

Rivers

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 September 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Katy Gerner and Rev Isobel Bishop

Creation 5B – River Sunday

Psalm 104; Excerpts from Paolo Coelho: *Warriors of the Light*; Herman Hesse: *Siddhartha*; Lao Tzu: *Tao Te Ching*; Henry Lawson: *Song of the Darling River*; John 7: 37-38

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

KATY

The Murray Darling Basin Tours

These annual tours, a NSW/ACT Synod initiative, began in 2014 and have taken people around the basin: to the Lower and Upper Murray, the Darling, the Murrumbidgee and then finally the Northern Darling Basin.

Each of the tours included public forums, visits to farms with irrigation, dryland farms, historical sites, as well as spending time with indigenous groups and learning about the area’s eco-tourism.

We learnt a great deal – particularly that there are no easy answers to the problems surrounding the Murray Darling. But through learning, we did provide a listening ear, which was badly needed. So many country folk feel forgotten or at best misunderstood. And afterwards, we went back to alert people about the needs of the farmers and the environmentalists

The Murray-Darling Basin covers approximately 13.8% of the total area of mainland Australia. The states it covers include: Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland as well as the ACT. The three longest rivers in Australia all run through the Murray-Darling Basin. These are:

- the Darling River (2,740km approx)
- the Murray River (2,520km long); and
- the Murrumbidgee River (1,575km long).

It contains over 40% of all Australian farms, which produce wool, cotton, wheat, sheep, cattle, dairy produce, rice, oil-seed, wine, fruit and vegetables. It is also the home of least 35 endangered species of birds, 16 species of endangered mammals and over 35 different native fish species.

The water in the Murray-Darling river system comes from a very small percentage of the Basin area; mainly along the southern and eastern rim. Almost 86% of the vast 'catchment' area contributes very little or no regular run-off to rivers. The rivers have very low gradients over most of their length, which cause them to flow slowly.

The Basin also has a big variety of climatic conditions depending on its location, including sub-tropical, cool humid, temperate, hot and dry and semi-arid and arid

The 'stakeholders' of the Murray Darling Basin face floods and droughts. This was a former water hole. And their interests conflict- environmentalists and irrigationists have very different ideas of how the water should be used.

Other issues they deal with include:

- Farmers are in debt because they haven't been able to grow crops
- Some irrigationists appear to have stolen water
- People (well meaning) give inappropriate help - for example hampers are sent instead of fuel cards and food cards. This affects local businesses which are then forced to close down
- Erosion of soil which is caused by winds and made worse by a lack of education - I'm afraid the Grey Nomads are people who cause problems here - they've been known to park right next to the river bank, which damages the soil - and cut down trees to make fires
- Tourist businesses rely on people being able to fish or water ski, so they lose customers

My last trip (the 3rd of the trips) was during the floods. This time we (20 of us including Meredith and Isobel who I'm very sorry can't be here today) travelled through land, some of which had seen no rain for five years. It is very confronting seeing places that were once rivers, empty.

However, I still saw and experienced many of God's beautiful creations on our trip.

I saw shells and a dinosaur bone which were now also opals. (This one was \$10,000, so I didn't bring it home).

I went to an observatory and through extraordinarily powerful telescopes I saw Saturn's rings, five moons around Jupiter and craters on our moon. All the time I knew that my glimpses were of the past, not the present. But more impressive than even these was the resilience of the human spirit in the face of ongoing difficulties and tragedies.

I saw creativity used to attract tourists when businesses were failing. If you watched the ABC program 'Backroads', you might have seen the program on the town of Thallon. These are two of the creations they made. The wombat is quite a bit bigger than me and you can climb it if you want to! But we didn't. These are the beautiful painted silos and these are built to bring tourists to the area.

I met women from drought stricken farms who still spend regular time making sanitary packs so that girls in Africa can go to school. I'd like to say here that the lady was very discreet in how she was talking about this and just talked about the importance of the girls having sanitary protection so they could continue their studies. But it's also actually to protect them from rape because some of the men in the area believe that when a woman is menstruating, it can heal them of AIDS. So these packs save lives!

I also heard about:

- communities dealing with pests with ongoing projects such as an annual cod fishing competition or planting reeds to prevent further soil erosion and
- communities working together to get a grant to build an exclusion fence to keep wild dogs away from their sheep

I met a farmer whose family has been fighting to keep mining off their lands for two generations. Farmers are very concerned about the effect that mining would have on the quality of the water in their area. When one of our crew asked if their local MPs were of any help, she replied that, despite the fact that they were both National Party members they were both pro-mining.

Lock the Gate Alliance shared their concern: they report that mining:

- encroaches on good farming land
- disrupts other land uses and industries
- clears bushland which damages biodiversity
- causes air pollution and contamination or depletion of ground or surface water
- it impacts on the health of workers and nearby residents

But I would like to tell you about one case, which I thought was very special. It is: a bilby breeding program in Charleville, Queensland.

The bilby is a desert-dwelling marsupial omnivore. They are small with big ears, a long tongue and strong paws. And they use these strong front paws to dig deep holes in the soil that plant materials fall in and then decompose. At the same time, soil is aerated from their digging which then supports seed germination. So the bilby plays an important role in caring for the soil. However, bilbies are not designed to compete for food with rabbits nor being torn apart by feral animals.

The bilbies that you are looking at are Greater Bilbies; the Lesser Bilby is now extinct. The Greater Bilby is now listed as endangered in Queensland and as vulnerable, nationally.

