

## Noticing the good things (Psalm 66)

Dearest friends at St Ninians,

Neil has asked me to do this little reflection because I boasted to him about getting a letter published on the website of an organisation called Christians for an Ethical Society. I am only on the committee of that organisation because of the goodwill of Bill Bush who recommended me as someone who might speak up about social justice issues. And to prove him right, I wrote that letter for the CES website because I wanted to persuade ministers and churches to use any powers they've got to try and sustain the generous policies that our government has implemented in response to the pandemic.

You know what I mean... For years we've been told that we couldn't afford to put up Newstart and suddenly it's doubled and turned into Jobstart. For years we've been told that we couldn't afford to house our homeless and suddenly they are accommodated in hotels. For years we've been told that the idea of a guaranteed minimum income is a pie in the sky idea until, suddenly, we find that we can tide over people who have jobs with a JobKeeper payment and it begins to look very much like a guaranteed minimum income, at least for anyone whose been in a job for 12 months.

And all my CES letter does is to look at the Bible readings for each week in May this year. It suggests to those of us who might be giving a sermon a way in which our sacred texts could offer observations that are very relevant to where we are today. Well, why should this surprise us? Think of the way the New Testament is full of texts which reuse and quote ideas and stories from the Hebrew scriptures. Think of the way even Jesus himself is often found to be quoting the predictions of the old prophets. Many theologians show us that he is even reshaping stories from the ancient texts he would have been taught as a young boy in the temple!

So, in trying to use our sacred texts to help us today we are not only keeping continuity with the ancient ideas, stories and poems we share, but also using their strengths to help us meet the challenges in the world we now live in. Jesus did it for the people of his time and I'm pretty sure he's still hoping he's taught us a thing or two about how to keep up this grand tradition.

So, in looking at the texts which are prescribed in the lectionary today, I was very moved by Psalm 66. Here we have the Israelites loudly giving thanks for the good things that have happened to them after some pretty terrible traumas in their recent history. Listen to them calling out to God starting from verse 11. *'You brought us into the net',* they remember and go on to say, *'You laid burdens on our backs. You let people ride over our heads, we went through the fire and through water. Yet you have brought us out into a spacious place.'*

Well it sounds a bit like modern history of NSW, doesn't it? What with the drought, the bushfires and the hail we've endured, but the way they describe where they've been brought to as a 'spacious place' is what really appeals to me. Here are a people who are willing to sing (and psalm 66 was apparently a song) they are willing to sing about the good things that have happened to them, despite the terrifying traumas of their exodus from Egypt and the chase through the Jordan River with the troops hot on their tails, not to mention the starvation and plagues they suffered in the wilderness.

They give thanks for the good times, for the 'spacious place' they find themselves in... and this is the way I think the text can help us with where we are now. We have found ourselves, in response to the trauma of the pandemic, in a place which has been made more spacious for the people who were formerly disadvantaged. Some of our hungry and homeless now have enough money to buy food, a warm place to sleep, and have been saved from the penury of losing a job. But how many of us have spoken up about these humane measures? We have seen them implemented but now the threat is that they will soon be removed. The supposed 'snap back' sounds as though it will have many of our fellow citizens returning to unthinkable hardship again.

My point today is that we should take a leaf out of the Israelites' psalm. We can loudly notice these good changes and give thanks so that the whole universe (which is so complex and unknowable that many of us call it 'God') knows that we want to hang onto these changes. We can preach about how good they are, we can sing about how grateful we are that our fellow citizens are warm in their beds with enough to eat and even a job to return to instead of freezing and hungry on the streets in what promises to be a very cold winter.

We could translate the psalm so that it speaks to us with the same kind of rhythm and intent as psalm 66. It could go a bit like this...

*'Through the actions of our government,  
the Lord has saved our poor from slipping;  
though they were downtrodden by wage theft,  
breathless with bushfire smoke,  
hungry for a good meal,  
threatened with a lethal virus,  
and dreading the winter.  
The government has legislated temporarily  
giving them relief and housing,  
safety in social isolation,  
and space in intensive care wards.  
Truly the government has listened to our cries.  
We need your help, O Lord, to sustain this new sharing –  
of this spacious place with which we have now been blessed.'*

Of course, I recognise that there are people who've missed out badly like temporary visa holders, people who've been dangerously exposed to the virus, like the disproportionate numbers of indigenous people in prison, unemployed artists and entertainers, and people with a disability unable to access the resources they need during social isolation. And I recognise that there will be considerable burdens of costs in the future if we manage to sustain the more equitable distribution of wealth our psalm is praising, but there is so much that can be done by more well-off individuals and businesses to creatively deal with these challenges... And they won't be done unless we sing out about the good things we want to sustain.

I've been practising this approach of noticing the good things in that I've been appreciating the 'spacious places' we have right here in Canberra. Opposite our house is open space with eucalypts and grass. People stroll through it on their way to the shops and to the school. As we looked out at this space, I grew to love it, so one day I went to the Green Shed and bought a rough but comfy wooden table with two wooden benches.



I had them put in the middle of this space and, since then, there have been children's parties, singing groups, a mother breastfeeding her baby, a stay at home working Mum using her laptop, and many other gatherings around that table. My point is that through my noticing the good things, even better things have happened.

And at St Ninian's too, we notice good things. We encourage the playgroups, and more come. We encourage the use of our dear little church as a space for worship, and Benedictus comes. We admire our spacious grounds, and people plant trees, grow vegetables, and make new spaces for gatherings of all sorts.

Let's talk to anyone we meet about how grateful we are that the unemployed are less hungry, that the homeless have beds, and that the very ill have intensive care. Like the Israelis did long ago in their psalms, let's notice and sing about the good things we have, in order to make it more likely that we can keep them in place. To paraphrase verse 16, *'Come and hear, all you who fear God, and we will tell you what He has done for us...'*

God bless all you good people at St Ninians. We pray in the Lord's Prayer most Sundays saying 'Thy kingdom come'. Let's not miss the opportunity to preserve those bits of his 'kingdom' which have already started arriving. Let's be like the Israelites and sing loudly about the more 'spacious place' with which we are now blessed! Amen.

Jill Sutton