

A round Tuit by Jean Shannon

Based on the readings: Psalm 111 from a *Fine wind blowing* by Francis Macnab; 1 Kings 3:3-14 and John 6:51-58. These readings can be found on page 5.

You won't be surprised if I say this passage from John is problematic for me. I struggle with it on a number of fronts not the least of which it is churlish. It is not in the loving voice of Jesus as we have known him in other gospels. The focus of John's gospel is not 'the story' it is in making Jesus the messiah – even when there is evidence elsewhere that he did not proclaim this himself. Well, enough of ambiguity, the writer of this passage wants to spell it out in big black letters - It's my way or the highway.

It probably doesn't help that in researching this weekend, I found my copy of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman. Uh-oh, they sighed, we know where she's going. It all started when young Dr Ehrman was doing his degree in textual criticism. His essay picked up one or more of the inconsistencies between the gospels such as in Mark, Jesus was crucified the day after Passover, in John, it's the day before and errors like the mustard seed: which we know is *not* the smallest seed in the world. He researched and research, he speaks several languages and at the end of his extremely erudite and complicated essay, his professor wrote one comment, 'Maybe Mark made a mistake.'

Ehrman said, the floodgates opened! We talk about the original texts being inspired – but we don't have the original texts, we don't have copies of the originals. What we have are error ridden copies mostly written centuries later and different from each other in a thousand little ways. His whole academic focus turned to the 'mistakes' and what they might mean. His whole theology shifted as he came from a fundamentalist background – and literally, the ground began to shake. He had never seen the Bible as a human creation with each author bringing his needs and interests to the pen. This is not news to us but by golly, it rattled his windows!

And so we come to the theologically motivated alternations to the text. As you know, in the first few centuries there was a lot of competition between

different theologies which led to Paul's letters continually correcting and threatening groups who wandered off the accepted path. And here are a few examples: Some Christians believed that God created this world – others did not because this was an imperfect world; some believed that the Jewish scripture were given by the one, true, God – others believed that the God of the Jews was an inferior God – hence John's gospel starts with a very, very clear iteration of the correct thinking, i.e. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..... in other words, the Jewish scriptures were right. There is a field of study looking at how the different groups battled it out in the texts.

There were the adoptionists of the 2nd & 3rd century– those who believed that Jesus was fully flesh and that God 'adopted' him. The most famous were the ebionites – whose name probably came from Hebrew Ebyon (poor) because they decided to imitate the original band of disciples, give up everything and take on voluntary poverty. These people were *very* Jewish and Jesus was a very Jewish messiah. They believed you had to be a Jew to be a Christian. They kept kosher, they were circumcised and they kept the Sabbath. Jesus was not born of a virgin, was not in himself divine but was chosen by God for a special relationship.

Every sect had its writings but whatever texts were circulating at the time were 'corrected' by the more orthodox, that is, the antiadoptionists or if we go to the other end of the spectrum from the Ebionites, the Docetists. They believed that Christ was never fully human. Their name comes from the Greek *Dokeo* – to seem, to appear. Jesus was completely divine and he only *appeared* to be human. Now it's a no brainer to say who had more texts copied and therefore more survived to be studied: The people who embraced poverty and travelled around or the ones who did not and went on to establish bricks and mortar centres?

This is a long winded way of saying, I don't want to talk about John's passage or we might get into an argument.

But I do want to talk about St Bartholomew's Day which is August 24th. 350 years ago the English Parliament passed the *Act of Uniformity*. Charles II had just been restored to the throne. Now why on earth would the Uniting Church be interested in this?

The Act said that any congregation that would not conform to the Common Book of Prayer by St Bartholomew's Day 1662 should be ejected from the Church of England. Sadly, it was exactly 100 years earlier that the French Protestants (Huguenots) were expelled and massacred. (There's a pattern here)

Up to 2500 dissenting ministers were ejected (or left) along with their congregation members. It is known as the **great ejection**. Dissenters were hounded, harassed, imprisoned and tortured but they kept meeting in homes, barns and under trees. Many congregations actually chose to use the *Book of Common Prayer* but it was not about the content, or its accuracy, it was about freedom of choice. For dissenters, the authority of Christ was vested in local congregations – not in Bishops or governments.

Dissenters included Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists and Independents – later to be known as Congregationalists. Methodists grew from non-conformity. 3 years after the Ejection, non-conformists were allowed to build *chapels* (not churches) but only 5 miles out of town. They were forbidden to attend universities or hold government office for the next 150 years and even as the rules loosened, the 'stain' remained. And even today, people's Christian allegiance can be known as either 'church' or 'chapel'.

This is really the beginning of the Uniting Church in Australia. It is the time when our identity of a church of reformation, intellect and debate was born. This is where many of our early colonists came from especially in South Australia where the dissenters prevented the Church of England from becoming 'the Established' church. It is why it was so politically important for the C of E to be written **into** NSW legislation. But we kept the right to read our own texts and choose the materials we use in worship.

And finally, all this lead to what I really want to talk about. The great ejection, in many ways, revitalised Christianity in Great Britain. It brought people together in passionate debate. Victimised, they formed supportive communities. It propelled them into the Americas and later, Australia.

We heard a few of the early results from the Church life survey at the presbytery meeting last weekend .

Two statistics really stood out.

When people were asked,

‘In the last 3 years have you undertaken any of the following to help you in your discipleship or leadership?’ –

Respondents were given 15 options to choose from including conferences, workshops, courses, retreats, reading, bible studies, etc. They were even given the option of ‘other’

The good news, 55% of the over 14,000 people who answered, read a lot but the disturbing news is over 33% - said they did nothing.

Later in the survey, when asked, “What are the most important aspects of being a Christian for you?” over 61% of over 20,000 people said, ‘Growing my relationship with God.’

Relationships – even human relationship need to be nurtured. We’ve all got a list of best friends that we lost contact with over the years, simply because we didn’t make the effort; Not to mention marriages that fall apart while both people are busy doing something else.

Sometimes people tell me they feel distant from God and it’s been suggested that I ought to ask, ‘who’s moved?’

So if 61% of the people surveyed think that growing their relationship with God is the most important reason they are part of a church – then how do they think it’s going to happen?

I think we need to have a little non-conformity to make us think. Maybe we should be studying the adoptionists to see if they have something to say? At least they were thinking about it!

I guess today is a good day to start. What is the first thing you will put on your grow your relationship to-do list?

Feel free to either pull out some paper and write your list or tell the person next to you.

It's about time we got a round Too-it!!

Readings St James 19 August 2012-08-16

Psalm 111 from a *Fine wind blowing* by Francis Macnab

It is time for me to crawl out of my corner where I ruminate on the negative things of life.

It is time to look around me and see the good and great things that are always there. My heart could overflow with gratitude for what God does, and is, for us. I cannot see him, but I see all the signs of his presence:

The splendour of this colourful creation;

Events that speak of kindness and compassion;

The promise of stability and justice;

The possibilities of a real freedom and a right strength.

Those who recognise his presence touch the fringes of a deeper wisdom. They will find this strengthening their security. They will be part of an eternal spirit of praise.

1 Kings 2:10-12 New International Version (NIV)

Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. ¹¹ He had reigned forty years over Israel—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in

Jerusalem. ¹² So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

1 Kings 3:3-14

Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.

⁴ The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

⁶ Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

⁷ “Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. ⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. ⁹ So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹ So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. ¹³ Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honour—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. ¹⁴ And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

John 6:51-58

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

⁵³ Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”