

Lent 4 All Souls' The Story, Our Story, My Story **A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST** dtw

Last year, I told you about Ross Jones, who was a butcher and a farmer in Manjimup in the south-west of WA. His wife, Lynn, used to attend the local Anglican Church, St Martin's with her young children. Ross never went; he was effectively an atheist and a proud, self-sufficient man. On Easter Eve, 1981, Lynn persuaded Ross to join her and the children at the Vigil Eucharist that evening. It changed his life. The reconciling love of the crucified and raised Christ flooded the soul of that proud man as the New Fire was lit and the people renewed their baptismal promises. That very night Ross went home a Christian; less than 2 years later he was at Wollaston Theological College in Perth, then ordained a deacon in Bunbury Cathedral in 1985, becoming my first assistant curate in Mt Barker, WA that same year. In the beautiful words of Paul in today's epistle, Ross became a new creation, for 'if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.' (2 Cor 5. 17)

There was a popular expression a few years ago, "When everything else fails, hug your teddy!" My teddy bear, who appeared at Christmas, is my oldest possession. (*Exhibit*) I've had him ever since I can remember; indeed, he sailed with me from England in 1952. My parents and sister came too, which was a good idea, seeing I was not quite three at the time. We moved around a lot when I was a child and this bear was like a security blanket for me, along with my parents' affection and particularly my mother's love. I can vividly remember as a child, calling for mother in the night with my little chant, "Mamma Mia, I want you...Mamma Mia, I want you". I kept singing it until she came, and she would tuck me in with my furry friend and everything would be alright. Mothering Sunday was always a special day for our family; we *never* observed Mothers' Day, "that American abomination!" my father would say.

As I look back at my childhood and youthful formation, I realise that my mother was frequently a bridge between me and my father when it came to my unseemly behaviour. I know that my wife, Deborah, has been like that for our children too. Mum was my shelter in the storm, often my only defence. She would sometimes need to 'soothe the savage beast' while I summoned up enough nerve to approach him. I feared my father's anger, which was certainly justified at times. I cherished his warm affection which was always a wonderful relief and a haven when the storm had passed. I'm sure the Prodigal Son felt the same after his pretty disastrous time away from home. And that's the whole point: it is really the Parable of the Loving Father. Come home, all is forgiven! And that's what this Lenten journey is all about too: God is in love with you and wants you to come home.

The joy of reconciliation is indescribable. If you have experienced it in your life, perhaps in your marriage, or with a friend, or in a difficult work situation, you will know what I mean. Indeed, when there is true forgiveness, healing and renewal are just around the corner, and the last state of that relationship can be so much more wonderful than the first. You have become 'a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' Not only that, but when we are given the grace of years to look back, whatever those problems may have been, they just pale into insignificance in comparison with the glory in which we now are basking. The secret in all of this is what I call 'Hanging-in-there Love'. Remember, that while the son was still far off, his father was out there looking for his son, not sitting in a corner feeling sorry for himself, all rejected. No, True Love, Unconditional Love remains faithful, longing, waiting, hoping, and it converts the wayward heart. Amazing!

Francis of Assisi had a similar story. John Watson writes, 'Francis Bernadone was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. For the first twenty years of his life, he experienced and then pursued pleasure, comfort, and self-glorification in the chivalry of the times. He remained unsatisfied until three experiences called him into another path. A leper on a bridge path called Francis to embrace the suffering and ugliness of the world. Francis kissed the leper, and the leper was Christ for him. En route to war a voice called to Francis to leave the service of a temporal lord and serve the Lord of lords. In the ruins of St Damiano's church, (ed which Deborah and I visited in 2007), the crucified Christ called Francis to rebuild the church.' Francis became a new creation. The seed sown in his heart would sprout and grow a thousand-fold in the world-wide Franciscan movement, along with the followers of his spiritual companion, Clare, founder of the Poor Clares.

Perhaps you too have a story of new life to tell? Or is there someone you know who has the potential to become a new creation if only you could lead them to spiritual water, like Lynn did with Ross? Where could you plant seeds of faith? It's as easy as an invitation to worship in this place or a study group or a friendly meal. Irenaeus in the 2nd century wrote 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive' I pinched my study book title from him. Its goal is that people would experience being fully alive in Christ. Hey, sign up and bring a friend to the studies after Easter; our initiative for Hope 25. Indeed, how about this parish being the instrument for the birthing of new creations? What a privilege it would be!

FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5.16-21 again. Consider the words 'God...has given us the ministry of reconciliation'. What does this mean for Christians in daily life?
2. Now read Luke 15.11-32. Consider the attitude of the elder brother. Then consider the life of the church; long-term 'faithful' members on the one hand and recent converts from atheism, consumerism, drugs, gambling etc on the other. Could they co-exist at All Souls'? Explore implications and possibilities. Dream dreams.
3. Conclude by saying together this prayer from *A Prayer Book for Australia* p.143

Father of all

We give you thanks and praise

That when we were still far off

You met us in your Son and brought us home.

Dying and living, he declared your love,

Gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.

May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;

We who drink his cup bring life to others;

We whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.

Keep us in this hope that we have grasped;

So we and all your children shall be free,

And the whole earth live to praise your name. AMEN