



Sermon

By Rev John Gilmore

Anniversaries lead us to ask questions. We are marking the 30th Anniversary of the NCCA, and on Saturday 47th Anniversary of the establishment of the UCA, later in the year 30 years of the Chinese Methodist Church in Australia, the 30th Anniversary of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and next year the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and the subsequent creed! No doubt there are many other significant anniversaries as well.

Anniversaries cause us to pause and reflect – on the beginning, the journey and the future. They take us back to the original impulse and hope of what was at the beginning. This is true for us all, both organisationally and personally. This year is the 40th anniversary of my beginning in my first ministry as an ordained minister. I look back and am overwhelmed by the combination of naivety and confidence I had then. I am relieved that at the beginning I had little idea as to what was ahead. I am deeply appreciative of those that stood with me in the journey since and humbled as to where this journey led me. Our personal journeys in life are not inert, rather the product of experiences where we grow and mature influenced by our faith and those who stand with us.

So, the NCCA is turning 30 – born out of the Australian Council of Churches and now the NCCA in human terms is in its early Adulthood. In the 30 years we have found our identity, and clarified how we can work and be connected to one another.

The reading from 2 Kings tells of the ‘mantle’ that was passed from Elijah to Elisha. It is likely to have been a sheep skin cloak, and possibly the main item of clothing worn by Elijah. Elijah made no claim that the mantle had power, yes, he used it to part the waters, however he did not say to Elisha this is a mantle that will give you authority and spiritual power. Elisha must make a decision – Elijah had discarded it and Elisha had to decide to pick it up, unaware that in doing so his request to Elijah that he might inherit a ‘double share of your spirit’ was granted.

With it Elijah could part the waters, and after receiving it so could Elisha. For Elisha it was a symbol of authority, prophetic power and calling. This mantle was not to be placed on a shelf or in a chest.

In taking up the mantle Elisha was very aware that his new responsibility was linked to significant stories of Elijah and the promised spiritual power.

The mantle also served as a statement that the work of Elijah was not finished or complete. Elijah had ascended to heaven in a dramatic fashion, witnessed by Elisha, and in his ascent he ‘dropped’ or ‘left behind’ the mantle on the ground. Elisha picked it up and used it soon after receiving it in a similar manner to its use by Elijah. Through this he continued the prophetic work of Elijah and values established by Elijah.

The parallels for us are rich. The genesis of the Australian Ecumenical Movement was first through the formation of the Australian Student Christian Movement – 1896! The National Missionary Council in 1926, The World Council of Churches Australian Committee in 1946 and the Australian Council of Churches in 1960 and the NCCA came into being in 1994.

A mantle has been laid down and picked up several times in the life of the Australian ecumenical movement as one body released it to another. Putting the mantle down has signified an ending and picking it up a beginning. People have grieved the loss of the past and sometimes struggled with that which was the new.

In the inauguration service for the NCCA the ACC laid down its mantle and the new body picked it up. It was picked up as a sign that the work of building unity among Australia's churches had not yet finished. There was a new season and so the work was to continue in a new way. In the 30 years since we have endeavoured to be true to our heritage and so go on and build on from that which went before.

Who we are today reflects this heritage – many common values and yet we are different. When one reads the NCCA Constitution – it is clear, we are not a church, we are a council of churches. It is also equally clear that we have come into being with values that connect us to our past. As a Council of Churches – the churches and their leaders are our constant point of reference. We do not have a life without the churches that constitute who we are. One could say that we have achieved something profoundly important in terms of growth and development. The NCCA has individuated from that which was before and continues in our Ecumenical journey.

The spiritual genesis of the movement of which we are part is found in the Prayer of Jesus in John 17. In this 'High Priestly Prayer' we are given an insight into what was understood as important to Jesus himself. John presents it, not as teaching, nor as a monologue, rather it is a prayer to be overheard by the disciples and us the readers. We are invited to take a place with the disciples and listen.

This is part of an important pause in the Gospel – a transition from the upper room to the garden. It is in effect a pause in the narrative, and we are taken into the heart of Jesus.

So, what do we hear in these words of Jesus – as we sit and listen?

Jesus prays for two groups of peoples 'these' and 'those'. The these are the disciples and their future work and the those are the expected 'believers' of what the 'theses' carry forward. Placing ourselves in this prayer are we 'these' or 'those'?

Dare we identify ourselves as among the 'these' that Jesus prays for? People who once were 'those' and are now 'these'. It is a brave thing to do – to place ourselves into this text and hear the prayer of Jesus directed towards us, and not others.

Hear the words of this prayer to the these:

1. Who are the 'these' and 'those'?

"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are

in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

This is a prayer for unity...not a negotiated unity, rather a relational, spiritual and dynamic unity that is an expression of the life of the trinity itself. God in distinct expression, in relationship Father and Son and still God. The 'those', in relationship, in unity, centred around Jesus.

2.

The Christian Tradition of which I am part had its origins in a strange descriptive identity - Old-Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church. Holding to an 'old interpretation of the Westminster Confession, wanting the freedom to select their own ministers – without the involvement of the local mayor and separated from the Presbyterian church at the time!

As churches we have distinct identities and a times these distinctions cause tension and separations. Jesus prays for us to be together in expressing the life of Jesus in the presence of the Father – not for our own benefit – but so the 'world' may see the presence of Jesus in and through us! This is a unity that both enables mission and serves the purpose of Jesus. It is a unity needed for our witness in Australia. It is also something that calls us to think beyond the immediate life of the NCCA and ask the question: 'how might church communities in Australia be more united and stronger in our witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ'.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The words used through this prayer are deeply relational and so our work is one that expresses both life and witness... the unity is so the world may believe – not the intensity of feeling good about ourselves – rather a unity that is a living expression of gracious forgiving and renewing love seen in the command of Jesus in John 13:34 – words that precede this section of John.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them."

There is a clear expectation that we will be in a distinctive, deep and dynamic relationship with Jesus and in so with a growing appreciation at depth of who Jesus is and how Jesus continues to be present and so in a growing dynamic of unity with each other, founded on our common naming of Jesus as Lord of Life.

In this service, we symbolically pass and touch the mantle, laid down 30 years ago and picked up. We have it and hold it and do so aware that our work is not complete.

We have mourned and grieved matters of the past in relation to Australia's First Peoples, the treatment of women and children and vulnerable people and our loss of voice in Australia. In looking to the future, we take the mantle, hear the prayer of Jesus and move on, shaped by all that has gone before and ready to work together 'so that the world might believe'.