**Awakened by compassion.**

**Today’s passage from Exodus 1 tells the story of the beginning of Moses’ life. He was really lucky to survive infancy, thanks to the compassion of the midwives, who put their own lives at risk, and to that of Pharoah’s daughter, who rescued Moses from the river. Moses of course played a vital role in leading the Hebrews to safety in the promised land after they fled Egypt.**

**I am going to talk today about another inspiring man, who also led his people to safety and who played a pivotal role in the existence of the Uniting Church. That was only one of his many achievements though.**

**In 1901, year of Federation, a young student teacher named John, aged twenty, was appointed to a newly established school at Hazelwood, which is now called Churchill. The school was called Eel Hole Creek School and was built on land owned by my Nana’s uncle. John boarded with the Northways, my Nana’s family, who lived nearby while teaching at the school. The school changed its name to Hazelwood South within a couple of years, and was the school attended by both my grandmother and grandfather.**

**After leaving Gippsland and teaching for a further year in West Hawthorn, young John entered ministry as a home missionary with the Presbyterian Church, and was sent to the town of Beech Forest, in the Otway ranges in the Western District of Victoria. I assume he travelled there by train to Colac, then caught the steam train called the Beechy, which had just begun operation. (I was there when the last train left Beech Forest in 1962. That train is now in operation on the Puffing Billy line). John’s passion had always been ministry rather than teaching, though he did continue to do occasional relief teaching at the Beech Forest school, then located at Gardner’s Hotel. The Beech Forest school proper opened just a few years later in 1909. (I attended that school from 1962 -1964. Ten children only, as the population had dropped to 180 by then). Beech Forest was a thriving timber town back in the early 1900’s, of some 600 inhabitants, and about 29 sawmills. (There was only one sawmill left in 1962) Beech Forest was a couple of hundred kilometres from Melbourne, so fairly isolated. Accidents happened from time to time in felling and milling timber, often very serious. While John was there a man was injured. There were no medical facilities available locally, and he had to be transported to the nearest hospital and doctor, down in Colac, 45 kilometres away. A group of men assembled and he was carried out by stretcher by the teams involved, relieving each other as stretcher bearers as they tired on the long walk. John was among the stretcher bearers that day. The long slog would have taken at least ten hours. At least in was downhill!**

**I don’t think there was a Presbyterian Church building in Beech Forest when John was there, but it’s hard to be sure, as the town was wiped out by fire in 1919. I gather from one of his biographies that John conducted services in people’s homes.**

**Not long after the logging accident, John himself was thrown from his horse, suffering a nasty injury to his face. He was patched up, and fortunately facial injuries often heal remarkably well with minimal scarring, though the scar on his upper lip remained visible for some time. John was very aware of the perils of living at a distance from medical care, and this awareness was to shape his life. (Even when I lived at Beech Forest, the nearest medical help was in Colac. I remember Mum telling me that the local sawmiller sliced open his thigh on the saw, probably quite a significant injury. He raided his wife’s sewing box and stitched up the wound himself!)**

**After 18 months at Beech Forest, John was appointed to Buchan, again as a home missionary. Buchan was another isolated town, though not too far from Bairnsdale. John had a passion for photography, developing his own film, and from time to time would share his slides at the town hall in Bairnsdale at his very popular Lantern Slide Projections. He was the first to photograph the inside of the Buchan Caves, and one of the first to see the potential of the caves as a tourist attraction.**

**In 1906, after his years as a home missionary, John was able to apply for a scholarship to study divinity at Ormond College at Melbourne University, completing his studies and being ordained as a minister in 1911. He wasn’t the best student of Latin and Greek and was relieved to scrape through. He was often distracted from his studies by his other interests, in first aid, in photography and travelling to shearing sheds in isolated parts of Victoria ministering to and counselling both adults and children. He also ran a Sunday School for the local children in Braybrook, diverting them away from less healthy pursuits.**

**John published a book called the Bushman’s Companion in 1910, a handbook for Australia’s rural dwellers, consisting of first aid, hymns, prayers, bible readings and even a funeral service. Over 2000 copies were distributed. It was another distraction from his studies!**

**John was fascinated by the stories of the inland of Australia he heard while growing up. His first placement as an ordained minister was to Beltana, in the north of South Australia. The challenges there were immense. Distances were vast. It was not a safe environment to bring a wife and children to, so many if not most of the inhabitants were young men, trying to make a living on large, flat, arid properties. Accidents happened from time to time, and the only way to get help was to travel by horseback hundreds or even thousands of miles to the nearest major centre, which could take days, or sometimes weeks. The injured person would often have a prolonged agonising death long before medical help could reach him. John’s first priority was to establish bush hospitals, staffed by one or two nurses. The Australian Inland Mission was born, and in time 14 further bush hospitals came into being.**

