Sermon: A welcome stranger

In many languages, invite others to welcome as they would have done in their country of origin.

“Croeso i chi” {Crow e so ee knee} Welsh -a warm welcome to you all.

The importance of Welcome, why do we do this?

Robyn Thorpe asked this simple question at the Eden Project lab this week. How do we welcome a strange or newcomer to our town? The responses; - a smile, a hello, directions, introductions , a welcome package or gift, information - what is there to do here? who to contact, etc. Check with Robyn for more contributions. In this congregation we pass the Peace, to help others feel accepted or at ease – celebrating forgiveness and harmony.

Traditionally, way, way back in more primitive tribal times, perhaps ones very survival rested upon the ability to welcome the stranger. A welcome stranger was less likely to steal your food, all of it, to welcome may have meant to share a meal. The adoption of welcome often led to mutual benefits. Beyond that welcome trade could develop. To exchange of resources and the exchange and exploration of arts and knowledge. All sorts of technologies could be shared for mutual benefit, medicines and techniques for producing food, development of agriculture, domestication of animals etc etc.

The list is long and of course complex. And we as a species have never arrived at the completion of this process of exchange and benefits. It goes on to this day.

Sadly, peaceful co-existence often falls out of balance and we can easily witness these tensions in the world today. Welcoming the stranger, aid and trade can become very complex and the independence and inter-dependence of peoples become fractious and contentious. Falls into conflict.

The Bible has many examples of the welcoming the strangers, the first I can recall

## **Genesis 18**

“The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3He said, “If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4Let a little **water** be brought, and then you may all **wash your feet and rest** under this tree. 5Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.”

*It is an interesting chapter deserving of attention…..*

“Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.”

6So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and **bake some bread.”**

7Then he ran to the herd and **selected a choice, tender calf** and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8He then brought some curds and **milk** and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

10Then one of them said, “**I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”**

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11**Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”**

13Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ 14Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

15Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

16When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and **Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.** 17**Then the Lord said,** “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? 18**Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”**

I love this reading, how wonderfully it tells us of welcome, the practicalities of welcome, the role Sarah plays, the prophetic Voice, the struggle to believe and the historical importance that causes many future generations to reflect upon including our own. It is one of the Biblical foundational stories.

*(We routinely acknowledge the possession and care of our lands by indigenous peoples. We hope, and pray, that we might continually learn from their ancient culture and the practices of living in the land and waters which sustained their culture for thousands of years. We recognised that Europeans, the second nation’s peoples are relative newcomers still with much to learn about living more harmoniously, more sustainably on God’s creation.)*

We know that biblical history, indeed the history of the whole world, has always been one of migration and cultural exchange and integration, of peace and of conflict, of domination and submission, of assimilation and of the striving for intercultural harmony, of cultural autonomy and independent identity.

*(A complex interrelationship of diverse peoples. There are many push and pull factors, issues that cause people to leave or flee their homelands or seek other places of safety or provision. The Bible gives accounts of drought and famine, of domination and conquest or displacement of being refugees, captives in foreign lands, of longing for homelands and traditions.)*

Whatever our origins, communities and cultures that survive have customs and rules that are originally intended to protect the integrity and continuation of that group; but, as we are also well-aware, these rules are often compromised or disobeyed. Powerful leaders often perpetuate their own privilege and exploit or disadvantage the less powerful, usually the poor. Leaders have followers who also have responsibilities to uphold good laws and standards. In short, all systems of law and order at some point fail.

Today’s Bible readings points to the Hebrew culture, sustained and strengthened by its rules, the God given laws of God intended to guide, protect, and bless a chosen people, to instil an appreciation for care of the poor, the stranger in the land, the widows and orphans and justice for those who might otherwise be exploited or deprived of their humanity and dignity. We perhaps are familiar with the most basic rendition of these laws – the 10 commandments and would no doubt agree that the law of the Lord is perfect making wise the soul.

# Refer to Psalm 19:7-9 Contemporary English Version as read by Petra earlier

7 The Law of the Lord is perfect;  
    it gives us new life.  
His teachings last forever,  
and they give wisdom  
    to ordinary people.  
8The Lord's instruction is right;  
    it makes our hearts glad.  
His commands shine brightly,  
    and they give us light.

**9Worshiping the Lord is sacred;  
    he will always be worshiped.  
All his decisions  
    are correct and fair.**

Nothing wrong with the Law, but again, I think that the Old Testament records a frequent falling short; or a deliberate turning away; of ignorance; of self-interest; of compromise of sin.

If we time travel and land closer to home, we confess and do confess regularly that collectively and individually, we **all** sin, all fail to achieve the righteousness of God by our own efforts, even as Christians!

*But There’s The Rub*, an idiom for Pat …… Shakespeare would say, - here is the difficulty or obstacle that prevents a desired outcome of righteousness.. *“Ay, there’s the rub, when wisdom is too late.”* The fool in King Lear.

