

How do we know where we are? How do we know who we are? Do we notice when God is right in front of us? Over the last 3 weeks these two questions have weaved in and out of my head. Yesterday morning at 5am as the plane I was on prepared to land at Heathrow, I was looking out the window at the lights thinking ‘that’s odd – Sydney doesn’t usually look like that when we land’. It took me a few moments in my sleep deprived state to remember that I had left Sydney once again, and returned to London.

Similarly, when I was in the small country town where my parents live, where I spent two weeks, sometimes I had to consciously remember which place I was in. The smell of Eucalypts and the loudness of the birds and the people, often reminded me that it was Australia. Sometimes it felt strange and unfamiliar, and yet so much of it is the same town I grew up in. My Father can see the house he was born in from the kitchen window, and many of the people I went to school with, and their parents and grandparents still live in the town. So when you go, as I did, and play lawn bowls with your Dad and his friends, and you talk to people who knew you before you were born, you sometimes forget that this isn’t your life – and actually you live somewhere else and have a whole different existence.

As much as many things felt familiar and comfortable, there were other things about Australia that were very confronting. The politics has become incredibly conservative, and the public discourse on many issues seemed strange to me. Or maybe I have become too British!! It seemed strange that you can now swear on public television, openly vilify leaders – but everyone still wears a tie and jacket!

So much of our identity is linked to the places that we call home and the people that we relate to. This is not just the case for the over self-actualised generation we part of, it is also the experiences of peoples who have gone before us. Identity and a sense of connection is very much at the heart of our readings today, as is the way we respond to, and interpret those who are called to be our leaders.

When Moses, who had led the people out of the Egypt, had removed Hebrews from Slavery, he changed their context. While they were now technically free, they were in very unfamiliar surroundings. Their context kept changing. Now while in many ways they were with the same family and friends; the relationships had changed. Their relationships no longer included the Egyptians, or the work that they had done – it would have been familiar and yet unfamiliar all at the same time – and for a period of 40 years.

So Moses led with courage in the wilderness, and brought the Hebrews to the foot of the mountain – he had only gone to meet with God for a short time before the people became unsettled. ‘Moses has been gone too long – make

us a new god, a new idol we can follow'. It seems like a drastic action – but immediately they make the golden calf. The Hebrews cannot cope without God before them – and in the void of Moses not pointing them constantly forward towards God – they create a replacement.

The sad thing is, God isn't out of site in this story – God is in the cloud at the top of the mountain talking with Moses – and still the people choose not to recognise God in their midst.

But there is something in this story about how we respond when we are in a situation which is both familiar and yet uncertain. We don't always recognise – who we are, or where we are – and as such we don't always recognise that God is with us either. Out of context, and to be fair, sometimes in context – we do not recognise what is before us and so we make extreme decisions or behave in odd ways. The danger then is that we create an idol, or a false image of our reality to help understand who we are – rather than stopping and considering where we are and what we might learn about ourselves and even God in this place.

When Jesus comes this doesn't change. The parable of the failed wedding banquet which we hear in the gospel tells of a similar story. God or the Wedding Planner, invites people to the wedding banquet, invites humanity to come into the presence of God. And still the guests are too busy with other idols, other parties, other opportunities, other tasks and priorities. And so God, having asked those who had been prepared, decides to invite anyone and everyone. Once the new invitation is offered, the new guests prepare for the wedding and come into the banquet. But there is one, one who wants the best of both – wants to be still doing the tasks of one, while attending the other. It is not his clothes that are the issue, but his ability not to be fully present – to want to be somewhere else. This is quite a stark image – there is a choice of which banquet you attend – but you can't have it both ways. You can't worship God and the Golden Calf at the same time – you can't come to the banquet which God places before us while focusing on the task you were still doing in the street.

Our readings today are not easy to listen too, and their message is not one that is necessarily comfortable to hear. On the one hand – we have the clear image of the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God – a kingdom and banquet to which everyone is invited. But then alongside this most amazing image - we have the stark reality that rather than respond to this invitation, as humans we go to great lengths to avoid giving ourselves to the wedding!

So often our response to God, and to the issues we face each day are distorted by the context that we find ourselves in. So much of our world is unsettling at the moment and depending on where we stand it can be confusing and even disorientating at times. Who we understand ourselves to be, and how we understand the community of which we are part will give us context to help us understand who God is.

So who are we in this place?

While I was away people asked me a lot about you as a congregation – what you are like? If you are nice? And I found it an interesting question to answer? The temptation is to answer with a Golden Calf – to create an image of what I want it to be, of the best bits! Now there is nothing wrong with selling how wonderful you all are, but the danger is of course we don't take time to notice those things which might be challenging us.

How does God inform we were are in this place? When things are challenging and disorientating – do we like the Hebrews build an alternate reality of God so that we have somewhere to look? What are the idols we create when things seem tough?

Similarly, how do we relate to ourselves and each other – are we like those invited to the wedding too busy to respond to what God which be calling us to do? Or are we like the one who was hedging their bets and have a foot in several camps which means we are unable to respond when God asks?

Having space to reflect over the last 3 weeks has challenged me to consider what idols distract me from God, and which situations I choose to hedge my bets on, rather than committing to invitation which God has offered. And you know, so often, as in all the stories today what is needed, what God is seeking – is right in our midst.

On Thursday I had a drink with a very old friend on Sydney Harbour. He was telling me about an extreme retreat he had just been on, where you fast and camp naked in the desert for 3-5 days until you have a sense of what the universe wants for you. He had got a lot out of his experience. Two weeks later, he had gone with his daughter, son-in-law and grandson – to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem for Rosh Hashanah (New Year). While he is an atheist – his grandson is Jewish. He commented how odd this seemed to be a place to find God. I was struck that someone who had gone alone and naked into the desert for 5 days, thought people praying in a sacred spaced seemed odd.

It made me think again - How do we know where we are? How do we know who we are? When do we notice God is already in our midst?

You know in the end, it is Paul in his final words to the Philippians who really sums up what all this is about – and gives us courage in our faith to address these questions.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and

heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.¹

Amen.

¹ Philippians 4:9