

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by David Tutty, Social Justice Commission Executive Officer, Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba, Queensland.

Who is my neighbour? A post-COVID bigger picture

This year has been very difficult. COVID-19 has impacted on so many areas of life. Many of us have had long periods at home with very little social contact. So-called 'social distancing', the cancellation of events, the limitations on travel and the loss of incomes have all come with a huge cost.

One of these costs is that our foci have become much more local and inward. We have worried about ourselves, our families, our jobs and our futures. While there has been much reaching out in care of family, friends, parishioners and work colleagues, I see, in the bigger picture, our horizons of care have narrowed.

This has also occurred at the national, state and regional levels with border closures and the instigation of isolation and quarantine arrangements. Various Australian governments have been about protecting their own people. To support these decisions, some have argued that they need to protect their health systems from a deluge of sick people. As practical as this may seem, it has contributed to the sense of narrower horizons and a more inward and local focus.

Many bigger picture issues have been put on the back-burner. It has been harder to talk of institutional racism, climate change, inequality and wider sustainability issues when COVID and getting the economy back to normal have been front and centre.

Governments have poured huge amounts of money into protecting their economies. Here in Australia, job-keeper and job-seeker payments have been made alongside of a range of economic stimuli so that key businesses had a chance of surviving. The Federal budget has also brought forward a range of tax cuts so more money is available to spend and to maintain the economy.

Alongside these stimuli, Scott Morrison's Government has cut the refugee intake and changed the focus of overseas aid and development to more local and regional. An increase in spending in the Pacific and in

Timor Leste comes alongside decreased spending in Africa and the Middle East. There is less money for the International Red Cross and the World Food Programme. While these reflect the ideological bent of the Liberal-National Coalition, they reinforce that our horizons have narrowed!

In this context, it is again necessary to ask the question: Who is my neighbour?

The Lukan story of the Good Samaritan is well known and we have mainly focused on the actions of the despised Samaritan on the road in comparison to those of the priest and Levite. If we widen our focus to see that the Samaritan saw someone who was 'other' as his neighbour, we begin to answer Jesus' question of 'Who is my neighbour?'

Pope Francis, in his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, offers a detailed commentary on the Good Samaritan story. He notes that the Samaritan "became a *neighbour* to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers" (#81). The pope argues that this "leaves no room for ideological manipulation and challenges us to expand our frontiers" (#83). He connects this story with the insights of Matthew 25:31-46, saying that the words of Jesus "compel us to recognise Christ himself in each of our abandoned and excluded brothers and sisters" (#85).

Learning from this, my sense is that, as Christians, we are called to expand our horizons as part of the dynamic of becoming a neighbour to those most in need. To become a neighbour requires a willingness to move beyond the comfort and security of the world we know and to enter the world of those in need who may be very different from ourselves. Drawing on *Laudato Si'*, I see our call to become a neighbour is an action in response to "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (#49). So the earth itself is our neighbour in need as much as those in Tuvalu and Kiribati, Niger and South Sudan, and Te Urewera and Jilkminggan.

I acknowledge that we are limited human beings and this wide horizon may not make sense to many when there is homelessness and child poverty present in our own cities. Yet we are called to be open to stories like the Good Samaritan and grow in our horizons and in our ability to care.

For those of us who are part of the dominant culture, I suggest that to better grow in our horizons we need to reflect on some of our assumptions and ways of being. Goenpul and Quandamooka First Nations' academic, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty*, argues that loss and fear of loss shapes white ways of being in Australia. I would suggest it also is true for Pākehā in Aotearoa. This is played out in our collective need to possess and dominate both the land and the first peoples of the land.

Most of us are not good at facing and processing loss and we employ strategies of denial and myth-making to cope. While our ancestors' loss and trauma of leaving their home countries and having to begin a new life on this side of the world is a factor, I suggest we need to look further back to the loss of the sense of being part of a collective and the separation from ancestral lands. Be it through the English landowners' enclosure of the commons, the clearances in the Scottish Highlands, the displacement of millions of Irish by the English conquest, or the much earlier invasion of England by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, all have involved losses and the creation of stories to try and make sense of the new reality.

Many cultures around the world have a strong collective aspect and their starting point is responsibility and obligation and not individual rights. Somewhere in the English journey, in parallel with other peoples in Western Europe, there developed a strong sense of the competitive individual and the loss of an awareness of, and responsibility to, a collective. Through this history, the majority of those who left the British Isles also lost a close connection to the land of their ancestors and the opportunity to care for it.

Most of our peasant forebears who came out to Australia and Aotearoa were just hoping for a better life. Yet in their coming to possess land, opportunity and a sense of belonging here, Moreton-Robinson names that they were party to the "original theft" (p5) and the "illegal dispossession" (p4) of First Nations peoples. We, as their descendants, are also party to this theft and dispossession because we are enjoying the benefits of this ongoing dynamic.

Moreton-Robinson speaks about white Australians' "wilful forgetting ... colonial conquest and racism" (p10) and their reduction of First Nations peoples to being "trespassers in our own land" (p16). The wilful forgetting is our denial mechanism as we want to believe we are basically good people and because of this denial, Australians have constructed myths around the battler, the digger, the ANZAC, the mate and the lucky country.

Matthew Fox, in *A Spirituality named Compassion: Uniting Mystical Awareness with Social Justice*, calls us to move away from a psychology of control and grow in the practice of compassion. The quest for power, prestige and possessions arises because we are unwilling to sit with our fundamental anxieties and insecurities. I suggest that these anxieties and insecurities exist because we have not honestly faced loss and continue to fear loss.

To learn to become a better neighbour and to risk widening our horizons, I claim we need to first learn to sit with loss and our ongoing fear of loss. This is both an individual and collective process. We need to recover the ability to better grieve loss.

Many losses, though, go unrecognised or are hidden because of the myth-making within our dominant culture. Settlers, colonists, adventurers, traders and missionaries are still seen as heroes by many as they have brought so-called civilization, Christianity and commerce to this distant part of the world. Capitalists, developers, multi-national companies and their supporters are now seen as modern saviours who can provide jobs and future wealth. Yet alongside deliberately ignoring environmental exploitation, colonial dispossession and white privilege, we also continue to ignore or deny the many losses we carry in our collective psyche and epigenetics (see www.bbc.com/future/article/20190326-what-is-epigenetics).

In this context, truth-telling and an honest dismantling of inherited myths are necessary parts of facing historical losses and being open to becoming neighbours in a larger horizon. While truth-telling is a key challenge of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, it is also essential for us who are non-Indigenous so that we can better face our own losses and fears.

To be better open to the neighbour in need in a post-COVID world requires us to grow in empathy and compassion for ourselves and our losses. If we have the courage to do this, we will be better able to widen our horizons and show compassion to the earth and to those who are the poor of the earth.