**What do we do about this painful situation when even God’s perfect law seems to fail to produce the outcome God longs to see, in every generation, in all peoples.?**

I am going to leave the question hanging there for a bit.

Today is multicultural Sunday.

Aspects of welcome, hopefully we all saw a word or words on our welcome slide that reflects **your** cultural background, if f not speak to us afterwards so we can include more!

Multi-cultural implies difference. If we are hard wired to belong, does that mean? To be the same, to be like or liked in as many ways as possible?

We are all inclined to be like the proverbial Birds of a Feather. And flock together?

What binds us together, connects us, engages us and what drives us apart?

Communication – Michaels exploration, language, beliefs, celebrations and traditions, common interests and lifestyles, music, dance, some necessary for survival some by choice - hobbies and exploration of individual giftedness. Communion sharing of rituals and traditions and the forming of new ones by consensus or attachment.

I will ask some more rhetorical questions, you might like to discuss later?

**How do some cultures become hidden or mis-understood, ignored?**

**Do we exclude others without intention, it just happens?**

**How deliberate do we have to be to include others?**

**This week, I listened to a radio program about PALM workers in Australia.**

I had a lot to learn.

We are blessed to welcome brothers and sisters from various Pacific nations to our service and social events from time to time. My interest was sparked by knowing that many of these people work at Uniting Aged Care and some are my direct neighbours. Some members of our congregation have strong and active connections within Uniting Aged Care and with their employees in community.

So, lots of good reasons to better inform myself. Because today is Multicultural Sunday. I thought I would like further expand the inclusive nature of our gatherings. I am sure there are some in our company far better qualified to speak on this subject so please share during our fellowship What does PALM stand for?

PPT

Well beyond the attractive image of palm trees swaying in the warm breeze, is the intention of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme?

Like most employment schemes, what is good and what is not so good about this scheme needs exploration and discussion, more time than we might have today.

Those who come to Australia under this scheme, may be picking your fruit or your veggies, working in the meat works, or as care workers in our aged-care facilities. In simple terms, the Australian nation benefits by filling gaps in our labour market by an estimated 30,000 individuals and the Pacifica participants benefit by earning wages to support their loved ones back home and furthering their economic ambitions.

We could be seduced to think in only economic terms but it is much more important to think first of the very human and social aspects of this arrangement. Workers are People first and foremost.

We all need to try and understand and think from the perspective of how we welcome and support these people who live and work close by. Let us consider for eg the huge emotional and social costs of being separated from one’s family and community. So much to be missed, all those relationships which motivate people to love and to want to provide for. Think of missing the warmth of the sun when you are plunged into Australia’s cold, especially winter, How about your favourite food, social gatherings and customs. The list is long.

Then, there are things that don’t turn out as expected. The disappointments.

The job might be risky, in terms of injury to body and mental health. Employers might be kind and generous or austere and distant, even exploitative. In short, relationships both formal and in formal can be positive or problematic. I believe that workers are tied to their employers to whom they are contracted. When problems arise, although theoretically formal supports exist they may be difficult or impossible to access.

From my limited knowledge access to medical services can be costly, further training and education lacking in opportunity and again costly. If you are not a citizen, if you are not permanent then planning for your social needs in a region or town can be severely lacking. What to do in a natural disaster? What flexibility is there to be home for special occasions or to comfort or help family in need? What about your partner, or your children - growing up without you? Keeping focussed on the long-term goals can be very hard. And of course, temporary means temporary, a temporary visa which may or may not be extended beyond a season. Depending on circumstances and desires, what are the pathways to permanency? So many aspects to life in a new country and the often-painful aspects of meeting one’s own needs and the needs of those at a distance.

We can’t answer every question. But we can ask them. We might feel love and gratitude for those who care for **our own most** vulnerable our aged relatives and friends, knowing full-well that they have left their own mothers and fathers, grandparents and children without their presence and similar care.

That might be a sad thought, even for some here today. Please do not leave with your sadness, there are many here who would like to support, to pray and listen.

As a Christian community what more is our responsibility?

To be better informed. To listen with respect and empathy. To assist in times of need. To know channels of advocacy and support. To worship together and be willing to adjust our ways of worship to bless those in our midst.

I am sure you have thoughts, please share during our further fellowship over a cuppa and chat.

To return to my earlier question.

**What do we do about this painful situation when even God’s perfect law seems to fail to produce the outcome God longs to see?** In every situation where we feel we have failed think again, from the reading Petra brought to us in Johns gospel, (and now in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

## **Reading Galatians 3: 3-13 CEV– Petra)**

## **Jesus says,**

Do not turn away…remember what I have said…..I will send the Spirit to you…8The Spirit will show the truth about sin, justice and the judgment…The Spirit will bring glory to me by taking my message and telling it to you. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.