**Inland Australia is vast, but John was determined to bring all Australians under a ‘mantle of safety’, no matter where they lived. How could he possibly accomplish this though? It wasn’t just the tyranny of distance, but lack of communication. There was just no way for someone in need of help to communicate that need.**

**The first world war arrived, and John was encouraged by the rapid developments in aviation. It was suggested to him that plane flights might be the answer in bringing medical help to the critically injured or unwell. Apart from accidents, typhoid was a major cause of sudden death, often wiping out whole households. Funding, and communication were still the big issues though. There were no phone and power lines, and distances way too large for any radio reception.**

**John was put in touch with a brilliant young man called Alfred Traeger, and together they worked on the problem. It took years, but eventually, in the mid 1920’s they came up with the pedal powered radio, which revolutionised communication in the outback. The Aerial Medical Service, later called the Royal Flying Doctor Service, became a practical possibility by 1928, but there were still huge problems to overcome, including funding, as the depression years hit. The church had to decide where its priorities lay. Fortunately, John was a driven man who would not give up and managed to keep the idea going through the depression years. The Aerial Medical service, later called The Royal Flying Doctor Service, finally came into being in 1934, with government and private backing.**

**John Flynn became Moderator General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia in 1939 but also in 1939 came the 2nd WW. There was real risk of invasion by the Japanese. Northern cities and towns including Darwin and Broome were extensively bombed and the ability to communicate across huge distances using Flynn and Traeger’s pedal radio was absolutely vital to the war effort.**

**The other obstacle to bringing up a family in inland Australia was the absence of education for the children. This all changed too in the early 1950’s with the establishment of the School of the Air, where correspondence lessons were able to be complemented by being able to interact with teachers and fellow students across thousands of miles. I remember visiting the base for the School of the Air in Broken Hill when we visited there on a school trip in 1969. We listened to a teacher giving a lesson over the air, which was quite fascinating. It probably also made us feel a little grateful for the luxury of being able to attend school physically rather than by radio.**

**When Graeme and I were doing 5th year Medicine in 1976 we had an elective term of 6 weeks, where we were free to organise our own medical studies wherever we liked. Graeme and I travelled by bus to Alice Springs for our elective term, and while we were there went on several flights with the flying doctors. I flew down to the town of Amata in the north of South Australia and observed an antenatal clinic and Grame flew over to Docker River in Western Australia. It was certainly a way to cover long distances quickly. We both flew to Papunya, north of Alice Springs and spent a week there with the flying doctor. That was a really interesting time, living amongst aboriginal people who had only had limited contact with white people.**

**Currently the Royal Flying Doctor service undertakes 40,000 flights per year, and treats 750,000 people.**

**John Flynn had a pivotal role in the establishment of the Uniting Church. The Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches were brought together for the first time under one roof in Darwin in 1956, calling themselves the United Church. It wasn’t until 1977 that the Uniting Church came into being though, 26 years after John’s death.**

**I am sure that John Flynn would have been very familiar with today’s reading from Romans. He really did offer his body as a living sacrifice, with diligence and cheerfulness. He didn’t even marry until he was 52, too late then to have a family. John’s passion for the wellbeing of inland Australians often brought him into conflict with Synod. There was a great deal of expense involved! Where does the responsibility of the church begin and end? Are we to deal only with spiritual matters, or do we have a broader responsibility?**

**John Flynn was an amazing and inspirational person, who dedicated himself to the service of others, and changed Australia for the better. He had many gifts, and used them all. It is wonderful to think that all Australians could have a mantle of safety and that is something we really need to continue to work towards. I was really shocked to hear a few weeks back that Whyalla’s maternity services were being halted, hopefully only temporarily. Whyalla is a city of 20,000 people but Midwives are in short supply, and under increasing stress. There is a projected workplace shortage of 100,000 nurses within the next couple of years.**

**Many general practices have had to close too, leaving towns without access to basic services. There is a projected shortage of 10,000 general practitioners by 2030. Given there are only 38,000 GPs in total in Australia, the impact of that shortage will be huge, especially in rural areas.**

**I guess there’s not really very much we can do as a church to reverse the impact of decisions made by governments decades ago. But let’s not forget John Flynn, and what he was able to accomplish against great odds.**