

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. August 26, 2018. Coming home.

It is good to be home. I have been away overseas in Japan for the last two weeks and that was wonderful, but it is good to be home. It is good to be back in Australia. It is good to be back in Queensland. It is good to be back in Toowoomba. It is good to be here.

'Home' operates on many levels. It is place. It is a place where we are accepted. It is a place where we are welcome. It is a place where we feel comfortable. Home can move too. I have travelled a lot and have felt at home in a lot of different places. That isn't just the different houses in which I have lived but home can even be a place 'for a time'. I felt at home in Japan. I felt comfortable and welcomed and relaxed. I feel at home already here in Balonne Shire!

Home can also be found in relationships, not just places. There is someone to whom I can say that I feel at home when I am with her. Place doesn't matter. Location is irrelevant. And even being physically in the same place is not essential because making the connection over the phone can take me home.

There are other relationships too in which we find ourselves at home. Last Sunday I went to church in Kyoto, Japan. The service was entirely in Japanese. I didn't understand a word of it. And yet I did. It was an Anglican Church and the pattern, the flow of the liturgy, was familiar. I THINK I managed to join in with the Gloria and the Creed and the Lord's Prayer at the right place. When the priest was introducing the thanksgiving prayer and said, in Japanese, 'The Lord be with you' I was able to reply in English. It was a kind of being home. Familiar. I was able to participate and engage with being there. For that time, I was home.

And that was possible not only because I know the service inside out. I should after having been a priest for nearly 30 years! I was able to be at home there in that place in that context with those people with whom I did not share a language because we also share a relationship. Being at home in God means that there is a strong sense in which I am home wherever I am. That happens when I am physically alone. And when I am with people who also share that relationship that reality of being at home comes alive in new ways.

When I recognise the presence of God in those who I meet there is a close connection. When I act, or am able to recognise others acting, in ways which echo the values of the kingdom of God, the household guidelines you could call them, then those echoes of being at home resonate deeply.

Finding a home is important. Finding a place. Finding a relationship. Finding God. Being without a place, being without relationship, being without God are all aspects and expressions of homelessness. Being homeless in ALL of those ways has a sense of emptiness. Some places are home for a time. Some relationships will be home for much of our lives. Being at home in God is an eternal embrace.

Solomon (in our reading from 1 Kings) was marking the beginning of the use of the Temple. A new physical home as a focus for the worship of God. A new place to which to come to 'touch base' with God and be welcomed, embraced, accepted, loved, included, as well as a place in which the challenge of living by the household guidelines was ever present. Among those guidelines, which Solomon wove into his speech, was the way that strangers are to be treated. Foreigners who come to this home, this house of God, are to be welcomed. This was nothing new. It is a major theme throughout the Old Testament and the New. Embracing the stranger. Providing hospitality. These are guidelines for how to treat one another.

It is part of what is wonderful about the often ignored second verse of our national anthem. “For those who’ve come across the sea we’ve boundless plains to share.” Our national anthem echoes the household guidelines of God’s invitation and challenge and embrace. As humanity we tend more towards selfishness, closed borders, internment camps and high walls though. Humanity can also tend towards abuse and persecution of the stranger. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing to do with anything sexual. It was their failure to provide hospitality, open hearted welcome. That was their sin. Some modern political leaders would do well to heed that story.

The psalm we read this morning, Psalm 84, has more images about finding a home in God. The images about being at home in the temple echo the speech made by Solomon. But there is also a delightful image of welcoming the sparrow, recognising that the sparrow making a nest under the altar is welcome. That may sound all very nice but imagine what it actually means! We like to keep the place here inside the church building neat and tidy and avoiding mess. What would you think if there were sparrows making a nest inside, tucked up under the edge of the altar?? Pesky birds messing up the place!! But the psalmist uses this as an example of what it means to be welcoming. It even means accepting the mess. Because being welcoming and open is being Godly. We accept and welcome and also are prepared to be put out by the actions of those who are being welcomed. Because welcoming is a Godly activity.

Being at home, making a home, welcoming people home or to a new home, is a Godly activity. It happens here in many ways. Sunday by Sunday. In the ecumenical connection and hospitality with the Lutheran Church in St George. In the way that the space is cared for and into which people are welcomed whenever we can gather. In the invitations to come and be cared for, including the lunches held for the wives of farmers from around the area. What is being done is making a home, a space, a connection. It is being open-hearted, as we are called to be.

We make home where we are. And God meets us in that space. The passage we read from 1 Kings contains my favourite word in Hebrew. Chesed. When you say it you have to have a bit of flem in the back of your throat. Chesed. In this passage it is translated as ‘steadfast love’. 1 Kings 8:23. This is love which continues, which perseveres. This is love which focusses more on solutions than problems. This is love which sees the stranger as a new friend who can be encountered. This is love which builds homes, builds new connections in which to live, builds relationships in which people can flourish and discover new life. Chesed, steadfast love, is what being the church, the house of God, the community of relationships, the welcoming home, is all about.

We already do a lot to make a home here. What more is possible? How can we welcome? How can we connect? How can we encourage people around us to find home in God? How can we encourage those household guidelines, including welcoming the stranger, to be lived?

Think of what it means to you to be at home, in places, in relationships, in God. And share that. It is who we are.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell