

Lent 5

21st March 2021

Jeremiah 31. 31-34

Psalm 119. 9-16

John 12. 20-33

I have a friend who has a house in North Fitzroy. This house has two street frontages, one at the front, the other at the rear of the block. For many years now he has been working towards constructing a second, two-story residence on the back of the site in which he would live, then selling the other house. But progress has been very slow as neighbours have all along the way objected to every detail of the proposed project, delaying its fruition by years. My friend has a determination which I have always admired; his neighbours are also determined.

The latest diversion has been over the title boundary on one side. At the back of my friend's block there has been a small brick building on the boundary line. At some point in time a former neighbour constructed a lean-to carport which was attached to the brick wall on my friend's boundary. But a recent land survey has revealed that the brick wall on my friend's block is actually 50mm inside the actual boundary line as it is recorded on the title. The neighbour wants to claim adverse possession of the 50mm sliver of land. If this was successful it would mean a change to all of my friend's very detailed and precise designs for his project, frustrating the project's realisation further. All over 50mm.

As we have acknowledged the Boon Wurrung people and their custodianship of the land on which the Ormond church stands over the course of Lent, the silliness of this argument over a 50mm sliver of land has come into stark relief for me. I have realised how tightly developed and controlled our Australian notion of land ownership is.

The Great Australian Dream has been the quarter acre block. Our lives have been oriented toward acquiring such a piece of land – and more if possible, leading to us being considered as successful – and we build a life on it: marriage, children, happy family, prosperity, success and wealth. We stake our claim and sign on the dotted line. The Great Australian Dream. But, as Stan Grant says, the Great Australian Dream has been built upon the backs of the aboriginal people of Australia.

Strange, I thought, how the British created a legal fiction they called *terra nullius*, that there were no people in Australia – the indigenous inhabitants being classed as fauna, not humans - and so no one owned it, and on this vacated land we created a great legal superstructure around land ownership – down to the point where we can argue over a 50mm sliver of land. The truth is our identity as Australians is so intricately and intimately tied up with property ownership.

So, when the notion of *terra nullius* was challenged and found wanting in the Mabo Case in the High Court of Australia in 1992, everyone thought that the aboriginal people were going to be coming after the quarter acre block. Why would they want my quarter-acre block, no one seemed to ask?

With our identities tied up with our paling-fenced parcels of suburbia we couldn't imagine that what was being sought was recognition of some other relationship to land which indigenous people have had and still have. The impediment to comprehending this relationship to country is ours – not theirs. We are the retarded ones with our identities and imaginations not able to see beyond the six-foot fence.

It strikes me that there is a darkness to our notion of land ownership. Because it is built on the fact of stolen land. With our identities tied up with land ownership it is difficult for us to acknowledge our own complicity in the theft – all this time later. It is as though the great legal superstructure around ownership is some kind of smokescreen to divert us from what has taken place. With the stroke of a pen, thousands of years of indigenous ‘ownership’ was wiped away by the British legal system in the notion of *terra nullius* and it is as though the ubiquitousness of the quarter acre block has sought to make us all complicit in the theft. This is a collective darkness. Behind our Australian dream, a nightmare for indigenous people.

We have read some words of Jesus which John has woven into a scene as Jesus begins to move toward the cross: *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

We are reminded that the call to know the life of God means loss and death of those things which so often are considered to be necessary, indispensable, measures of success and identity which our culture places on us. But in Christ we are called to this path of dying in order to bear much fruit. This is not bodily death, rather death to those things which hold us in thrall and strangle our god-giveness; and those things in our living which deny life to others.

This week in the session in the study series *Believing in Our Contemporary World* we looked at the subject of the Bible and its relationship to Christian faith. We heard the OT scholar Walter Brueggemann, a titan of biblical scholarship, describe scripture as a *work of imagination that invites our faithful imagination.*

Now we place too little store by imagination in our society – or maybe we fail to adequately examine how we are formed or encouraged to imagine ourselves; to dream ourselves into things. We sometimes dismiss children’s imaginative play as something that children do and in time they will give up - it’s something we are expected to do as we “grow up”. But as adults, in truth, we continue to imagine ourselves into scenarios on which we stake our lives – the whole direction of our lives. So, to be raised with our eye on the goal of realising the great Australian Dream in the purchase of a quarter acre block is a work of imagination – we imagine ourselves into security and prosperity and domestic happiness.

The Great Australian Dream is a work of imagination which guides and directs our lives and gets us out of bed in the morning. But in our imagining and working toward that goal maybe there are some things we overlook. We have overlooked the theft. We have overlooked the pointlessness of the Great Australian Dream to the indigenous people of Australia; indeed the insult it is to their millennia-deep culture and way of relating to land and the way that gives them identity and a sense of belonging. A work of imagination? No question.

A couple of weeks ago in our New testament reading we heard about the wisdom of God being found in the scandal and foolishness of the cross. Dying and rising.

As we reflect on what will give life to our indigenous brothers and sisters, we have to recognise that so much of what we have taken to ourselves as essential, or told ourselves a story about being lucky or blessed, has actually robbed them of so much. A spirit of penitence is a spirit which is open to what is wrong and needs to be righted, recognising that some things in us need to die. Penitence doesn’t involve a spirit of judgement and condemnation but a spirit which recognises

that there are things which need to be righted and reconciled. The spirit which fears the quarter-acre block being taken away is a spirit of fear, not love. We can imagine ourselves into a world graced by God where love and healing are the order of the day and are possible. We can imagine ourselves through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus into reconciliation which invites us to put down those stories we have taken to ourselves, or to hold them more lightly, and be able to approach our indigenous neighbours in a spirit of openness, curiosity, humility, contrition and grace; grace for both First and Second Peoples. In this there can be joy for us all.

Dr Maleika Selwyn offers us a prayer which seeks God's spirit:

Teach us how to love each other and journey together,
in this process of reconciliation and true friendship.

As we explore how Ormond UC may participate in this reconciliation may God give us hearts which are open and transformed by resurrection, that Christ may still be seen and felt and heard.

Andrew Boyle