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Fracture Lines

In the course of the next few weeks, as my mind starts turning more and more toward my new ministry placement, I will be holding a series of meetings with the people who will be my chaplaincy colleagues at the University of Melbourne. These include a priest, a nun, a vicar, a rabbi, and an imam...and there are plans to eventually include representatives from the Buddhist and Sikh faiths in the chaplaincy team, too!

As I contemplate working with colleagues from diverse faith backgrounds, I am both excited and daunted by the challenges and possibilities this presents. For one thing, it will be an incredible opportunity to learn from my colleagues about their respective faith traditions, and what it means to be a person in religious vocation within those traditions. On the other hand, I am deeply conscious of many of the historical and current tensions that exist between and within faith traditions, especially in light of the current conflict in Israel-Palestine.

It hardly needs saying that this conflict is a "live" issue on campus. On the one hand, there is widespread sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people, both in terms of their historical exclusion from self-determination and homeland, and also in respect of the present military response by the State of Israel to the Hamas attacks on Israel that emanated from the Palestinian enclave of Gaza.

On the other hand, there is a deep awareness of the rise in anti-Semitism which has occasioned the present conflict, of the attacks on and insults directed toward individuals and institutions of Jewish heritage which have, at least in part, stemmed from perceptions of the "overkill" nature of the Israeli military response to the Hamas attacks.

The result is a good deal of trauma and fear among both communities. I have already heard reports of Jewish students feeling unsafe on campus and in their classes; while, on the other hand, Muslim students are feeling frustrated and devalued by what they feel is the refusal by government and some parts of the media to criticise Israel more openly for actions which they regard as violations of international law.

Naturally, a chaplaincy team made up of practitioners from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds is going to experience these tensions too as the chaplains both live within, and minister to, their respective communities. The challenge, amidst all the trauma and suffering, becomes: how do chaplains, students, staff and the wider community express solidarity for suffering humanity, even as we disagree with one another about political, economic, social, and legal matters? In other words, how do we give voice to protest, dissent, and disagreement without dehumanising the other and thereby condoning prejudice, fear, and hate-based activity?

This question is all the more important given the current polarised nature of politics, of media coverage, and social discourse. At all levels of society and culture, we have become divided into antagonistic, mutually hostile "tribes" who are not prepared to listen to others, much less concede that those we disagree with may nonetheless hold a legitimate perspective - one for which they should not be automatically vilified. The struggle to find a way to give voice to protest while also refusing the temptation to vilify or deny the humanity of others, is, I think, critical to beginning the process of healing the wounds caused by

partisanship and fractured discourse in wider society.

Whether or not the chaplaincy team at Melbourne University (or anywhere else) will be able facilitate this shift in understanding is, of course, an unknown question. But it is worth us all considering the question of when we find ourselves in disagreement with others: do we adopt a win-at-all-costs mentality that is prepared to dehumanise and demean others for the sake of getting our way; or do we acknowledge the humanity and dignity of others, even as we continue to practice principled dissent and disagreement?

Jesus never othered the people he argued and disagreed with, even on those occasions when he used strong language about them. And he was always open to further conversation, to the renewed possibility of keeping open the lines of communication. When engaged in dispute or disagreement, this is the model we should keep in mind. Even at the level of the local and the day-to-day, if we continue to practice this form of principled disagreement that refuses to condone prejudice or "othering", it may be that we can effect a cultural shift over the longer-term that enables both free speech and a sense of safety and belonging.

Worship This Sunday

This Sunday, worship will be led by Caz Coleman. If you are able, please come along to HUC to support Caz in her ministry to the congregation.

AGM

Please note that the congregational AGM will take place after worship on Sunday 17th March 2024.

4U News

The next meeting of the 4U social group will be **Monday March 11th at 2pm** in the Fellowship Room at HUC. Gerry Robinson will detail some of the current projects tracing the history of the Heathmont district which the Heathmont History Group are undertaking. For full details, [click this link.](#)

CPP Presents - Little Women

The CPP will be presenting the stage version of Louisa May Alcott's classic, "Little Women". Performances begin on April 5th, and include a mix of evening, matinee, and early afternoon shows. Full details can be found by [clicking this link.](#)

Pew Polishing

As mentioned at church recently, I will be making a start on polishing the pews on March 6th at 9.30 am and continue on through the month of March when hopefully we will have done all the wooden furniture we have in the worship space. Chair cleaning is also on the agenda and will be done during the School Holidays perhaps in early April when there are no CLC classes.

- Glenis McDonald

Blessings,

Brendan





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