

Sermon Sunday 30 August 2020 *Dean Susanna Pain*

Exodus 3:1-15 Matthew 16.21-28

'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground'. Exodus 3:5

Surely all ground is holy?

Why this ground in particular? Possibly because here God is revealing Godself. Yet isn't it possible that God is present in all places, it's just that we don't always notice?

We come from the earth and to the earth we return. Nothing is lost. Our biblical heritage names us *Adamah*, earthlings from the red earth.

Today, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land where I am, the Braiakaulung Clan of the Gunai Kurnai Nation whose territory occupies most of present-day Gippsland and much of the southern slopes of the Victorian Alps. The Gunai Kurnai launched a native title claim in 1997 following on from the successful Mabo native title case of 1992. On 22 October 2010 the case was settled in the Federal Court under the *Native Title Act (1993)*. The Court recognised the Gunaikurnai as traditional owners, and found that they held native title over much of Gippsland. Based on these findings the Victorian Government entered into an agreement with the Gunaikurnai on the same day, the first agreement reached under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act (2010)*. This included: ten national parks and reserves transferred to the Gunaikurnai to be jointly managed with the State.¹

Take off your shoes, you're standing on Holy Ground. Aboriginal people know this.

Arrernte Aboriginal Elder from Central Australia, Margaret Kemarre Turner, OAM, writes:

The story is the Land, and the Land is the Story. the Story holds the people, and the people live inside the Story. The story lives inside the people, and the Land lives inside the people also. It goes all ways to hold the Land...

Apmereyanhe, our language- Land, is like a root or a tie to us. It holds all of us. The only way that we can translate into English how we see our relationship with the Land is with the words 'hold', and 'connect'. The roots of the country and its people are twined together. We are part of the Land.... The Land is us, and we are the Land. That's how we hold our Land...'²

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunai_people viewed 27 August 2020

² Margaret Kemarre Turner, Iwenhe Tyerrtye, *What it means to be an Aboriginal person*, (IAD Press, Alice Springs, 2010), 20, 33.

I wonder what land you belong to? What or where is your country? Wherever you are is holy ground and God speaks to us from wherever we are.

Each year I lead a retreat at Campfire in the Heart near Alice Springs in Central Australia. That's where I'm meant to be there right now. It's a five-day retreat where we pray, listen to reflections and spend time in the landscape. The journey of the week's retreat is to be open to encounter with G-d on the land.

Central Australia brings me to silence. It is a vast arid open place with its orange sand and rivers flowing underground. I think of Moses out there in rough desert lands tending his sheep, having grown used to the landscape after many years in exile, now with wives and children. Out in the bush alone, what was he thinking? Obviously dreaming, remembering home and his people in Egypt where he had been born, rescued and adopted into a royal home, before pining for his blood people, and murdering in his enthusiasm and adolescent anger, then fleeing, escaping, running, and here he is, in the desert. A vision pulls him up short. Take off your shoes, you're standing on holy ground. A burning bush, un-consumed... then an unimaginable conversation... a call to go back, a call to understand his identity. I sometimes think it takes time in places like this to reassess, to open up to the freshness of new life.. to be surprised.. but the bush was burning.

My growing up land was Canberra with the blue purple Brindabella mountains in the distance, a river plain surrounded by mountains. In Sale by contrast, it is flat and there is a lot of water here, especially at the moment. It has been a gathering place for First Nations peoples. It is also a massacre site.

I love walking around the lakes each morning and taking photographs of the changing light and birdlife. I am relatively new to this place, this land of the Gunnai Kurnai nation. The land and the people here have much to teach me and I have much to learn. Yet, I walk and live and listen for G-d's call in this particular land.

In last week's Gospel, set in the lands of the Hebrew people, Peter was the golden haired boy, he got it, "you are the Christ the anointed one" he said, but today he's in the bad books.

He loves Jesus , and all this suffering crap, he's not going to stand for, "no way" he says, and Jesus speaks to him quite harshly "get behind me Satan". he says. "Don't tempt me. I have to walk this road that I'm on and you are getting in the way. My path is not roses. Of course it's gonna mean suffering and even death. That's the price you pay for challenging corruption and evil for calling out public figures and associating with undesirables". "If you want to follow me" he says, "You will have to shoulder this burden too."

So in the Hebrew Scriptures we have this spoiled boy, Moses, who has grown up, and now has been called back to his birth people, called to stand up to his adopted family, to challenge those who allowed him to live. Called to a tough journey home. And here

in the Christian Scriptures, we see Jesus and his friend Peter, such an intimate portrayal of hope and despair, Jesus desiring to follow a calling to the end.

So what do these readings have to say to us in this Covid time?

The ground on which you are standing is Holy ground, the place where you are is sacred space. God is here and God is inviting you to turn aside, to let go what you're doing for the moment and face the bush which is burning, face the utter holiness of God the burning presence of God. To turn aside and listen, and engage in a conversation. God is calling you home calling you to be at home to speak God's truth, to speak God's love, to challenge injustice. God is active and alive in our time inviting us out of our sluggish foggy brains and frustrated body spirits to serve God in love and peace. And Jesus is inviting us to do the hard yards, to face the suffering of God's people everywhere around the world, to listen and to respond.

Warsan Shire is a British writer, poet and activist, who was born to Somali parents in Kenya and moved to the UK as a child.

She wrote this poem entitled:

'what they did yesterday afternoon'

*they set my aunts house on fire
i cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
i called the boy who use to love me
tried to 'okay 'my voice
i said hello
he said warsan, what 's wrong, what 's happened?
i 've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.
later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.*

Moses is called to help his people who are in pain deep pain and burdened by oppression. Peter is called to follow Jesus along a path which includes suffering and possibly even death. We are called to follow Jesus and the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures . As the prophet Isaiah says

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

The point is not our suffering, but our following, and whatever happens, as God says to Moses “I will be with you”.³

God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am .’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I am has sent me to you.”’⁴

Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’⁵

Take off your shoes, you are standing on holy ground.

Susanna Pain

³ Exodus 3:2

⁴ Exodus 3:14

⁵ Matthew 16:22-28