

Rev Don Owers
Sermon 28/1/24

Lord Palmerston, the sixth of Queen Victoria's Prime Ministers, was well known for his abrasive wit – so much so that his political foes sometimes referred to him as 'Lord Pumicestone'. On one occasion, a French diplomat said to Palmerston, 'Sir, if I were not a Frenchman I would prefer to be an Englishman.' The poor man was trying to be complimentary, but he got no mercy from Palmerston, who replied, 'Sir, if I were not an Englishman, I should like to be an Englishman!'

Last year, nearly 200,000 people, from 200 countries around the world elected to become Australian citizens and for many of them this step involved renouncing the citizenship of their country of birth – in other words they were saying they prefer to be Australian.

The progress of Australia from a barely surviving fledgling colony imposed on a harsh land and a bewildered indigenous population, to a flourishing, tolerant and open-hearted land of opportunity is something that must be celebrated! Australia is not perfect, nor does it have a perfect history – though I would hazard that Australia's history, acknowledging the, sometimes awful, treatment of aboriginal people, is less imperfect than that of most other nations. That said, through sheer hard work, and the mostly peaceful resolution of various internal conflicts, and by the sacrifice of those who gave their lives to defend its freedoms and its values, over the years Australia has been built, by Australians - migrant and indigenous - into one of the world's most successful, inclusive and prosperous nations.

Notwithstanding the benefits they enjoy – and probably take for granted – some disaffected groups are in the habit of using Australia Day to focus on what is wrong with Australia rather than celebrating just how blessed we are to live in such a wonderful country. They have a right to criticise and to demonstrate of course, that's one of the freedoms we enjoy, and it's an Australian value to tolerate and even to give a hearing to such criticism. But if we want to get a true perspective on what Australia represents, and what it offers, I suggest we listen not to a headline grabbing minority but to those who have chosen to come from other places to make Australia their home.

This is a photograph of Walter taken in Rundle Mall a few years ago on Australia Day. I like it because it recalls a pleasant conversation in which Walter told me he was celebrating in the Mall because he's proudly Australian – and the shop behind him provided a caption for him.



I'm not sure if Walter was able, at that time, to buy his Australia Day t-shirt from Woolies, you can't now, of course. Somewhat ironically you can apparently get them from the Reject Shop! Anyway, Walter is from Croatia, and he came to Australia some years ago with his family to escape ethnic division and discrimination in his homeland. I asked him what he thought of Australia. His answer was unalloyed, 'Best bloody country in the world!' I suggest that if you interviewed people from all kinds of ethnic groups as they prepare for an Australia Day parade, they would express similar appreciation.

But I thought it would be good, for a few reasons, to hear from someone closer at hand, so I've asked Samuel Yengi tell us what he thinks of Australia.

So, Samuel:

Q: How old were you when you came to Australia?

35 years. Born in Kajo Keji, South Sudan. About 20 km from Uganda.



Q: *Where was your family living before you came here?*

A: I was in one of the refugee transit camps in Northern Uganda for over 13 years before resettlement in Australia.

Q: *What were conditions like there?*

A: The conditions were exceedingly tough. The refugee population is densely packed transit camp. Approximately 13000 people.

The campsite is located along the Nile River's banks. A lot of mosquitoes. Many children and adults suffer from malaria, and many died as a result of waterborne infections and air pollution. Sanitation is significantly poor.

Q: *Why were you living in that place?*

A: Refugee as a result of nearly 31 years of civil war between the predominantly Christian South Sudan and the majority Islamic-dominated government in North Sudan.

Q: *What was the promise of Australia for you and your family?*

I now call Australia home. After being welcomed and given the opportunity to share in this family's inheritance, being as part of the custodian of the land on which we are living now is something I cannot underestimate.

I've waited 11 years in that camp, only laying my trust in God's best moments. The response to my prayers is what I believe is God's providence.

My commitment to Australia is that, with God's help, I will share my life experiences in order to serve God and bring honour by spreading His unconditional love throughout the Australian community.

Q: *And has that promise been fulfilled?*

With the granting of my family's visa in 1999 and my naturalisation with the ticket of solemnly receiving Australian citizenship in 2003, I feel that the promise this has been fulfilled. Thank be to God and Australian government.

Revd Samuel Mori Yengi.

The fact that Australia has been able to offer a safe haven and new opportunities to so many people, and at the same time been able to maintain a safe, cohesive and generally contented society is an achievement of which we can be proud and for which, as Christians, I believe we should give thanks to God.

No country in the world is perfect, and we have our own set of problems. One of the chief of these is the continuing suffering of aboriginal people who live in third world conditions in remote communities, or in alienation in ghettos in the cities or town camps.

In his book 'The Politics of Suffering' the respected anthropologist Peter Sutton argues that the rectification of this dreadful situation must be the starting point for any Indigenous policy. Sutton has spent a lifetime placing the highest value on indigenous language, land rights, social organization and visual arts – but he insists that the well being of people, especially women and children, in remote communities must take precedence over all other considerations. The protests generated by the celebration of Australia Day on 26th January, might be actually be helpful to us in that they prevent us from airbrushing the unpleasant parts of our history. The danger in them is that they might focus attention on the hurt feelings and political aspirations of urban aborigines whilst having no impact whatsoever on the plight of those in the settlements and town camps.

One thing then, that we as Christians can do and, I think, must do, is to try

to keep the focus of attention in indigenous policy, on the plight of those in the remote settlements. The call to plead the cause of the poor and oppressed resonates throughout the scriptures. 'Learn to do right' Isaiah thunders, 'Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.' (Isaiah 1.17) Jesus, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, makes it clear that our neighbors are those we find in need, especially desperate need. With Peter Sutton, Senator Jacinta Price and numbers of other indigenous leaders we should be asking, 'What practical difference will this or that policy change make to those living in poverty in the settlements or in alienation on the fringes of towns and cities?' It's a key question, one that cuts through the noise of sometimes self interested groups to what really matters.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus tells us that, as his disciples, we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and I take this to mean that we are to bring the flavor of the Kingdom of God and the light of the Gospel to the world. Salt is thoroughly mixed in with whatever it's flavouring or preserving – we can't stand apart from these and other issues in society. Light dispels darkness and ignorance. I think this is not about the light of intellectual knowledge but rather the light of the knowledge that Christ imparts – the knowledge of the dignity that God's love confers on the other person or the other group, and the respect this demands from us. Christ's light is the light of love – the love that took him to the cross for us – and for those we might be called to oppose. In the context of the heated debates that are occurring in our community, perhaps being salt and light might mean that before we try to win a particular argument, and rather than

getting caught up in the heat and anger of these often highly charged debates, we might seek somehow to bring Christ's presence into the situation. How well we can do that, our text suggests, depends on the extent to which we retain our saltiness – which I take to mean a Christ-like character – and our capacity and willingness to let the light of Christ shine through us. This in turn will depend on the closeness of our daily walk with the Lord Jesus. The thing is, that only Christians can bring Christ's love into these often polarized discussions. It's down to us. But by being obedient in this way, I think we can make an important contribution to the wellbeing of Australia, and Australians, because some of the debates that are happening have the potential to be divisive and to threaten the social cohesion of our community. If we can bring the salt and light of the Gospel into these situations we can be a blessing both to individuals and our community, and at the same time bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.