

Reflection

Part 1 Introduction

Recently, I have reflected on a simple question. Where do I belong? It comes after a long time of isolation, locked away, then released back into the world so to speak. In the readings for today read to us by Helen from Johns gospel, I want to explore with you the question where we belong.

Worshipping with us today is a lady from Iran. She does not speak English. She is a Christian. Her name is She was brought to the community centre by her friend, a Muslim lady. Perhaps she has come here to ask, "Where do I belong?"

Let us pray

Father God, As we gather to listen to your word, to reflect on what it has for us, We ask you to comfort us, to listen to our stories as your people In this space. Amen

Part 2 In recent times I have been reflecting on the question. Where do I belong? Perhaps a strange question to ask, given we have new and refurbished buildings. in the case of the chapel refurbished and changed around. Maybe you have asked yourself that question. Maybe this question has never crossed your mind because this is where you belong. You are very comfortable here.

To belong, to know you belong, is an important part of living. Perhaps one of the most important gifts one can have. It is at the very core of our life. It sustains us. It provides us with a reason to be. To not belong is a difficult place to be in, as witnessed by Refugees and displaced people in Ukraine.

As a young man I never thought much about belonging. Belonging was where I was. It centred on a town. a footy club, cricket, church, MYF, and friends I knocked around with. I never viewed life then as belonging. It was much more about living.

As I grew older, children came along and then grandchildren. When visiting family in Swan Hill I was drawn back to my grandfather's farm in the mallee. It became a ritual. In the car with family or friends and on the road out to Ultima. Then just past the 14-mile dam a right turn down the Nowie South Road, a mixture of limestone and sand, a mallee track, treelined, exposing long years of sand drift. Then a left turn onto the Black Wire Road, a sandy track, dusty in summer, then a couple of miles to the old farm gate.

There are no buildings there now. Just an imagined footprint of a galvanised iron building, a much-loved home, now a ploughed paddock. All that remains is a stand of timber surrounding a dam, an old windmill broken, standing out above a row of old peppercorn trees. I get out of my car, wander around, point out to those with me what happened where.

This is the place I am drawn back to. This is where I take my grandchildren to sketch a picture, tell a story. It is a physical place, full of memories. It is where I belong, where I feel comfortable and at peace

Let me ask you a question. Do you have a place where you belong? Where memories flood back. Perhaps you have never considered that question? Perhaps it has never crossed your mind.

Part 3 In the reading today from Johns Gospel read by Helen, we are told the Jewish Festival of Dedication, also known as the Festival of Lights is celebrated around the 25th of December in the northern hemisphere. Jesus is walking into the Temple in Jerusalem through a public arcade to a place called Solomons Porch. A fresh breeze is blowing as he mingles with the Chief Priests, Pharisees, and Rabbis.

He has become known. His name has spread around the countryside where crowds gather eager to hear his preaching, to see firsthand his miracles. The leaders in the temple are keen to find out what authority he has to preach in the synagogues. A small crowd of Jewish scholars' questions Jesus. "Where do you come from?" they ask, "Are you the Messiah?" another says "Then tell us plainly" v 24b "Who you are"

One can feel the tension, the muffled comments in the background. Jesus is evasive, perhaps uncomfortable. He wonders to himself where have these scholars been of late. Had they not heard he restored a man's sight, gave healing to a deaf person. Yet many in the temple around Jesus were blind to his preaching. A few were in support. They remained divided in their view of this man. Perhaps what bothered them most, was his ability to pull crowds, gaining a presence amongst the people as he spoke to crowds along the roads and in the villages. It was said he spoke with a natural authority. His knowledge of the law, his teaching linked to the prophets, brought people to him.

Then Jesus spoke to those assembled in the temple. "I have told you and you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me" V 26 and 27

Part 4 This reference by Jesus to his sheep was spoken about in John 10: verses 1 to 18 The author describes Jesus as, the good shepherd. the gatekeeper calling his sheep by name, leading his sheep to green pastures, searching for the one lost. The sheep will follow him, they will not follow a stranger because they know not his voice.

