

EVENSONG, ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL; INTERNATIONAL WOMENS DAY AND COMMONWEALTH DAY

08-03-2020

Exodus 2.23 – 3.8a; Ps 119.9-24; Matthew 26.36-56

The website 'Commonwealth.org', in its page about the history of the commonwealth, begins, "The Commonwealth is one of the world's oldest political associations of states. Its roots go back to the British Empire, when countries around the world were ruled by Britain."

Membership of the modern Commonwealth is based on free and equal voluntary co-operation and includes countries with no historical ties to the British Empire.¹

That is how things are now. But we must remember our history, the history of the Commonwealth and of the colonisation by Britain of countries including Australia. It happened in the past, but our present is shaped by it; we are living with the consequences of invasion, conquest, and domination, every day of our lives.

George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This was famously tweaked by Winston Churchill, who said, "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." We still have much to learn.

The Christian church used the so-called 'doctrine of discovery' to justify conquest; Pope Alexander said in 1493 that any lands not inhabited by Christians were available to be discovered, claimed, and the rulership taken over in order that "barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."

Celia Kemp, author of 'A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart'² writes, "Our history shapes who we are and how we think.

That is, it shapes our theology.

Anglicans are entirely embedded in recent Australian history. An Anglican chaplain came over on the first fleet and Anglicans have been active across Australian society ever since.

Anglicans were the pastoralists and governors and newspaper proprietors and miners and missionaries and Protectors and advocates and First Nations peoples.

We are part of the good of it. We are part of the woe of it."

When we meet Moses in Exodus chapter 2, he had fled Egypt where his people, the Hebrews, were living in captivity as slaves.

Moses was wandering about the countryside minding his own business when he came across a blazing bush, from which God called to him.

Moses was told that God would use him to lead his people out of Egypt to a good broad land, flowing with milk and honey, where they would finally be free. From here the story of the Exodus begins: the founding story of the people of Israel.

¹ <https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us>

² A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart', Celia Kemp 2018 ISBN 978-0-6483444-07
www.abmission.org/voice

The problem, we might find ourselves thinking, is that land belonged to other people, who lived and died, farmed and fished there. But that was OK, they weren't God's chosen people so they could be killed, dispossessed, enslaved with impunity. They didn't matter.

A considerable time later, Jesus lived his earthly life in a country that was occupied by a foreign power. He was born, lived and died in what had been the Kingdom of Israel, the promised land- which was now ruled by the Roman Empire.

Jesus spent his life patiently teaching his followers the way of non-violent resistance, subverting the powers of empire and preaching the reversals of his new kingdom. He, like many others who have resisted the power of violence without reciprocating with aggression or violence, was murdered by those powers.

This evening's reading from Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus praying in Gethsemane and then being arrested after Judas had identified him.

The man of peace was betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends and given into the hands of those who wanted him to disappear, to stop criticising them and threatening their power and influence.

Jesus taught the radical equality of the kingdom, a kingdom so completely different from any other empire or kingdom as to be unrecognisable. In God's kingdom all have enough, all are honoured and have a place, in stark contrast to existing kingdoms in which only a few have enough, only a few are honoured, and many or most have no place and no voice.

When this country we call Australia became a British colony, its original inhabitants had no voice and their place was taken from them. All of us who have come to settle here from other lands continue to benefit from that dark history.

First Nations' Women and their children were treated shamefully by some of the first Europeans who came here, and that legacy continues to affect indigenous peoples.

Ann Summers' best-selling book of 1975, 'Damned Whores and God's Police'³, told early colonial history through the perspective of the women.

The colonisation of Australia, she argued, had created a patriarchal gender order that reduced 19th-century women to one of two narrow roles: virtuous wives and mothers, dubbed "God's police", and the transgressive "damned whores".

I wonder how much of that 'patriarchal gender order' is still present in Australian society and has become so normalised that we are unable to see it- unless we look with different eyes.

We have legislation to ensure equality of pay and opportunity for all, male and female- but inequality still clearly exists. It remains difficult for women to find and maintain good paid work through their child-rearing years and beyond. Women aged over 55 are the fastest-growing cohort of homeless Australians.⁴

³ Damned Whores and God's Police: The colonization of women in Australia, 1975, Ann Summers, ISBN 0140218327

⁴ <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/projects/risk-homelessness-older-women>

As we are painfully aware, gender-based violence is endemic in Australian society. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender-based violence is a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality and continues to be one of the most notable human rights violations within all societies. ⁵

Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of their gender. Both women and men experience gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls. On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner.⁶

When women and children are murdered by their partners, ex-partners and fathers, we are horrified and appalled; but it keeps on happening. Governments pledge more money and resources after particularly prominent murders, but the next budget is just as likely to cut funding for women's refuges yet again.⁷

Violence and discrimination aimed at women are not new and did not come out of nowhere. Their roots are in millennia of cultural practices continued by societies and the church, carried by colonizers and settlers to lands belonging to others.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is '#Each for Equal: an equal world is an enabled world'.⁸ We have a very long way to go before our world could be considered in any way 'equal'.

If we look at the world through the lens of the kingdom and take seriously the teaching and example of Jesus, we will have a chance of re-shaping societies. If we listen to our First Peoples and are prepared to learn from our history, we will become aware of changes we must make.

If we truly understood that ALL people, of any gender, ethnicity and identity, are equal in the sight of God and created in God's image, would we still treat anyone as of less worth? Would we continue to exert power over others, taking advantage of comparative weakness with exploitation and violence?

The Blessed Mary, in her Song of Praise, said, 'God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.' We need her words and those of her son, our Lord, to stir us up today, tomorrow, and until God's kingdom comes in all its fullness.

The Lord be with you.

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence>

⁶ <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-06/aboriginal-domestic-violence-survivors-peak-body-defunded/11773066> ;
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/australia-urged-action-rising-violence-women-200306022709312.html>

⁸ <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>