

West Epping Uniting Church

Sunday 21st January 2018

Mark 1:14-20

Rev John Barr



This coming Friday, 26th January, we will celebrate our national day, Australia day. This is an opportunity for us to stop and reflect on who we are and where we are going as a nation.

As we do so there is some controversy over whether January 26th is the most appropriate date to celebrate such a day. A recent poll conducted by the Australia Institute indicates some 56% of those surveyed didn't really care on what date Australia Day happens as long as we celebrate our nation.

A majority of respondents didn't actually know why we celebrate Australia Day on January 26th while 49% indicated we should not celebrate our national day on a date that is hurtful or offensive to indigenous Australians.

Whatever you think, I do hope we will be aware that Australia's history concerning human habitation does, in fact, go back at least 50,000 years with the Wallumedegal people being the first people to live in this area. These people lived on the northern shores of the Parramatta River and walked the blue gum forests of this area hunting, foraging for food, carving intricate designs on rock faces and celebrating important ceremonies. This happened over countless generations until the intrusion of European settlement which had a most horrendous impact.

There are so many things to reflect on as we celebrate our national day. Our indigenous heritage and the history of colonization is one significant aspect that we must acknowledge.

A further matter that all of us are greatly aware of concerns the major changes taking place in our local community. We are all witnessing the development of high-rise in Epping and Carlingford as those signature red brick bungalows and ornate federation homes are replaced by towering apartment blocks and modernistic rows of grey duplexes.

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According to the recent 2016 Census, the combined population of Epping and Carlingford is 48,082 people. Meanwhile, estimates indicate that over the next forty years there will be an increase in the population of some 43%!

This presents the church with a real challenge. We are no longer gathering to worship in a traditional “Bible-belt”, middle-class suburb where most residents represent a second or third generation Anglo-Celtic heritage. This is a thing of the past as today nearly 60% of the population in Epping and nearly 55% of the population in Carlingford were born overseas, mostly in China, Korea or India.

These days, in Epping and Carlingford, more than 60% of the population speak a language other than English in the home with Mandarin, Cantonese and Korean being the most common. Moreover, the days when Christianity and church-going were a way of life is gone as more than a third of the population indicate they have no religion.

What is also interesting is that the median age of the population in our area is young at 36 years in Epping and 39 years in Carlingford. Here there are more children aged between 0 and 14 years living the area than there are people aged over 65 years. This means, that in the next twenty years or so, the greatest increase in people living in the Epping-Carlingford area will be those in the 25 to 34 age bracket.

Recent Census figures reveal most of the local population have high education qualifications and work as professionals or managers while local knowledge strongly suggests people settle in the area because of good educational opportunities for children.

Now, what does this mean for us as a Christian community gathering for worship on the corner of Carlingford Road and Orchard Street every Sunday? What does this mean for us as we, with the resources available, provide programs, services and outreach to a growing, changing population around us?

In a nut-shell, our local community is now most likely to have been born overseas, probably somewhere in East Asia, is younger (much younger than most of us here today) and speaks either Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language. There is a good chance Christianity has played little part in their lives while they have come to Australia with significant skills and talents to improve their quality of life.

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Here local communities embrace high aspirations for their children, particularly in the area of education and work opportunities.

This morning we listened to a story from Mark's Gospel that many of us are familiar with. Jesus calls a group of fisher-folk who worked the Sea of Galilee. It's a lovely story. No doubt we can picture Jesus strolling along the shores of the lake, coming across these tough, hard-working fellows as they sorted their catch and mended their nets.

And here Jesus says to Simon and his brother, Andrew: *"follow me and I will make you fish for people"*.

Now, this is often seen as the quintessential text calling us all to mission. In my Sunday School days I remember singing the song:

*I will make you fishers of men,
Fishers of men, fishers of men.
I will make you fishers of men,
If you follow Me.*

The irony here, of course, is that the original Greek text of the New Testament uses the word "anthropon" which comes from "anthropos" meaning "human". Hence the translation *"fish for people"* is much truer to the Biblical text that "fishers of men"!

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (which we use here in West Epping) says *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people"*. Meanwhile, the New International Version says: *"I will send you out to fish for people"*.

