

## **‘No longer Strangers and Aliens’ – A homily for Trinity VII**

*Ephesians 2.11-22*

*Mark 6.30-24, 53-56*

The writer to the Ephesians makes an extraordinary claim in today’s second reading: that we are no longer ‘strangers and aliens’ but are now ‘citizens and householders’ alongside all the saints. To be a stranger and an alien is to have no guarantee of a place or a welcome in the world, it is to be at risk and vulnerable, it is to be perceived as being both threatening and strange, it is to have a language and behaviour which disrupts and disorientates. On the other hand, to be a citizen is to enjoy the protection and patronage of the state, to have rights in law and to have a place to call home. To be a householder is to be a member of a family, to be loved and honoured, to have a place at the table.

Incredibly for the writer to the Ephesians, this isn’t any old territory, or any old family, but citizenship in heaven and sharing family ties with Christ and sitting at the table with God. There can be no better welcome, no greater status, no higher dignity than this. And it’s all for us as a free gift.

We have the honour as the Church in here Hove to be called ‘All Saints.’ This means we are to be a community of breadth, a community of generous welcome to all who pass our way, a community that gathers the outcast and wanderer in, a community that calls the stranger and alien a friend and brother. Who are those in our community who are yet to find a place at the table? Who are those who are left shivering in the cold? Who are those who find the door is closed to them and access is denied? To be ‘citizens with the saints and members of the household of God’ is to seek out and find such people, to ensure them of the saintly dignity that God already sees them as having, to re-assure them that they are friends, not enemies.

One of my favourite contemporary writers is the Australian Shaun Tan, an artist and illustrator, film director and writer, creator of the animated film ‘The Lost Thing’ and the

charming book 'Tales from Outer Suburbia.' As Neil Gaiman tells us, Shaun Tan 'creates stories, sometimes wordless, always told with economy, which manage to be both alienating and welcoming. They make you feel, somehow, like you are a stranger and also that you have found your place, that you belong.' Not a million miles from the writer to the Ephesians then. One of my favourite stories is found in his 'Tales from Outer Suburbia.' It is a story about a small creature called Eric coming and staying with a family. This 'foreign exchange student' confounds and bewilders them as they cannot understand the things he does or the language he uses. 'Must be a cultural thing' the mother says. Slowly a relationship is formed, until one day he flies out of the window on a leaf, never to return. 'There was much speculation over dinner later that evening' we are told, 'Did Eric seem upset? Did he enjoy his stay? Would we ever hear from him again? An uncomfortable feeling hung in the air, like something unfinished, unresolved. It bothered us for hours, or at least until one of us discovered what was in the pantry.' Opening up the cupboard they found a multitude of tiny luminous flowers glowing in the dark and a small note: 'Thank you for wonderful time.'

When I was in Australia, it seemed that religious leaders had a bigger political platform than they do here, with archbishops and theologians often invited onto TV to debate the issues of the day. I remember vividly watching Q&A, the flagship Australian political debating show when the Archbishop of Sydney happened to be on. One of the questions came from a young man who was gay. He told his story to the archbishop, a story about how he had been a member of the church as a teenager, but that when he had come out as gay he had received an aggressive, dogmatic, and exclusionary response. It got so bad for the person that he attempted suicide. He asked the archbishop what responsibility he felt the church had when it spoke in such ways to people. Calmly and rationally, the archbishop thanked him for his courage, but then went on to ask the question: do people really take any notice of the church, does the church really carry any power or influence in people's lives? It reminded me of my parents asking why their opinion mattered so much to

me as a young man.

It seems to me that the families and institutions that we are a part, those people and things we love, carry a huge influence and weight for us. It can be the difference between feeling like a stranger and an alien – alone, voiceless, powerless – or being recognised and welcomed as a citizen and householder. In all of this our words matter, as they have the ability to bless or to curse, to wound or to heal, to welcome or to exclude.

Moving towards the stranger and the alien and turning a desperate situation or a forgotten or lost cause into one of blessing and hope demands only one thing of us. This one thing is a move away from debating the abstract issues and moving towards human encounter and engagement. It is so much easier to remain fearful of something we don't know, but our deliberations about asylum seekers, homosexuality, those of different race or who speak a different language, or practice a different religion, indeed, all those who seem strange and alien to us, must move from the abstract to the real. As soon as a conversation begins, as soon as a story is heard, as soon as you encounter someone face-to-face, then things can change. It is only this encounter that can transform us from being strangers and aliens to each other to becoming citizens and friends in the household of God. And in our splintering and fractious world, the only way to do this is together as we open ourselves to the reconciling work of Christ.