In 1998 two men, Frank and Peter, launched a fund to construct the Bilby Fence at Currawinya National Park where Bilbies could live safely. Frank was a former Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Ranger but his motivation to save the Greater Bilby from extinction arose from a night spotting trip that a friend took him out on to cheer him up a bit after the death of his wife. He spotted a bilby and that sighting led to a new focus for his life. Frank then began speaking to as many groups as he could about the importance of saving the bilby.

Peter is a zoologist with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service based in Charleville for over 30 years. He designed and built the Currawinya fence with teams of Conservation Volunteers. The fence was designed with floppy sides so that when cats tried to climb up the fence, they lost their balance and fell off. In 2003, 30 captive-bred bilbies were released to live happily ever after behind their 250 kilometre fence.

The population slowly built up to about 300 bilbies, but the floods in 2013 damaged the bottom part of the fence. Burrowing predators got in and only 10 bilbies survived.

But the people who had worked so hard to save the bilbies did not give up. The remaining bilbies were taken away and the fence is being rebuilt with more secure metal. The education programs and fundraising goes on. At the time we were in Charleville, the local hotel was preparing for its local Fur Ball to raise money for the various projects related to bilby preservation.

Here are some of the organisations you can support to help the people of the Murray Darling Basin:

- The Moderator's Drought Appeal (which you can make a donation to during the service)
- Frontier Services
- Lock the Gate Alliance
- Charleville Bilby Experience (I'm wearing a beautiful Bilby necklace that I bought up there, so I can show it to you afterwards if you like Bilby jewellery).

ISOBEL

Some observations from the Murray Darling Basin Trip: July, August 2018.

Hello, dear smiling faces. I'm sorry not to be with you today. I've been on two of the Murray Darling Basin trips – this one and a previous one. I've learned so much about myself. I've learned about the land, the river, the mountain and the sky. I have learnt that though so complex, that distributive justice for the Murray Darling River is what I yearn for, in common with many people who have their livelihood along it. That is my hope for the outback community.

20 people left Dubbo on Sunday 29th July, to travel to the headwaters of the Darling River. We travelled up through Walgett, Lightning Ridge, & St George, to Charleville. We stayed two nights in Charleville. Qld. Then on to Roma, & Surat and returning into NSW, to Moree, Narrabri, Coonabarabran, & Dubbo.

In Charleville and the other stops, we mostly walked around alone, and in some ways it was very similar to many Retreats I have experienced earlier in my life.

I went to a small café - The Blue Gum Café, and here is a little piece of the décor in that rather old fashioned watering hole. All the locals knew one another, and came there for breakfast often, it seemed.

As I walked around the streets, it was sad to see so many shops and businesses closed. One factor though, stands out in my mind. Everywhere we went, I sensed that many people were just not giving up. There is still a resilience of the human spirit, even in the most hopeless situation, if people can talk it over with another.

Another small café named Violet's Café, was very new, just passed 6mths of being open. Violet told me she needed repair surgery on her hip, though she was about 45 years old. She said "*I need to go to Brisbane over 400 kms away, and my husband and staff of two will need to look after the café while I am in Hospital.*" It all seemed so hard to me.

The other place I will mention is the town of Narrabri. My cousin Lochie also lives with the coal seam gas fracking right on his property – the Whitehaven coal mine. A noticeable shift is that many of the young farmers and their partners, are now University trained. They understand the implications of the Climate warming, and also contend with fracking. and now this terrible drought. The CSIRO have been diligent in educating the farmers as to Climate change, their situation and also their rights. Between Narrabri and Gunnedah there are no less than 6 wells - fracking.

My second broad reflection is on the state of the Uniting Church out beyond Dubbo. The drought is crippling the farmers, and yet farmers have always contended with the unpredictability of the climate. Frontier Services is still caring for people out back. In both Gilgandra and Coonabarabran where we worshipped, the tone of the worship was evangelical in nature I suppose. But what stood out for me was the gracious evidence of the love and respect of every person in the midst of the congregation.

I was reminded in Gilgandra, by one of the younger women, who came up to me and mentioned that I had officiated at her Wedding back in 1986! Jim and I spent a little less than one year in Gilgandra, in locum ministry. I met again some 91 year old farmers, dear friends who taught me so much about strains of wheat, and so many other things. They still live on their farm, and come into town every Sunday for worship. Gilgandra Church is a modern brick building built in 1986, and is a very practical building. The Sunday we worshipped in Gilgandra was the Sunday two of the lay women were commissioned to become lay presiders at Holy Communion. What was so noticeable about both Gilgandra and Coonabarabran is the love and care and genuine concern the people have for one another.

In Coonabarabran on the cold winter's Saturday night we arrived there, the Church provided a meal for us, even in the throes of the 5 year drought they are experiencing, and not a word of complaint or gloom amongst them. Then the next day at worship, all the focus was on praise of God, and a practical common-sense sermon, with plenty of choruses.

This is a poem I wrote for the Murray Darling Basin:

Grey green blue gums
Tired old river
Knocked over Mulgas
For hungry cattle to eat the leaves
The terror, the terror of it all.

Parched dry land
Water so precious
With such a strong smell

The land is waiting.

It calls us to love
It calls us to care
That no coal seam gas is extracted.

It calls us to wait
It calls us to look, listen
Learn and hope, as it renews,
Oh the wonder, the wonder of it all!

I thank mother earth and the river – this glorious wonderful river that it might yet be for all to have some justice and some share of it