Both translations are good and the point I wish to focus on concerns those words "will make" or "will send". For you see, Jesus just doesn't simply call the disciples to win people over to his message, rather, he "makes" them "fish for people". Jesus "sends" them out to fish for others.



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Here the Greek word, “poieo” (poy-eh-o) for “make” means to “prepare, form and fashion”. It’s more to do with the action of “making ready” than it’s to do with simply encouraging, pushing or forcing someone to do something.

And so it is with the translation of “poieo” as “send”. To “send” is a reference to an engagement in mission where we are prepared, made ready and commissioned for a particular service.

So, with these words of Jesus in mind, what does it mean for us to be “made” or “sent” to “fish for people”? What does it mean to be “made ready, “prepared, “formed” and fashioned” for witness and service in our local community?

As I think about the challenges we face, there are a number of things I wish to share:

Firstly, I believe strongly that we are to listen. We are to listen for the voice of God. Note that before Simon and Andrew, James and John jumped into action, they heard the call of Jesus. Jesus spoke first and then they acted.

And the question is surely asked of us. How much time do you spend listening to God in your life? How much time do we, as a congregation, spend actually opening our ears and our eyes to what God is saying in the midst of everything we do?

Mission planning is a good thing. Indeed, it’s necessary. But we need to be careful about defining what we want to achieve, we need to be cautious about designating what directions to take and we need to be prudent about defining how we are going to get there without first discerning what God is asking of us. Hence any mission planning program must involve a serious amount of prayer, Bible study and reflection!

Secondly, it’s vital that we understand what it is that God is calling us to do. Are we seeking to provide some form of community service? Are we wanting to simply fill our pews on Sunday morning? In Mark’s Gospel Jesus makes his intentions clear:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”.

Here Jesus is saying we have entered critical, opportune times where God’s way of justice and peace is breaking in. There is an urgency as Jesus calls on us to stop procrastinating, to stop mucking around and to start getting serious about what God is both doing and intends to do. Reconciliation and restoration between God and God’s people, reconciliation and restoration among God’s people through the generous gift of God’s grace - is what it’s really all about!

Thirdly, we are to understand our context. Where are we to engage? And what are the issues? We know, too well, that we live in a rapidly changing context while the developing picture is one that is increasingly multicultural, younger, aspirational and less religious.

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Here we are to think carefully about how we engage and what we are to do where there is a surge of younger people from non-English backgrounds who may know nothing about Christian faith.

Fourthly, as we discern all this, it's important not to feel overwhelmed or totally inadequate. The operative point is that we can't do everything. A half-glass full approach where one emphasises the gifts and graces we have is far better than a half-glass empty one where the emphasis is on what we don't have and on what we can't do. Here we are to celebrate and use the gifts God has given us while not berating ourselves because there are important things we just cannot do.

And this leads me to the next point which involves collaboration and cooperation. God doesn't simply think of mission in the Epping-Carlingford area as something West Epping does – or as something the Uniting Church as whole does. Every church, every Christian community in the area is important. And because of this, we need to see the task in terms of what God calls God's whole church to do.

So, not only does West Epping Uniting Church have a role here, so does Epping Uniting, Marsden Road Uniting, Eastwood Uniting, Beecroft Uniting, Carlingford Uniting and North Rocks Uniting, all of whom are a matter of just kilometers away. Here collaboration and co-operation among such churches surely has to be a priority!

And it's not just about our "own kind". Collaboration and cooperation among other Christian churches in Epping and Carlingford is also clearly important.

Hopefully, our attention to those words of Jesus, "*make you to fish for people*", will prompt us all to think, reflect and ultimately act in effective, realistic, collaborative ways.

For, the hinge around which all this turns is demonstrated in those final words of the passage: "*immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with hired men, and followed him.*"

Friends, everything that has been said depends on this statement. For the disciples gave up what they were doing and - in an act of sheer obedience - "*followed him*".

As we seek to be "made ready, "prepared, "formed", "fashioned" and indeed, "sent" to bear witness and to serve, may we, too, dedicate our lives. May we, too, offer our lives in complete obedience to the one who constantly calls us.

For Jesus said, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*".

Amen.

