

‘Party, party, party ...’.

Sermon: Clive Pearson;

Location: Earlwood, Clemton Park:

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Texts: Jeremiah 20:7-10; Romans 6:1-4; Matthew 10:24-39.

It seems like every Sunday these days is party time. We’ve left behind the sombre scenes of Lent and Good Friday. We’re on a roll: Easter Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost - last week was Trinity Sunday and now today - today is another celebration. Make yourself ready. Today we celebrate the anniversary day of the Uniting Church. So it’s party time - are you ready for a good time - song, dance, feast, some kava ... party, party, party ...

Sounds good - though if you were to watch a video now about that first Sunday service back in June 1977, you might be a bit shocked. The service was held in the Sydney Town Hall. It was filmed in black and white, not in colour. None of the ministers were as well dressed as me - wearing as I am a designer off-white ecumenical alb, a white cord (which is called a girdle, believe it or not) and a red stole. Back then they were all wearing black cassocks and full white dog collars. Many of the women in the congregation were wearing hats - and the men suit and ties. That is the way we were back then.

That is the way we were back then in part. There were no drums; no conch shells calling us to worship; there were no greetings like *malo e lelei*, *bula*, *an yeong ha seyo*, *kia ora*, *kia orana*, *Talofa*; there was no Tongan, Fijian, Korean presence; there was no Aboriginal reference; no songs in other languages -we were all, it seems, of the one colour;

It was not until 1985 that the UCA declared itself to be a multicultural church. It was now recognized that this church was made up of many diverse cultures from different backgrounds, from different parts of the world. It was time to celebrate that diversity and name the work which lay before us. Back then there was talk of hymns in different languages in the service of worship, readings in more than one language where that was appropriate ... and presbyteries were supposed to give particular support to ministers whose first language was not English. That same declaration referred to the indigenous people for the first time in a document of the Uniting Church...

And now we have a new constitution where the first peoples are named - and where their story is told; there is open acknowledgement of how their lands were invaded; and the rest of us - all of us - are what the constitution calls 'second people'. It doesn't matter if you're Tongan or Anglo - you are one of the second people...

And now we also have another document ... *One Body, Many Members*. I was never happy with the term that we were a multicultural church. Multicultural is a funny word. It was invented in the life time of some of you here. Any guesses when? 1960. And where? Canada. This made up word means many cultures; I remember thinking about this one day in a class. We were talking about Christ and context. We were talking about how our cultures, our backgrounds can influence the way we see Jesus and how we follow him. We were in room G3 at the Centre for Ministry.

There were 27 people in the room; we came from 19 different cultures. I found myself wondering about the hidden stories which lay behind why each one of us was in this room at this time, in each other's company. Some of the stories were quite traumatic - like the story of the Vietnamese candidate who had fled his country, an asylum seeker, on a boat. I looked around the room and I knew some of the stories which lay behind the engaged faces ...

And it dawned on me that the reason that we were together in this room had nothing at all do with this all multi-business. We were not doing our studies because we wanted to be multicultural; we hadn't come together to share one another's food, songs, and dances ... that might happen; it was great when it did; but it was not the reason we were here in the first place.

And then it occurred to me that we had come from our different backgrounds because of our common faith in Christ; to use the language from the epistle this morning we had all been baptised into Christ; we had been buried with him, so to speak, and now we were raised in him to become the body of Christ. It was through the cross of Christ that we found ourselves in this room together, talking about our faith. And so I suggested we think of ourselves not as a multicultural church but as a cross cultural one.

The class looked on eager to hear what that might mean. So I started off. The reason we are in each other's company isn't because we all support the Eels, the Bulldogs, the Wallabies or, better still, the All Blacks. We come together because we have been called together by Christ. We belong to him. Our identity is in him. That is why we are here ... and so we have come together through the cross of Christ and not his being a multicultural person;

And then we pressed a bit further. If you talk about being multicultural then you can end up existing in one of many cultures; but you don't have to engage with people who come from different backgrounds. If you think of piece of paper, for just a moment, you can draw on that paper a circle which represents one culture, and then another circle for another culture, and so on. There is no need to step out of your own circle.

