

**Sermon for Alstonville Anglican Church**

**13 October 2019 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**

*Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66; Luke 17:11-19*

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*Ten Lepers, James Christensen*

It's good to be with you here at Alstonville today in this lovely historic church building. I understand the first St Bartholomew's dated from 1896. No doubt, when the church was built, the town of Alstonville looked very different to what it does today.

The early European history of this district was one of isolation and hardship. What today is an easy drive from Ballina or Coolangatta Airports, was once a very difficult journey that would have taken days, from Sydney, probably by ship as far as Ballina. While the land was a familiar and much loved place to the Bundjalung people, who traditionally occupied and cared for this land, to the early pioneers, this landscape must have seemed challenging and even hostile, let alone a very long way from their mother countries. A strange and unfamiliar land.

The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah today raises the question of "how can the Israelites remain faithful in a strange land?": a land of exile, where they have been taken against their will.

In a letter written to the exiles, the prophet Jeremiah says their captivity will last a long time. They should come to accept it. They should, in the words of last Sunday's Psalm, learn to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land". That question from last Sunday's Psalm (137) is a profound one:

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

In many ways it's a question that wasn't looking for an answer, it was a cry of despair, a cry, a lament. But nevertheless it is a question that this week's bible readings seem to be attempting to answer.

In particular, Jeremiah in his advice to the exiles (verse 4 and following) "*Thus says the Lord...to all the exiles...build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, take wives and have sons and daughters...multiply there and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city...for in its welfare, you will find your welfare*".

In other words, to be faithful in a strange land is to *befriend* the place: not to decrease but to prosper regardless, to make the *darkness, light*.

Not to fear it, or to deny you're there, but to come to accept where you are and make the most of it.

The question that the Israelites asked in captivity is a question that we all have from time to time. One I'm sure the early European settlers in this district might have asked, and one that the traditional custodians of this land might have asked too after they had been dispossessed and found themselves removed to other places:

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" It's a question about faith, hope and perseverance: "How can we be faithful at a time of suffering and hardship?"

Most of us ask this question many times in our lives but we ask it in different words:

How can I have the courage to survive this cancer?

How can I keep my faith and yet deal with the death of a loved one?

How can I keep my hope despite the rejection of unemployment?

How can I keep my faith and hope in a world that seems meaningless?

As a priest, I have the privilege of spending time with people at some of the highest points and the lowest points of their lives.

- The "strange land" for most seems to be the low points of our lives.
- Probably because (like the Babylonian exiles) few of us want to go there,
- And most feel uncomfortable when we get there.
- Many don't fear death itself, but we fear losing hope, faith, courage as we face the prospect of it (or face whatever the problem may be)

How do we remain faithful, hopeful? How do we persevere despite this terrible thing that is happening?

In the Gospel we hear the story of the 10 Lepers: 10 people who have emerged from an unhappy place, a land of suffering, pain, illness but perhaps just as importantly, from a place of isolation, rejection and prejudice.

Until they were healed by Jesus, they had been living as aliens (not politically exiled but aliens due to being considered unclean).

In the "Ten Lepers" painting by James Christensen we see a depiction of this scene.

It's one of my favourite paintings. I like the energy of the nine who have been healed.

They're free! They sort of lean forward into their new future. They're full of hustle and bustle.

They're full of talk and plans about how they're going to live their new lives. They're gone in a flash.

We've all been there. In their business, they sum up our lives really. Full of energy, activity and plans.

Then there's the one: the 10<sup>th</sup> one.

*... one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup> Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

(Luke 17:15-19)

In this depiction, he stops and thinks. I wonder what he's thinking? What's going through his mind? As the verses tell us, he's giving thanks, but what made *him*, in the midst of all the excitement, stop and think about this, when the others rushed on? What were his other thoughts?

A new future doesn't come without its uncertainties. He can't earn a living as a beggar now. Healing is what he's longed for, but it comes with its own set of new expectations. He's entering a new, and previously unexplored, strange land! The land of wellness and inclusion. What are the implications of this for him?

As Psalm 66 reminds us, "*Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals*" (66:5). God brings us through some rough stuff sometimes, and for whatever reason, we are changed people. Because of what's gone on before, we're not the same. Suffering, or whatever has gone on before, has somehow changed us.

In a sense, every new moment is a strange land, or at least, new territory for us. God's ongoing work of creation continues in us, he re-creates us through his Spirit, and we become slightly changed people through his work in us. When we moved back to Australia a few years ago after many years living in the UK, we found that Australia, the land of my birth and the land of my wife's birth, was a bit of a strange land. Partly that was because Australia had changed in the intervening years, but primarily it was because we had changed. I was the same person, but also, because of all the new life experiences and insights I was also not the same person.

In every new situation, we need to be alert to God's call upon our lives. Like the 10<sup>th</sup> healed Leper, we need to constantly be ready to stop, reflect and think. To be grateful for the blessings and conscious of what God has done, and is doing, for us.

Today's readings are more than just practical advice for flourishing in uncomfortable places that are not of our choosing. It's about remembering our identity as God's people in on whatever ground we occupy, and through gratefulness and thanksgiving, to be lights for God in that place.

Jesus, Master, have mercy on me.

Touch me in my isolation.

Heal me of my afflictions.

Free me to serve you with a glad heart,  
and draw me back always to thank you.

For your infinite mercy and love. Amen.