared for farming in the 1960s, leaving the soil impacted and depleted, but the native vegetation is returning with encouragement and planting and will help complete the Gondwana Link – a project to provide a continuous wildlife corridor over 1000 sq. km of the south-west – an internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot.

Eugene, his family, and the “Friends of Nowanup” have also established a Noongar cultural centre for people to connect to country – it is seen as a place where all – Noongar or wadjella – can seek peace, safety and healing. It is a

most precious place for those of the stolen generation seeking to piece together and protect their culture. Healing the land is way of healing people.

Facilities at present are very basic – a large shed housing kitchen dining/meeting space and few beds, a shower block and Eugene’s small demountable. Curtin University will soon be building some accommodation for a “bush university” (camps for students) and Gondwana Link have dedicated funds to further re-vegetation and the creation of a walk path. Several Noongar rangers are employed (I’m not sure by which organisation). Despite this, the cultural and healing work of Nowanup is very much grass roots, and dependent upon the support of individuals and groups such as our church.

I joined one of the Family Camps a couple of weeks ago and my visit showed me just how significant our contributions (\$800 for a boy’s camp, and \$500 for bush shelters/meeting places) have been. Four teenage boys were on the camp, who I learnt had stayed at some 20 foster homes in their 14 years. This was their first visit, accompanied by their current guardian, a distant aunt who now cares for them unassisted. “Uncle Eugene” got them busy cutting brush wood for a new meeting place, and there was talk of getting some more boys together for another camp which we will help finance.

I was honoured to be asked to say grace before our first meal, and to say some words and a prayer on Sunday morning. I was taken by surprise on both occasions - I had expected just to fade into the background, anxious not to be seen as an old style “missionary” – I was there to learn about Noongar culture and to help heal the land – but it is a multi-layered and intriguing situation: Many in Eugene’s family are Christian, in a different tradition to ours, but we all live, not only in a post-colonial world where there is considerable resentment and suspicion of religious institutions, but also some would say, a post-Christian or least seemingly indifferent world. So there is an inclusive line to walk between a number of outlooks when a group such as Friends of Nowanup come together – but by the positive response I received to a modern version of the Lord’s prayer (that I thankfully mostly remembered in the spot!) beginning “Ground of All Being” (a term coined by theologian Paul Tillich) – it is still possible to find common ground - literally on the ground of places such as Nowanup.

Eugene admits the work of reconciliation and healing can be hard and demanding - so our support in prayer is greatly valued. He expressed hope there would be further opportunities for fellowship. On our part also, I feel there is much to learn from Eugene and our Noongar brothers and sisters about living on this land we all call home. It was also an honour therefore, to plant some native groundcovers on depleted soil, and to listen to Aunty Eliza and Aunty Annette talk about the six Noongar seasons and what would be ready to eat at this time of year – Makuru – season of cold and wet weather, but also fertility.

This is a new kind of harvest, a new creation – where we do not see ourselves as the only ones sowing seeds, or those different in origin to ourselves as a crop to be harvested into our barn and thus meeting one of our mission goals, but an abundant sharing of the fruits of wisdom that have been ripening over the centuries in many and various places. Let us finish with the version of the Lord’s prayer that seemed to speak to a cross-section of those at Nowanup, mindful of our painful past, the task of reconciliation and the new creation that is the task of us all:

Ground of all being,
Mother of life, Father of the universe,
Your name is sacred, beyond speaking.
May we know your presence,
may your longings be our longings in heart and in action.
May there be food for the human family today
and for the whole earth community.
Forgive us the falseness of what we have done
as we forgive those who are untrue to us.
Do not forsake us in our time of conflict
but lead us into new beginnings.
For the light of life, the vitality of life,
and the glory of life are yours now and forever. Amen.

(John Phillip Newell, Casa del Sol Prayer of Jesus / Celtic Mass for Peace)