

**Sermon for Australia Day
Sunday 26th January 2014**

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Readings:

Deuteronomy 8.5-14a

Hebrews 11.8-16

Mark 12.13-17

On the cover of our Pew Bulletin is a postage stamp issued by New South Wales in 1888 – before Federation each colony issued its own stamps. This stamp commemorates the Centenary of the Foundation of New South Wales on 26th January 1788. You can see in the top left hand corner the portrait of Queen Victoria, and next to her the Southern Cross, seen then not only as indicating our geography, but also our faith. Below her the proud name of New South Wales – even the name, like that of Queensland and Victoria, ties us back to our British origins. Below that the shield with the coat of arms of New South Wales – the cross of St George, emblazoned with the British Lion, and surrounded by symbols of trade and wealth, and all garlanded with Australian flora. The stamp proudly displays all the symbols of Empire and Christian Faith which bound our forebears in the nineteenth century, and still bound them well into the last century.



For them, Australia Day represented the day that their ancestors, under God, came into a promised land; their choice of our first reading to be in the lectionary for Australia Day was no mistake. The Lord God had brought them into a good land with water, valleys and hills, trees and honey, a land whose stones are iron and from which they could mine copper. Our reading from Deuteronomy fitted perfectly their understanding of Australia. Likewise our second reading from Hebrews, which has Abraham taking possession of a foreign land and filling it with his descendants, would have resonated strongly with our ancestors.

Of course, missing from both bible readings are the original inhabitants of the land which Israel came to possess. Likewise, missing from our stamp, and any of the stamps issued in 1888, are aboriginals. The idea of *Terra Nullius* was strong. Our ancestors saw themselves as taking possession of a foreign land, an empty land, and doing good things with it in the name of God. One of the costs of Empire is often the suppression of one group by another.

However, we should not judge our ancestors by our own standards. When the Israelites came into Canaan, and the British and Irish came to Australia, they were driven, like us, by a variety of motives. We should be a little hesitant to judge other cultures, and that includes cultures separated from us by time. But the effects of the past strongly resonate into the future, and those of us today are shaped by the past. So we need to consider the past and the present and think about how we are going into the future.

One of the seismic changes since Australia Day 1888 has been the end of Empire, and how we thought about church and state. In 1888 and even 1938 at the Sesquicentenary, we thought of ourselves as citizens of the British Empire, and the Anglican Church, even though not officially established, was the dominant church in a society that overwhelmingly considered itself Christian. Separation of church and state was generally thought of in terms of the State not favouring a particular denomination. We still held to the idea of Christendom, the idea that the state supported Christianity and Christian values and that Church leaders were the moral leaders of the country.

Now, of course, the paradigm has shifted significantly. We no longer think of ourselves as a Christian nation; secularism and the new Atheism challenge the established religious values that used to motivate our society. How do we respond to this?

Our gospel story is well known. Some of Jesus' opponents try to trap him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?" (v. 14). This is, of course, an obvious trap. If he says it is not lawful to pay taxes, then Jesus can be denounced to the Romans as a rebel. If he says it is lawful to pay taxes, then he is a Roman collaborator and therefore a traitor to Israel. Jesus, of course points out that the coins are minted by Rome and bear Caesar's image; so to Caesar the coins which belong to Caesar, and to God that which belongs to God. Even today, our coins show the image of the Queen, and by law are still owned by the Crown. So to the Crown and the State that which belongs to the State, and to God our supreme allegiance.

Many Christians have interpreted it to mean a rigid separation of Church and state, and thus reach on biblical grounds a very similar position to secularists: essentially religion is a private occupation to be engaged in by consenting adults, and religious values and institutions ought not to be engaged in public debate; but likewise the state has no role in prescribing religious values or interfering with religious institutions. In other words, state and church have nothing to do with each other. Give to the authorities of the state that which is theirs, and in your own religious life give to God.

Some Christians go even further, and refer back to the passage we received from Hebrews. We desire a better country, and desire the city that God has prepared for us. Implied in this is the idea that the world is irredeemably fallen, and that whilst we should respect the world's authorities (Romans 13) we are destined for another place. Accordingly, we should ourselves have as little to do with the world as possible, and concentrate on our citizenship of heaven above. So, while here on earth we give due respect to the state, but it is not a real concern. In this view, only heaven is important.

So, what do we choose? Do we try to maintain the old paradigm of Christendom? There is a strong temptation to do this. We hold civic services, connect and attempt to influence those in power, see ourselves as chaplains to society. But we really cannot go back to 1888, and follow the imperial paradigm of a church and state intertwined. So, should we seek to totally separate church and state, and concentrate purely on the affairs of heaven? Is this the real meaning of the gospel story?

I would like to suggest a middle way between these two ideas – we have other choices. It is not a choice between Empire and Heaven. The old idea of Empire assumes that we tell

others what to do – that we are part of the way in which Australia is ordered. We tend to see this today in the debate over marriage equality, where we are seen as telling our fellow Australians what to do. But this is a view that is past – we are no longer seen as the moral guardians of society. So, clearly telling the world what to do is not going to cut it.

On the other hand, just separating ourselves from the world is also not going to do it. How can we be Christian if we cut ourselves off from others? People who see the Gospel as making a strong division between God and state are missing something crucial. Everything belongs to God. You belong to God, I belong to God, this coin with the portrait of Queen Elizabeth belongs to God. This earth, and everything on it, belongs to God.

Culture as well also belongs to God. Some Christians see culture as being part of “the world”, and therefore belongs to Satan rather than to God. However, this is a false view of culture. We all live and breathe in culture. We are born into a particular culture, our language and our view of the world are mediated by our culture. Jesus grew up in a Jewish culture, and many early Christians grew up in a Greek culture. The point of evangelism was not the impossible task of creating a pure, culture-less Christianity, but to transform each culture in Christ, so that all cultures point to and belong to the God to which they ultimately belong.

How do we, as Australian Christians, transform our culture? This is a big question, but I would suggest that we cannot do it by brute opposition or rejection. We cannot do it by embracing a false dualism which sees Australian culture as being of this world, whilst we belong to heaven with no regard for this world. We cannot transform our culture by ignoring it, and especially we cannot transform our culture if we ignore the indigenous culture and spirituality of those who were settled and cared for this land millennia before our ancestors arrived.

This Cathedral has a beautiful design, which represents how we should be church in modern Australia. It is clearly and distinctly a building for Christian worship – a spire pointing high, the cross and symbols of Christianity plainly here. But it also is not a dominating building; it blends into its environment. There is no fence behind which it hides or protects itself. You can walk across the park or off the street and can just be here. In other words, it is distinct but also part of its environment. In the same way we as church should be distinct and have a clear and beautiful message, but also be part of our country and environment, and make it more beautiful and give it a clear and sacred place in which it can find refuge.