



**LEIGH MEMORIAL
UNITING CHURCH**
First Sunday after
Epiphany - 8th January 2023

God plays no favourites!

(Acts 10:34)

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Over Christmas a question always pops up in my household. Is it Santa Clause or Father Christmas? I grew up in Western Sydney and it has always been Santa Claus. But my wife comes from South Australia and its definitely Father Christmas.

The dilemma goes on. During this holiday season when we go to the beach do we wear cossies, swimmers, togs or bathers? For me as a Sydney-sider its cossies or swimmers. But for my wife who grew up in Adelaide its bathers!

As human beings we are constantly labelling things or putting people and places into categories. The city of Sydney has been labelled the "Emerald City" because its seen as all style and no substance. Those from other parts of Australia suggest people flock to the harbour city to fulfil their dreams only to become obsessed with superficiality.

Meanwhile those who live in Melbourne have been labelled coffee snobs, European wannabees, who only wear black, believe they have a monopoly on sport and culture, and constantly endure a climate that has four seasons in the one day.

But you see, the way we label things or, indeed, stereotype things is not always accurate. It can actually be misleading and even dangerous.

Many Australians have become obsessed with the movie character, Crocodile Dundee. But are we really all that adventurous, tough and uncivilised? The movie "The Castle" has become a classic. But are we really all such underdogs - little Aussie battlers who take on faceless bureaucrats? And are we really like those aspirational working-class ladies, Kath and Kim, whose quirky television series has entertained us for many years?

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The problem of putting labels on people and, indeed, stereotyping those around us stands at the heart of our Bible reading today. For you see, the followers of Jesus were very much part of the Jewish community. They operated within a strict cultural framework which labelled non-Jews as Gentiles or outsiders, people beyond the realm of God's kingdom. Non-Jews could not be trusted. They had to be avoided. Their homes could never be entered.

But the story in Acts chapter 10 turns all this on its head. It's an important story – one of the most important, I believe, in the Bible. Here the categorising of others, the labelling and stereotyping of people who are seen to be different is rebutted. It is done away with in a message that is later articulated by Saint Paul in his letter to the Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The Apostle Peter is called to the house of a Roman army officer by the name of Cornelius. This rather elite military person lives in city called Caesarea, a thoroughly Roman city on the shores of the Mediterranean just north of Joppa. It was the provincial capital of Judea and the place where Pontius Pilate, the governor, lived.

For Peter, a pious Jew, Caesarea would have been off-limits. It was an alien place. Rome was the colonizer, the oppressor. Rome taxed local people to the teeth. Rome put down Jewish protests with a brutal force while, in the eyes of the Jewish community, the Romans practised strange, unbecoming customs including serious breaches to the strict food laws that Jews were required to adhere to.

Within the Caesarea city confines stood the Temple of Augustus and Roma, an edifice which celebrated the divine status of the emperor and the Roman state. Such a place would have been repugnant to Peter and other Jewish Christians, who affirmed Jesus and not Caesar as the “Son of God”.

But despite all this, Peter responds to the call to go to Caesarea and meet Cornelius, who, despite his Gentile status, was *“a devout man who feared God” (Acts 10:1).*

Now, this was a huge call for Peter and for the Jewish followers of Jesus at the time. But Peter, despite Cornelius being a Roman, acknowledges Cornelius' devotion to God. And in doing so Peter breaks through the barriers as he enters Cornelius' house and speaks these important words:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34).

The original Greek text here literally says God is “no receiver of faces”. God is “no respecter of appearances”.

What this really means is this - God does not take people on face value. Outward appearances mean nothing to God. The distinctions and the differences - the categorising, the labelling and the stereotyping that world imposes on others are of no consequence to God!

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Friends Peter effectively declares that all the categories we place on people - constructs like cultural heritage, age, gender, class, nationality, sexuality, political allegiance, level of education or degree of ability or disability - do not come into the equation when it comes to God.

In other words, God has no favourites. The labelling and the stereotyping that humans impose means nothing to God!

And for Peter, this says, not only could he enter the house of Cornelius. It also said Cornelius, his family and his friends could be baptised into the faith of Jesus Christ!

Acts chapter 10 goes on to tell us that the Spirit of God “fell upon” these Gentiles (Acts 10:44). This was literally a second Pentecost. The first was in Jerusalem fifty days after Easter (as recorded in Acts 2), involving Jews from many different places.

Friends, there is a big lesson for us here.

Do not judge people by their outward appearances. Never disregard or right-off another on the basis of the social categories we construct around them. Do not fall into the trap of stereotyping people or putting people into slots simply because they are different to you. And never allow yourselves to be blinded your limited ability to fully understand others

Friends, the biblical text tells us that the only qualification, the only condition, indeed, the only thing that matters in standing before God and becoming a follower of Jesus is to “fear” God and “do what is right.”

To “fear God” and to “do what is right”.

Now to “fear” doesn’t mean being afraid of God or avoiding God. Rather, to “fear” is to be in awe and wonder of God, to honour God and to revere God. It is to stand in God’s in presence in an attitude of humility where one claims not to hold all the answers. It involves a willingness on our part to open our hearts and minds beyond the categorising, the stereotyping and the prejudicing that so often shapes who we are - to allow God to reach out and touch us.

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“To do what is right” is to live life in accordance with what God requires. This is often mixed up with the notion of personal piety and moral purity. But it actually means that we are to be fair and equitable. It means we engage in relationships that are respectful, gracious and loving. “To do what is right” is to be just in all that we do.

On this second Sunday after Epiphany there are so many lessons to be learnt. God has no favourites. No one has an advantage over another when it comes to God. Moreover, you can’t buy favour with God or expect any privileges simply because of the labels we put on ourselves or the stereotyping we impose on others.

What simply matters is that we fear God and to do what is right.

With this in mind, I reluctantly reflect on the jaundiced ways I have approached God and seen the world in my seven decades of life. Growing up Protestant in the 1950’s and 60’s meant people of the Catholic faith were treated with suspicion. They were outsiders whose faith didn’t make sense to me. Then, when women in the Methodist church received the call to ordination, I remember, as a somewhat know-it-all teenager, brashly and somewhat ineptly thinking a woman’s place was in the home.

Now, with Australia Day just around the corner we cannot ignore the history of European settlement in this country as indigenous Australians suffered labelling, stereotyping, indeed stigmatizing at the hands of a people who assumed their culture was superior. The time has surely come for this kind of thing to end.

Friends, God has no favourites. God is no receiver of faces. The difference and distinctions we impose on others are of no account to God. Rather, what matters – and what really matters is that we all fear God and do what is right.

As 2023 unfolds, open your minds and hearts to the God who is impartial, to the God who simply asks that we have a deep, humble reverence for him and a real commitment to doing what is right both on the eyes of God and in life-experiences of those around us.

Amen