Or, alternatively, you might indulge in a bit of what is called boutique multiculturalism. That's a bit like enjoying all the different cultures but not really seeking to engage with those who come from another background. It's a bit like going to a Thai restaurant one night, then a Korean one the next, and maybe an Italian one for a spot of pizza and pasta; you enjoy the food, you enjoy the company, you enjoy the surrounds, but then you go home; you do not need to find out more about Thailand, Korea or Italy. You've got what you need; you enjoyed it ...

What happens though if we talk about cross cultural ... then here is a difference, isn't there. The gospels tell us that in order to follow Jesus Christ we need to take up our cross and deny ourselves. We also find that in the gospels Jesus did a lot of crossing over from one place to another. If you and I come from different backgrounds, if we come from different cultures there is a lot which we do not know about each other. It is sometimes said that when two different cultures encounter each other it is like stumbling across an iceberg. We can see what is above the water; we can see what is on the surface; but there is much more to the iceberg below the water line.

It is now well known that one of the greatest obstacles to cultures getting along with each other is fear. And that fear can take a whole raft of shapes. It can be the fear of not knowing the language. I wish I knew more than *malo e lelei*, *malo aupito* and *fefe hake*. It can be the fear of not knowing what to expect; it can be the fear of being seen to be foolish, or too pushy, the fear of being ignored.

Our gospel reading this morning and its wider context should set those kinds of fear into perspective. The disciples are about to be sent out on a mission. They have been given authority over unclean spirits and instructions on how to conduct themselves. They are being sent out like sheep in the midst of wolves; they are told to be as wise as serpents and innocents as doves; they are told they will be dragged before governors and kings because of Jesus; and, yet he says to his

disciples, have no fear of them. Do not worry about what you are going to speak or what you are to say. It will be given to you at that time.

Now those with whom you might engage in the church who come from another culture are not likely to drag you and your family before those in power; they are not likely to be a resident wolf in sheep's clothing; they are not likely to draw a sword upon you; they are more likely to be your brother and sister in Christ; they may speak a different language, have different tastes in food and music and yet they are nevertheless your brother and sister in Christ, for Jesus assumes that the family around him are not family because of blood ties; they are so through faith in him and through their desire to take up their cross and follow him.

If we are to be a cross cultural church, then we may need to take risks. We may need to take the risk of not understanding each other immediately; there is nevertheless the call to follow Jesus and to cross over into the experience of other - and be willing, if necessary, to take up our cross and leave something we have valued a great deal behind for the sake of the other.

There is a lot going on in this language of the cross and being cross cultural. It is like an adventure, a journey of discovery and sometimes mistakes will be made. And so I said to the class that day there is another sense in which we use the word cross in English. Sometimes we are angry and we say we are cross. And so the suggestion was made: whenever several cultures come together there can be an imbalance of power. It can take different forms. And, often it is the minority culture, or those with the least power, that experience injustice. Sometimes it is important to be cross, not for the sake of being difficult, but for the sake of the gospel and a better way.

Consider what it must have been like for Jeremiah. To the people of his day he must have seemed cross all the time. The Lord had told him to shout violence and

destruction; he knows what others must think; he is a laughing stock; many say 'denounce him'; and, again even his close friends, those who know him best watch for him to stumble; they imagine how they can take their revenge against him. Poor Jeremiah! He has no option; even if he tries to curb what he says, he is overpowered by the Lord; he must cry out, even if he doesn't want to; if he says to himself I will say no more, there is within him 'something like a burning fire shut up in his bones'.

Sometimes when there is something not right, when something is wrong, there is need to be cross - not because you are an angry person, but for Christ's sake, for the gospel's sake.

Today is the anniversary of the Uniting Church. That opening service back in the Town Hall 37 years ago saw three denominations come together. It was a time of great hope and excitement. There was talk of the church being an Australian church, here was talk of us being a pilgrim people on the way; there was a hope that other denominations might join in - that is why it is called Uniting rather than United. There was a desire to be a church which bore witness to Christ in public life. At that first service there was a Statement to the nation released; It showed a degree of sensitivity to the environment which was unusual back then; it showed a concern for those who were likely to be most vulnerable to downturns in economic policy and It called for integrity for those who hold positions of leadership and power.

Our church is different now. You know that well enough. You only have to remember when congregations had a better mix of ages and were larger. One of the big changes has been in the cultural diversity of the church. We are now more colourful. We have become cross cultural. That is something to celebrate for Christ's sake.