

## What makes us Australian?

**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10**  
**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

What is it that makes us "Australian"? Is it simply that we happen to live in this country and have its citizenship? Is it that we have a high enough level of English language to pass the citizenship test? Or that we have learnt enough about what is expected of how to answer the test – especially for those questions that actually had more than one correct answer.

Interestingly, the citizenship test (when I had a look at the practice questions) has moved on from knowing details such as the batting average of Bradman. Now the answers are often either "parliamentary democracy" or "the Australian people" depending on whether it is asking about values or who controls and selects the people who make the decisions. To its credit, it does also now have some questions about First Nations heritage and what happens in a citizenship ceremony. But values... the values questions (to which the answer is "parliamentary democracy") needs a 100% correct response to pass. Is that really what makes us Australian?

The audience of Ezra-Nehemiah had a similar question: what makes a person an Israelite. How could they be assured, in this time when they were ridding themselves of foreign influence, that people were the "right" people to have in their community? After all, it was not just the people who had returned who had to be considered, but also the people who had never left. This latter group was more problematic as they were not known by community leaders of the returnees. To rebuild their community, they wanted a definitive answer to that question of what made a person Jewish.

The answer we hear in today's reading led to a radical innovation in the world of the ancient Near East, yet it is one that we hardly stop and consider today because it has simply become so ingrained into our tradition too. This innovation is idea of the will of God preserved in a particular body of literature that is given a special status. The preservation of these texts is what kept the cohesive bond during the Exile and now, on their return, the texts help define the community.

However, it is important to notice the focus in this passage is not on the reading of the texts. If it was, we would be given a summary of what was read because that would highlight the importance of the contents. Instead, the focus is on how the people responded to the text, with both tears and joy. It is also important to notice who is included. It is not just the men, who would have traditionally been included in this setting, but everyone who can understand – women, children, people with disabilities, and even the foreigners– all are included in this reading as part of being the people of the land.

The people of Corinth, on the other hand, had a different problem. They knew that everyone was included in the church, but they wanted to say there were those who were more important than others. After all, this was how they were used to society functioning. In response, Paul takes an image that was familiar to their culture – the image of the people being like a body – but turns it around to make the opposite point. Instead of being an image used to keep the lower classes in their place, as the people of Corinth would expect, Paul's image of the people as the body of Christ points out that less respectful body parts are given a greater honour; we clothe the parts of ourselves that we do not want other people to see.

This idea of equality before God is not limited to this passage of Corinthians. When Paul reminds the people of Galatia there is neither “Greek, nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free” it is thought by biblical scholars that he is echoing the baptismal liturgy of the day. This was a cornerstone concept in the primitive church as it struggled to find its identity in the world in which it found itself. It is therefore not surprising that it is only when Paul has dealt with social hierarchies in the Corinthian church that he offers something different – the importance of all gifts that people bring to the body of Christ.

However, there is also another theme that I think is just as important to explore as this first theme of “what makes us belong.” We hear this second theme most clearly in our Gospel reading, which puts some of the later words of Isaiah into the mouth of Jesus. It also sets up the understanding of what happens through the rest of Jesus’ ministry and affirms this ministry comes from God.

### **Luke 4:14-21**

So, what do we hear in these verses? These are verses that invite us to hold a mirror up to ourselves. How are we called to express our faith in our time? This is not a question about rigid rules, but rather reflecting on what faith-based living looks like in each new context we face. This is essentially the question faced by the first audience of Nehemiah; the members of the church in Corinth, as well as later the people who first read the Gospel of Luke. Like us, they were also called not only to listen to the faith, but to understand and respond to it.

This response is what Paul was calling people to when he wrote to the people of Corinth – to live out a radically different life that included people of all levels of society. It is also what we see in the response to Ezra reading the book of the Law accompanied by its recognition that changes are needed. Yes, they were told to go and celebrate, but that was after a clear recognition of the problems of the past.

It's easy to hear this need for a changed way of responding and think that our values are being criticised and it is important to note that in our Luke reading, Jesus is not criticising Judaism, but rather the exclusivist ways the scriptures were being interpreted. Jesus is shown as being central to Judaism and not outside it: indeed, he bases his action on the words of the Prophets, words that were considered scripture in his own day.

So as we reflect on this day about being Australian, I think the lectionary readings bring us some important challenges to consider about who we are and whose we are. Do we, like those people who heard the reading of the Law recognise the problems with what we have done in the past? Do we listen the Paul's valuing of all the people who make up our community and the gifts they offer? Perhaps most importantly, how do we respond to the invitation that Jesus offers to be part of living out the Kingdom values in the here and now? How does that invitation deepen our understanding of what it is to be Australian – valuing equality, a fair go for all, and working together to create a future of hope? In short, this year as we reflect on Australia Day, what can our faith teach us about being Australian and what can the ideal of being Australian teach us about our faith?