

Sermon 1st September 2013 - "All created equal"

Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT

Gregor Henderson

Jeremiah 2:9-13

Hebrews 13:1-3

Luke 14:1,7-14

About six weeks ago I booked and paid for a dinner ticket at a function here in Canberra, happily paying my \$40 online, and printed off the resultant ticket ready to go on the appointed day. The next day I received a phone call – "Gregor, you've bought your dinner ticket, but you're invited as our guest. Your \$40 will be refunded minus a small unavoidable booking fee and you're to come as our honoured guest!". Oh, if you insist, said I – and then immediately I thought of today's teaching from Jesus. When you're invited to a celebratory dinner, sit at an ordinary place, and if your host invites you to come higher, then enjoy. It's very strong straightforward teaching about humility, about not thinking of ourselves more highly than we should.

The really tough teaching in today's gospel reading, follows that. Jesus says when we give a luncheon or dinner we shouldn't invite friends or family or rich neighbours, but the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Don't expect repayment for your dinner hosting, he says, invite those who need it most.

Phew, that raises lots of questions about our current-day hospitality. Difficult as it may be, however, there's a very important truth behind it – the truth that God regards everyone equally, loves everyone equally and wants us to treat everyone equally. That doesn't mean he approves of everything we do nor of every attitude we harbour inside, but it does mean God offers his love equally to every human being, for all are part of the creation God loves, and God wants us to live out his love for everyone, not least those who are trapped in poverty or need.

It's 50 years this past week since Martin Luther King delivered his fabulous "I have a dream" speech in Washington. With a crowd of around 250,000 gathered for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, it was one of the climactic points in the struggle for civil rights in the United States. Dr King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and commenced his address by referring to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation 100 years earlier, in 1863, when black American slaves were declared free. He then went on to refer to the searing words of the US Declaration of Independence approved by the American legislature on 4 July 1776, a declaration which is rooted in the Christian faith:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Dr King went on "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy.. now is the time to make justice a reality to all of God's children". His inspiring "I have a dream" sentences had nine sections, none more heart-rending than "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by their character".

Martin Luther King's soaring oratory, his deep faith in the love and justice of Christ, and his unswerving commitment to non-violence, make him one of the greatest Christian leaders of the past century. His speech concluded:

"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every tenement and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all

of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual 'Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last'".

We Christians do not have a clean history of standing against racism, sexism, discrimination. But we should. Throughout the first century of Christianity argument raged as to whether you had to follow Jewish laws and practices or whether Christians were freed from those. Freedom won. Gentile Christianity, with its God-given conviction that all humankind is loved by God, that different nationalities, skin colours, tribes, cultures and languages serve only to enrich our oneness as God's human family, Gentile Christianity won. We need constantly to guard against any philosophy or activity that discriminates against others, as if God does not offer love to them as well as to us.

We Australians know how hard it is to work against racism and discrimination. Those who are mentally ill, the latest generation of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, the homeless, and perhaps saddest of all, people who are Muslims, experience what it's like to be victims of discrimination or racism.

In the USA, African-Americans comprise only 8% of the population, but they are one third of the prison population and half those killed in gun shootings are African-Americans. Here, Aboriginal Australians comprise just 2.5% of the population, but 27% of the prison population, a rate of imprisonment that is 15 times higher than the non-indigenous population. And life expectancy for Aboriginal Australians is 10-11 years less than for the rest of us. Fine words against racism, for justice, are not enough.

Did you hear the words of Jeremiah? He castigates his people for turning against the ways of God - "has a nation changed its gods even though they are no gods?" Did you hear the words of the letter to the Hebrews - "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them."

God loves every human being. All are created equal. It is always the time to make justice a reality for all God's children.

[Oh, and I am donating the cost of my dinner ticket to the Canberra City Uniting Church Early Morning Program which provides free breakfast to the homeless 5 days a week.]

To the glory of God, Amen.