

Jeremiah 1. 4-10

Luke 13. 10-17

Melbourne has a great history of Sabbatarianism. From the 1860s up and into the 1970s there was a fierce religious movement to restrict any kind of fun on Sunday; the Christian sabbath. This fierce assault on the freedom of Victorian citizens was most concentrated in this part of Melbourne in what were, until the Kennett years, the cities of Camberwell and Nunawading. Trains and trams ran on very restricted timetables, any sort of public activity, apart from going to church, and anything that seemed to resemble fun, was proscribed by the sanctimonious of the city.

Melbourne children were raised in a no-fun-on-the sabbath kind of way. Swings in parks tied up, signs warning against ball games on Sundays. And some of you have described PFA or youth group dances where the sanctimonious came and sat around the perimeter of the hall and read their bibles while the rest of you enjoyed yourselves. A phalanx of sanctimonious nitpickers.

Prolific journalist, Keith Dunstan, writer of the daily column – a Place in the Sun through the 70s and 80s in the Sun News Pictorial wrote a helpful book in the late 60s entitled Wowsers. In it he described the whole sorry story of how the sanctimonious of the city held Melbourne in a kind of strangle hold which meant the city was a kind of ghost town on Sundays. But Dunstan in his regular column helped Melbournians to begin to not take themselves so seriously – poking fun at our collective absurdities and exposing humbug. He was a prophetic kind of figure.

He was a man after my own heart, founding the anti-football league -the original AFL - out of exasperation that the only subject of acceptable public dialogue in Melbourne was Australian rules football. *AFL members have fought hard to maintain an immunity to the unfortunate affliction which affects many tens of thousands of Australians. League members are united by the common understanding that there is more to life than the ability to kick a pigskin between two white posts.* The AFL used to hold an annual sacred immolation of the pigskin on the hallowed turf of the MCG. That is, they'd burn a football.

In fact I took a secret vow in regards to football at my ordination by Jenny Preston as chair of the Presbytery of Yarra Valley, 20 years ago. Along with vows about scripture and the creeds, amongst other things, I vowed never to mention football from the pulpit – under my breath.

'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day' the leader of the synagogue announces to the gathered crowd: But the people rejoiced at the wonderful things Jesus was doing.

The leader of the synagogue was certain Jesus was doing the wrong thing.

The longer I have gone on in this ministry business the more I have come to feel that the religious life is about a single question; just one question. The question of whether we believe we can be certain; this seems to be at the foundation of all religious tensions and struggles; the push and shove between believers. About certainty.

The tension between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue is over what it means to be a person of faith – is it about grace, or law; freedom or constraint. About bringing life or binding in restrictions which prevent it. This episode in the synagogue is not a tussle between Jesus and the synagogue leader, with Jesus is trying to pluck up and pull down the synagogue, but a tussle between two Jewish teachers; two Jewish leaders.

In the first story in the Bible of the man and the woman in that mythical garden, east of Eden, the serpent tempts the woman with the possibility that if she eats the fruit of the tree, then she will know, she will be able to be certain – and she will be like God –knowing good and evil; and so know the difference between; she can be

certain about right and wrong, her experience of life can be painted in black and white. She will have the knowledge.

This primordial story which the editors of the Jewish canon have given us seems to be the foundational question. The primary question the myth provokes us with is: is the religious life about certainty or uncertainty; Of having the answers or being honest that we don't have the answers. The temptation is to believe that we can know. But life is not like this; to be human is to be uncertain, confused often, doubting.

In the recent film Conclave – released last year – about a conclave of cardinals at the Vatican to select a new pope – the Dean of Cardinals offers a reflection as the conclave begins. He reminds the cardinals that certainty is the enemy of faith.

Jesus is in the synagogue and it's sabbath day, the day of rest in the Jewish week. Jesus is certain that this daughter of Abraham can be set free from her long-standing ailment. But the leader of the synagogue is certain that she shouldn't be healed on this day of rest. He's indignant in his certainty – not because he's Jewish or the leader of the synagogue, but because he's fallen for the temptation to certainty. His indignance is such a giveaway that he's jealous of Jesus and so engages in some sanctimonious nitpicking.

When we believe we know, then we have fallen for the fundamental temptation of being certain. When we are compelled by a need to be certain we are unfree, because we're always worrying in what ways we might be wrong or somebody else might be wrong. This is unfreedom, enslavement. This was the spirit of the wowserism that afflicted Melbourne for a century and why it was so obnoxious and went a long toward driving people away from the church.

What the psychological awareness over the past century, and recent decades especially, has shown us is that control of others is a form of addiction. The wowzers who so constrained Melbourne life for a century were keen to keep at bay what they considered to be evils – certain that they were responsible for Melbournians' wellbeing – indeed the wellbeing of our souls. Yes, there were a range of social evils that they sought to limit. But I wonder: what did they do about the economic and social inequity which so many were subjected to – the economic vulnerability of so many in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the dramas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two world wars and the great depression. People sooth themselves with addictions – divert their distress - when life is traumatic and weighs them down; when they are bent over with injustice.

The church is called to see people weighed down and bent over – as Jesus saw the woman bent over - and to seek to liberate them; and we are called to name the hypocrisy which denies that anything can or should be done about it. Many are rightly concerned that the productivity roundtable held this week was a smokescreen for some new form of economic exploitation. Are people not working hard enough? Are not families under enough economic stress? Are not kids depressed and anxious like at no time ever before or acting out because their parents are without the time or space to parent as well as they might? Where might the church be in liberating people from the burden and naming the hypocrisy which wants systems of oppression, not just maintained, but enhanced?

The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church calls us to always be seeking fresh words and deeds in which to speak and act in order to continue to be Christ in our time and place. May the spirit enable us to find new patterns of faithfulness and ways in which the church may be these things.

Andrew Boyle