I have always had a sense of belonging to this story. This image of the shepherd and his care for, and his love for his sheep is a place I love to be. It is where I belong, where I feel at peace. It says so much about God and his love for his people in simple, easy to understand images. Perhaps this image is best summed up in Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want
He makes me to lie down in green pastures
He leads me beside still waters
He restores my soul
He leads me in a right path
For his names sake

How I long for this place, to belong in this place.

Having said that, I am not sure if you have ever attempted to move 200 sheep across a crude bridge of fallen mallee trees laid across a channel carrying water. It can be tricky as I found out when I accompanied my grandfather on such an adventure. This is another story for another time. It is not a place where I want to belong

Meanwhile, the murmurings of the crowd in Solomon's Porch grew louder. They did not know the shepherd of his people. Perhaps this was a place where Jesus did not belong.

Part 5 Then, suddenly, something quite special emerges. It is as though Jesus has had enough. He then turns to the scribes and pharisees and said, "What the father (God) has given me is greater than all else and no one can snatch it out of the father's hand. "The father and I are one" v 30. Do you remember the question of Jesus earlier in the temple "Are you the Messiah?" In the end, Jesus answers the question put to him by the scribes and pharisees in the temples when he said, "The father and I are one".

This comment by Jesus had an immediate and profound effect on the scribes and pharisees. It was different. It brought God into the light through his son Jesus. God had put a mirror reflection of himself for all to see. What you see in the mirror is Jesus. He reflects God. God and Jesus are one.

The chief priests and scribes could not believe their ears. This was insulting to their understanding of who God was. The Jews took up stones again to stone him V31

Part 6 As we sit in the comfort of this chapel our understanding of "The father and I (God) are one" v30 is not so difficult for us to understand. We are familiar with these words. Not so for the gathered Jewish scholars of that day. It was a confronting revelation by Jesus for those gathered in Solomons Porch.

For us, often at the end of a service, we will say together these words.

"The blessing of God almighty
The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Be upon you and remain with you always
Amen"

And we can agree with that understanding of the father and the son. Later, as Jesus was preparing to leave the disciples, there was his promise of the Holy Spirit. So there are some questions going around in my head. What is my relationship with God? How do I describe that relationship?

Part 7 As a young man of about 18 years of age, I sort of fell into taking services in small farming communities around Swan Hill. The Methodist minister in Swan Hill at that time was Rev Charlie King, who encouraged me to do this work for him. He could not physically be at each church each Sunday. As part of my learning, he required me to provide a written draft of the Order of Service and Sermon to him by 5.00pm Thursday night. I would write my sermon, on pieces of foolscap paper, hand in at the manse, usually after footy training on Thursday night, always late, sometimes very late. One day I received my sermon back from

Charlie King with spelling mistakes corrected, long sentences changed in red ink. On one occasion, Charlie was most encouraging. He worked his red pen over my handwritten sermon and wrote "You could include this passage from Galatians in your sermon here. Then he wrote these words *"I have been crucified with Christ and It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. Galatians 2: 20*

I remember looking at the red ink running across my handwritten notes. After a brief consideration of Charlie Kings comments, I deleted his words in red. I thought they did not add anything to my sermon. It was later in my life I was given a book "The Normal Christian Life" by Watchman Nee. Then I began to understand the significance of these words of Paul In my words. "To be dead to self, my needs, and alive to God, his leading. That is my story.

Part 8 But that is not the end of the story. It is a beginning of another story, another place to belong, perhaps a final resting place. There are some in our faith community who feel uncomfortable coming to this place (Templestowe) to worship. It's too far to drive, to many people in one place, I prefer a small group to worship with, I have difficulty hearing. They are saying the place where they are, where they worship, is where they belong. It is where they want to continue to belong. Where they want to remain. It is a very difficult reality.

Part 9 In the reading, read to us today by Joan, we heard these words *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another," John 13: v34*

Perhaps you have heard these words before. I remember them in a song I once sang. Jesus and God are one. We are one with God, because we chose to follow him. Because of Jesus we care about one another. We are commanded to love one another. This is where I belong This is where I want to be, as imperfect as I am. Where I belong Is not a place, it is not a building, nor a church. It is with you, and others like you in fellowship in the presence of God. The journey is incomplete, the end is well known. That is where I belong. My question of you is this. Where do you belong? Amen