

Sermon 2025.08.10 – Ninth after Pentecost

Today's readings invite us to reflect a little on the notion of home and homeland.

This is the theme of both the epistle and gospel, with the collect we said together picking up some themes from both: its reference to Abraham leaving his homeland (in the Hebrews reading) and then to the gospel picture of the servants waiting in readiness for their master's arrival home. But in both cases, the idea of home is not simple or straightforward – it has twists in it that we notice if we listen carefully.

Abraham and Sarah set out from home – there's something that leaves them uncomfortable, unsettled – in their homeland, and they set out to a foreign place on the basis of a promise, a rather far-fetched promise at that.

The promise was that they'd have children to inherit this new homeland, even though they had already lived a long time with no prospect of children or descendants. And the new homeland was just a promise, like a mirage in the desert – and yet, we're told – even as he lived a nomadic life in tents, he looked forward to a 'city with foundations.' But the promise was not fulfilled, or at least not at first – Abraham and Sarah's children continued to live in tents for some generations, considering themselves strangers and foreigners in the places they lived. Any yet they greeted this promised homeland from afar. This is the story we read in the book of Genesis; the writer to the Hebrews extrapolates from this another message: that

Abraham and Sarah awaited a better homeland, a heavenly one. It's as if home has to be left behind for home to be found – so how can that be?

In the gospel we have a similar ambiguity: home is where your heart is; it is where you know you belong and those you love are to be found. And yet – sell your possessions and go on the road. How does that make sense? And then there's the parable of the servants waiting for the master to return home; the servants guarding the home while the master is away. The master will come home, from a wedding feast – but once he does, the roles of master and servant are reversed – did you notice that? The master will fasten his belt for work, invite the servants to sit and eat while he, the master, will serve at table. The master will choose to become a servant in his own home.

So what are we meant to make of all this? Is home here or there; now or at some indeterminate time in the future? Does seeking a better home mean despising the home we've come from? And is the promised heavenly home we seek some sort of state of being beyond or above where we are now? Some of our hymns and traditional prayers seem to suggest home is somehow 'above' – and even suggest that we need to leave this present earthly reality behind us.

This ambiguity about home should not surprise us too much, because it applies to our daily lives in a number of different ways: as individuals, as a nation, and as Christians.

As individuals, we all leave home or have left home at some stage to establish new homes. In these new homes we become, in one way or another, servants of those who share our homes – especially if we have children or share a home with someone who depends on us in some way or another. This is quite normal. Sometimes, unfortunately, this new home ceases to be a home - in cases of domestic violence, for example, which we hear about a lot in the daily news. In our daily lives we encounter people who have become home-less, for this reason or other reasons.

Home – and the sense of being at home, is always conditional, despite the amount of effort we put into ensuring its homeliness. Our homes can be ‘broken into.’ The gospel passage is quite matter-of-fact about this reality.

As a nation, as Australians, it’s been said we are a nation of orphans – and there’s a truth in this for us who are non-Indigenous Australians. We’ve all come from somewhere else; we or our not-too-distant ancestors have washed up on this shore, and have tried to make the best of it. And for the most part they / we have. Maybe this was their way of leaving home in the hope of finding a better place. That has to be respected. And even for Indigenous Australians, the disruptions to homelands has been so pervasive over these last two and a half centuries that not many still live

on their own Countries. For many, even the memory of their home countries within Australia has been lost. The difference is that for these people it's been an experience of dispossession rather than transportation (willing or unwilling) to a new place.

As Christians. Here we face a problem, to which different Christians will give different answers. Is this good earth our home, or do we look for another home – beyond and above? And if it's the second answer, is this earthy home to be used up and thrown away? Some Christians will take this position – but I want to be very clear that this is not an attitude that has its basis in biblical faith. The attitude that the earth can be discarded fails to honour either the biblical affirmation of God's good creation or the biblical affirmation that Christ came into the world in the flesh, not to condemn but for the world's benefit. The attitude that discards the earth comes not from the Bible but in fact from a philosophical movement of the early common era known as neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism taught a mystical discipline of ascent from the diversity of the world to the absolute transcendence and homogeneity of what it called 'the One.' The trouble was that neo-Platonism appealed to some Christians – especially the highly influential St Augustine – as a way in which Christianity could make common cause with the worldview and values of his own times. Christianity needs to do this in every age, so I'm not blaming Augustine for adopting elements of the prevailing worldview of his age, but it has had unfortunate effects.

In our age we need above all to value the reality in which we live – this earth, and this place on the earth, wherever it is we find ourselves. This global homeland is already suffering from our human presence, and to talk or even think of abandoning it to its fate is to reject the gift of custodianship with which we've been entrusted. And in Australia (not to mention other conflicted parts of the world) we can take the example of Abraham as a guide, Abraham the immigrant to a new homeland, because he settled in that new land not on the basis of conquest, but of acknowledgement of the people he encountered, and negotiation with them and paying them rent – a tenth of all that he had, according to another place in the letter to the Hebrews (ch 7, vs 2). If we who live in this place are to live here authentically as Christians, it will be by a similar acknowledgement, negotiation and appropriate rent-paying. And care for the homeland which is not ours as a possession, but (and I think this is what the letter to the Hebrews is saying to us in today's reading) - rather entrusted to us for a while, to be custodians and caretakers in this home.