

Epiphany 4

31 January 2021

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8. 1-13

Mark 1. 21-28

The events of this last week in which we have marked Australia Day have been turbulent. In the days before the announcement of the annual Australia Day awards, news of the upgrading of a past award to former tennis player Margaret Court was leaked to the press. A public hue and cry ensued. Court, now a Pentecostal Pastor of a Western Australian church, has repeatedly been vocal in her criticism of LGBT people and of the marriage equality decision a few years ago.

In response to the granting of this upgrade to Court's award veteran journalist Kerrie O'Brien announced this week that he would reject his proposed award. Dr Clara Tuck Meng Soo, a transgender woman who received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2016 for her work as a medical practitioner with LGBT people and those with HIV and drug dependencies, this week announced she would return her award. And the day after Australia Day the Rev. Alistair Macrae, former Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and former National President of the Uniting Church, also announced he would return his award.

Writing in the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald this week Alistair said: *As a minister and theologian, I am aware that bad theology kills people. Bad theology underpinned the racist apartheid regime in South Africa. Bad theology supported Hitler's racist ideology and the evil it produced.*

Bad theology underpinned or failed to recognise the racist assumptions behind the destructive program of colonisation not least in this land. Bad theology continues to alienate and oppress sexual minorities.

Statistics relating to suicide and mental health issues among the LGBTI community are well known and should be of concern to the whole community, not least the community that claims to follow the teaching and life example of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life was characterised by openness and welcome to all manner of people excluded from full participation in their communities, often on religious grounds.

We are moving into Mark's Gospel. What we have heard just now is really the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He visits a synagogue on the sabbath close to his home town of Nazareth and he teaches as one having authority, not as the scribes. As he is there, Jesus is approached by a man who, we are told, has an unclean spirit. Here, from the outset Mark's Gospel is characterised by a conflict between the good news being brought by Jesus and powers of oppression and alienation which characterised Jesus' religious world. Jesus consistently breaks through these boundaries.

Strangely, the possessed man recognises Jesus: *I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* He recognises the power which Jesus possesses to release and liberate him. But why is he here? Here in the synagogue. It would seem that the man loiters around the synagogue, in thrall to bad theology. He is described as having an unclean spirit. This uncleanness by which he is identified is a religious status, not a medical, psychiatric or psychological condition. His "illness" has been

imposed by others who have promoted themselves as having authority in matters to do with the religious purity code. He is not suffering from a psychiatric disorder but he may well have what we know as a personality disorder – brought about how others have defined and treated him. We might describe #45 in this way; not having a psychiatric condition but certainly with a socially imposed personality disorder.

The man has been designated and condemned as unclean. This defining as clean or unclean is the function of a purity code. We know about these purity codes. Certainly, they were part of the church world I grew up in. The purity code of sex outside marriage, the purity code of people “living in sin” - as it was called, the purity code of a child out of wedlock, the purity code of Australian racial identity – British descent being pure, others, especially non-whites, being relegated to various levels of national impurity – levels of new-Australianness. Where do you really come from?

And within the church we have obsessed over the purity of our theology, especially since the Reformation, seeing groups breaking off to protect the purity of their beliefs. And around our pure identity we draw a boundary and define ourselves on the inside of the boundary as pure and those on the outside as impure; or as it was in Jesus’ world clean and unclean. We may not use this language but we use the same boundary-defining behaviour.

What is at play around Margaret Court, is that in her pronouncements about LGBTI+ people and marriage equality she has sought to draw a purity boundary.

At present there is proposed legislation before the Victorian Parliament to outlaw the practice of what is known as Gay Conversion Therapy. Gay Conversion Therapy is a practice amongst evangelical and fundamentalist churches based on the belief that anything other than stock standard heterosexual attraction and practice is an aberration of our God-given humanity. So, the consequence of this thinking is that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are somehow flawed, broken and sinful. In Jesus’ world this would have been described as unclean.

These gay conversion therapies subject people to counselling practices which portray them as broken and ultimately a perversion of what is normal. They try to soften this condemnation by using language like “pray away the gay”. I know people who have been subjected to these practices and the scars are deep and lifelong, because the condemnation has gone to the heart of their humanity, their identity. These conversion practices cause deep and lifelong trauma, they bring some young people to suicide, they break families apart and destroy friendships and isolate people from support networks. All in the name of Jesus. It is, as Alistair Macrae writes, bad theology. And it kills; body mind and spirit.

What is interesting to observe about young LGBT people in churches like these is that they hear themselves defined as unclean by preachers and the social practices of the church – they hear themselves condemned as unclean – but they are not free to leave. Like the man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit they are neither free to fully belong, nor to go. They are in thrall to bad theology. Which is death-dealing.

It seems strange that the man with the unclean spirit is hovering around the synagogue. What is happening here is what so often happens when we condemn someone for their status or their behaviour – while we reject the person as beyond the pale, we hold them in thrall; they desire to belong, but we insist that they can’t fully belong unless they jump over the purity line. For gays,

to become hetero-normative. Churches also try to soften this abuse of queer people by using the phrase: love the sinner, hate the sin – which they experience as a kind of mental and psychological and spiritual torture.

So the man in the synagogue, even though he stands condemned as unclean, cannot leave. This is a mantle of shame which the church has too often throws over people to keep them under control, by which their humanity and their sense of self as child of God has been debauched. We have held people in thrall – in a place where we proclaim the love of God and yet people find themselves neither able to fully experience the love of God through the church community, nor able to leave.

We might also ask about all those who *have* left. Have they smelt the hypocrisy of our bad theology – about being unwed, mothers out of wedlock, divorced, or their non-binary sexuality. Have those who have left gone to find their lives, gone to reclaim them from bad theology? I hope so.

But we may easily stumble over this story as a miraculous healing. What is miraculous about this story is the way in which Jesus breaks through the purity code. You may recall from the Hebrew prophet Hosea the words: *For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.*

As Jesus commences his ministry he begins to break open these boundaries of exclusion – the ways in which we sacrifice people to our image of God - and Jesus begins to liberate them from the bonds which hold them condemned. Certainly, to break out of these bonds throws people into convulsions but ultimately, they become free.

This is the battle which is unleashed in Marks' gospel. Mid way through the gospel in chapter 7 there is a showdown between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus repeats the words of the prophet Isaiah to them and the crowd who have gathered around:

*This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*

Later in this episode Jesus turns to the crowd and says:

Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

Jesus redefines sin not as the things we do or don't do – our personal peccadillos - but as the kind of fixation with other people's purity. What he calls people to is the purity of heart which is full of mercy and compassion – shaped by, echoing the mercy and compassion of God.

We'll hear more about this as we go along with Mark. He provokes us to wonder about our own judgementalism and the ways in which we shape our churches and all our communities of which we are a part. He provokes us to wonder about what it means to bring the good news and to reveal the kingdom of heaven. He provokes us to carefully consider our theology and whether it kills or gives life.

We can give thanks for those who continue to challenge forces of oppression and call for the release of those who are bound in body, mind and spirit. May we be agents of this liberation. And we can continue to give thanks for God in Christ who continues to call us out of those things which hold us in thrall to powers of darkness and oppression.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

Andrew Boyle