

Like lots of people, I have a family story that shapes the way I see myself. On Mum's side, my grandmother was a daughter of engineers and miners. She was a schoolteacher, artist and calligrapher. She died of diabetes when my mother was six. Her husband, my grandfather, was a son of farmers and miners, and the grandson of two convicts. He was a music teacher and a violinist.

On Dad's side, there were tea merchants, missionaries, butchers and dentists. Both my grandfathers were Methodist Lay Preachers. So if you read all that tea-drinking, preaching, writing, mission, criminality and music as the story of where I come from, it makes some sense of where I am now. I feel blessed to have this story. I can't imagine what it would be like to live without it.

But imagine thinking that you didn't have a story, and then suddenly discovering that you had one after all. It could change your life. Suddenly, you'd belong. You'd have a '*because*' in your life. All sorts of things about you might start to make sense. And with a '*because*' in your life, a sense of purpose and belonging might encourage and shape you.

That's what happened in today's reading from Nehemiah. We met dispirited, uncertain people —returned exiles—whose immediate ancestors had also been born in exile. These people were gathered together by the priest, Ezra, and he told them their true ancestral story; the story of where they come from and why they were a nation. With their story came both pain and new heart. Maybe they couldn't cope with the enormity of it all, but as they listened, purpose flooded back in.

This Australia Day weekend, this scene from the book of the prophet Nehemiah calls me to imagine Aboriginal people around the world suddenly having all their Law, Language, Land and Tradition restored to them – a sense of what had been lost, and a vision of its restoration. I get the weeping.

Nehemiah had overseen the rebuilding of the city. Now, through the ministry of Ezra and the Levites, we see God set about rebuilding the people themselves.

The books of the Law of Moses are still written on scrolls that you can see being read each week in Synagogues. These books tell the story of the commitment there is between God and people. It's a story of belonging; a story of a people's heritage; the reason they are a people; their purpose as a people. And it tells in great detail how they are to be a healthy, life-giving community. We saw Ezra's reading give all this back to people who'd lost it generations ago – gave them back their belonging. And no sooner were they given it than they celebrate and feast, but importantly, to include others. Eat hearty, but make sure other people can too.

It was a transforming moment for these people – hearing their story afresh, with understanding. It poses a question for us; what do we expect will happen to us when we hear the Scriptures read as a gathered community? Does something happen?

What does it do to us when we followers of Jesus hear him this morning proclaiming his mission statement – our mission statement? What's it meant to do to us? What's it meant to feel like? Let me ask the journalistic question—what *does* it feel like to hear this as coming from your own mouth – from your own heart?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Just imagine if you didn't have a story, and someone suddenly gave you this one – not just any story – this one. What if they gave you this story that puts you in a huge picture, filled with a family you never imagined was yours, and a call to belong and join in!

We are most fully ourselves when we are connected – when we are part of a shared story of God’s extravagant generosity. Today we heard Ezra tell the returned exiles: *this is your story and it’s a story to be shared in word and action most particularly with those who have nothing to give back.* We are shown what this means for us when Jesus stands up in the synagogue and declares his commitment to the poor, to captives to the sick and oppressed. We are shown what this means for us when Jesus lives this story and dies to protect those sick, oppressed captives.

The Christian life can only be lived out in relationship; in community; in care and compassion. And central to the way we live it out is a shared commitment to the poor, to the weak and the marginalized. It is not the work of a moment, neither is it the work of momentary grand gestures and inspiring events; though they may sometimes happen. The Christian life is lived out by ordinary people who grow in our sense of belonging, care and inclusion. It’s simple, and lovely.

As we think about the on handing of stories, we remember that our children soon return to school. Can we see their return in a new way. Education is the sacred responsibility of each generation – handing on the story of how we’ve become who we are. Our children learn how and why they belong; they discover what gifts they have, and become equipped to care for their community when they become adults. Here, we seek to do that handing on of the story in the kids’ corner, and we are partners with other groups who seek to do it with us in the wider community – SJYS, Dulwich, MM, SLWS – partners honouring this co-missioning we share.

We call our community the body of Christ, so we seek to live a life anointed by the Spirit; to proclaim good news; to offer our story to people who might have lost theirs; to release people from the prison of isolation; to offer a vision of life to people who see no purpose, and release people from the slaveries of our age. Jesus has this day declared our belonging and our purpose in this mission statement.

Amen