

Unity; turn and retrieve it

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany + 3 – Vigil of 26 Jan: –Matt 4 12-25

I'm sure that like me, you'll be shocked and saddened by the divisive behaviours of some political leaders both here and around the world. Add that to the activities of influencers online and partisan media outlets and you wonder what can be done to stop the apparent slide into chaos that threatens world and national order. As I've been praying about this, I've been asking God to show me if and how the Church might offer a healing unity that makes a real change; that's the unity our leaders are all saying we need. As we've been approaching tomorrow's national day, I've been praying for the church to reel in the chaos and instead offer healing and unity; peace.

So I was excited when talking with David Hilliard on Friday to hear him describe how the Methodist Sunday Schools in South Australia helped shape their local communities. I'd had no idea of the amazing size and influence of SA's Methodist Sunday Schools up until the mid-1960s. In 1964, they shaped the values of 44,000 children (compared with the Anglicans' 14,000). What inspired me particularly was David's description of the Methodist Sunday Schools' very strong emphasis on teaching all these children to be kind to other people and to do something to help the less fortunate. These children learned that *Christianity should be expressed in action*. I suspect this has had a profound influence on the character of the SA community.

I confess to coming from another state. And when we moved to SA, I noticed something very different about the sense of community here. Even parliamentarians were polite to each other! That was a startling contrast to where I came from. In

the light of what David has told me, I have to wonder if this SA community character that struck me so profoundly might have been shaped by all those thousands of children who'd been formed for kindness and compassion by their Sunday Schools; together living out the values they'd been given in their childhood years. Can a church community that forms its children to embody kindness and compassion in action shape the character of a whole state? It seems plausible to me.

So what guidance does our church give us as we approach a national day? Our prayer book urges us this weekend to seek reconciliation with first people. The invitation to confession reminds us that the oneness of the peoples of this land has been broken by acts of oppression and the failure of compassion. The prayer of the day asks the Spirit to bring forgiveness, reconciliation and an end to all injustice. It names where the rubber hits the road for *all people of faith*. The world should be able to trust people of faith to model God's justice and mercy; God's peace.

The atrocity at Bondi Beach last month was one of many recent, terrible betrayals of that trust which have shamed faith communities of all stripes around the world. Twisted teachings of hatred and prejudice can so blind believers to God's love and compassion for all people that they commit grotesque violence, and claim it to be God's will.

One overwhelming response to such perversions of faith has been a cry to seek unity. The pundits tell us that a goal of terrorism is to divide us and so weaken us. But you have to wonder if terrorism is really a symptom of divisions and weaknesses that are already there. The call to seek unity is more a call to repair what we have let things sink to; not a call to reassert a unity that's been violated by a single act. We weren't united before Bondi. Bondi was a result of divided faith communities. If we people of faith want to help foster unity, we must first turn from our own divisions.

Right now, there's little commitment to unity. A committed few urge us to stay in touch with our fellow people of faith. I struggle with the lack of interest there is in ecumenism and inter-faith movements. Churches Together SA (formerly SACC) was closed down last year by the heads of churches; a tragedy. All faiths should be fostering connection and unity. It's an issue for every faith community and every Christian denomination. Churches won't share full communion with each other. And within each denomination, we're split up into literalist, liberal, evangelical, liturgical or pentecostal. How might our disunity hurt the wider community?

Last month, we saw this disunity erupt in the most brutal way; violence that had elements of religion, revenge and ethnic hatred behind it. It happened because a growing culture of scorning, ignoring, othering, despising and cancelling people we disagree with is smothering the old tolerance and unity, kindness and compassion, we all should have learned as children.

It's not the place here to go into a detailed programme of how we rebuild the mission of our church to form children who will bring the healing of compassion and kindness to rebuild a nation's life. But we're working on that here this year. What I want you to remember from today is *Jesus's response to John's arrest and the threat it represented*. He withdrew from the location of that threat; no use tackling it head on now. He then proclaimed his message: *Repent – turn from bad ways of living – because God's realm is knocking at your door*. Then he gathered people to do his mission with him, and together, they did the *mitzvah* thing the Jewish community has been asking us to do; they did something kind to help the less fortunate. Amen