

Reflections • Monday 10 June 2019 • By Bishop Jeremy Greaves

## Hard hats for hymn singers



**Bishop Jeremy Greaves taking Annie Dillard's advice and wearing a hard hat at All Saints' Anglican Parish, Chermside on Pentecost Sunday**

As a 19-year-old backpacking my way around Europe and staying in youth hostels, I came across a little book, left behind in a shared kitchen, that I have carried with me ever since. Annie Dillard's collection of short meditations, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, captivated me when I first read it and always repays return visits with rediscovered gems.

At Pentecost when our worship is filled with invocations of the Holy Spirit, I am always reminded of Dillard's musings about what it is that we do in worship:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,

mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."<sup>1</sup>

It reminds me too of that great Gospel song, 'Be careful what you pray for...you just might get it'.

What if we actually believed everything we prayed and said and sang in our worship? What if we really expected the Holy Spirit to 'fill our lives' or 'fill our hearts'? What if we truly accepted that we are loved and forgiven? What would our worship be like if we really thought that Christ was present?

I suspect, as does Annie Dillard, that often we come to worship and say our prayers and sing together and share the Eucharist and we come away unchanged...because we have long given up expecting to be changed by any of it. Perhaps, if we slowed down and thought carefully about the words of the liturgy we would be too afraid to join in any of the prayers. Or perhaps we might rediscover their power and their meaning and our lives would be changed, not just for the hour when we are in church, but enough so that we are changed forever.

I visited one congregation where they handed out earplugs at the door, but perhaps Dillard is right and we should all be wearing hard hats.

<sup>1</sup> Dillard, Annie. 1982. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 40-41.

## Diocesan Offices and Synod Hall, built in 1896, Corner George and Elizabeth Street Brisbane, 1962

In early 1909, the Cathedral Chapter decided to use money set aside from the sale of the Pro-Cathedral landsite. Part of this money was used for erection of St Luke's Church on Charlotte Street (now the Pancake Manor) and St John's Day School and Institute (now Webber House within the Cathedral Precinct). The rest of the money was to be used for the erection of a new office space and book depot.

## Refugee Week: share a story, share a meal

Coming to terms with the phenomenon of climate change has enabled many people to see more clearly that we live in an interconnected world. We are learning that everything from our choice of diet to the way we generate power affects the pattern of rainfall and floods, cyclones and wild fires.

Increasingly we are also recognising that our choices are affecting patterns of human movement. The people of The Torres Strait and the Pacific are contemplating the need to abandon their islands as a result of rising sea levels. These people are likely to become climate refugees.

The Syrian civil war has seen some 20 million people displaced from their homes. Many commentators have pointed to the role that climate change played in creating that conflict. Changes in climate led millions to abandon the countryside and move to Damascus. This mass movement destabilised the city and fuelled the unrest that led to the outbreak of the war. Many fear that such climate-change related mass dislocations of people will become more common as the effects of climate change become more pronounced.

For some time, refugee advocates have been arguing that Australia needs to develop a more compassionate response to those who seek asylum here. They argue that Australia's willingness to be involved in the conflicts that create many of the world's refugees needs to be matched by an increased willingness to deal with the problem we have helped to create. The fact that we are amongst the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases will increase this responsibility as the number of people displaced by climate change rises.

Despite the magnitude of the need and the responsibility that attaches to our production of greenhouse gases and to our role in geopolitics and conflict, our public discourse is strongly isolationist. Much of the public discourse is characterised by xenophobia, racism and the idea that we are somehow separate from the rest of the world. And, can remain separate. The public discourse enables both major political parties to get away with policy settings that are simplistic, draconian and cruel.

Churches have been strong advocates for a more compassionate response to people seeking asylum and refugees. This shared concern seems to get its focus from the fact that the Exodus story is so deeply embedded in our faith narrative. In that story, the Hebrew people flee persecution and find refuge in a new land. The story ends with the call to always welcome the stranger and to make room for those who come to you seeking safety.

This story of hospitality to the stranger enables the church to sing a different song to that of the secular culture and reminds us that we are shaped by stories. Narratives are better at shaping our response to life than facts.

Over the last few years, SBS has been producing a program called *Go Back to Where You Came From*. In that show regular Australians, many of who are anti-refugees, are introduced to the individual story of someone who is seeking asylum or is a refugee. More often than not, the Australian changes their mind about refugee policy in some way. The individual story transforms people in ways that facts about wars, refugee numbers and climate change cannot. Recognising the power that stories have provides us with a clue as to how we might progress the churches' advocacy on refugee and asylum policies.

This week is Refugee Week, and this year's [Refugee Week theme is 'A world of stories'](#). This theme reminds us that every refugee seeking safety brings their own story of why they left home, of their journey and in some cases of finding safety in Australia. The sharing of stories is an opportunity to not only remember and honour their journey but also to educate the Australian community to better understand the courage and contribution that refugees make.

During this Refugee Week, you might care to find a refugee's story to share with a friend or relative. Or you might ask if your community of faith might invite a refugee or person seeking asylum to visit and share their story over a shared meal.