

*(Draft—not for publication or citation)*

## **“It’s so Boring Waiting for Jesus.” Blessing and non-blessing in Central Australia**

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In April 2007 a congregational elder picks up an iron bar and smashes out the lights of her car. She is tired of the demands of others that she drive them to the bottle-shop in the evening. In December 2008 another congregational leader, a lay-assistant at the Eucharist, deliberately sets out to destroy her car by driving it into a tree. She too is tired of the demands of others to use her car to purchase alcohol. Tragically she loses control of the vehicle and ends up not only destroying the vehicle but also her own life.

During the year 2006, three Indigenous Lutheran mothers are murdered in Alice Springs. Two are murdered by their husbands, the other by her daughter. The Lutheran Indigenous communities of central Australia are fighting a daily battle against an alcohol fuelled cycle of aimlessness violence and despair.

Amid a community whose millennia-old traditional culture is being destroyed by the presence of an imported and affluent western economy, there exists an Indigenous Lutheran Church represented in a string of 30 Indigenous Congregations spiraling out over the desert floor from the regional economic centre of Alice Springs.

Lutheran missionaries from Hermannsburg and Neuendettelsau arrived in the Australian desert during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and today the Indigenous Lutheran congregations number 4,000 members, served by more than 20 Indigenous Pastors.

### **Non-blessing one**

Almost a century after white settlement of the rest of the continent, Central Australia in 1870 was yet to experience the presence of colonists. The harsh conditions of the desert had protected the Indigenous tribes from white invasion. But in 1872 the southern colonies built an overland telegraph line through the desert. Five years later Lutheran Missionaries Kempe, Schwarz and Schultz arrived and established an outpost on the banks of Lhere Pinta (the Arrarnta name for the ancient watercourse named the Finke River by white explorers), and just one year later the first white pastoralists arrived in the region.

The colonists were after the elevated country of the Arrarnta Tribes. The desert mountains were home to precious water holes and billabongs that could be used to quench the thirst of hundreds of head of cattle and sheep. Indigenous people who occupied the mountain country had two choices: allow the cattle industry to take over their precious water supplies and move away into the farthest reaches of the thirsty desert, or resist the invaders and stay on their land.

During the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many Arrarnta people lost their lives as a result of the guns of settlers and police. One group of white men did not come shooting. And many Arrarnta sought refuge and protection at the small Lutheran mission on the banks of Lhere Pinta.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most of the tribal people occupying watered country in Central Australia lost their land to the colonists. Tribes living further out in the harshest desert locations have kept their country and tribal lands even to this day.

While not suffering the loss of land, the onslaught of Western culture has brought its own tragedies to these remote communities in a myriad of ways. And within many of these remote communities there stands a rough tin-shed Lutheran Church, some only two or three decades old, built as a result of a wave of evangelization undertaken by Arrarnta Lutherans as they distributed to neighbouring tribes the new stories they had first received from Kempe, Schwarz and Schultz.

### **Against non-blessing**

Appalled by the violence being inflicted on Arrarnta people in the 1880s the missionaries at Lhere Pinta lifted their voice in response to the tragedy unfolding around them. Their concerns led eventually to the removal of one of the worst offenders from the area: Constable Willshire of the Northern Territory Police.

In the year 1900, at a desert mission further south, Neuendettelsau Missionary Otto Siebert championed the need of all involved in mission to Indigenous people to immerse themselves in and thus respect and acknowledge the value of traditional culture if they were to earn the right to communicate the stories of Christ that they so desired to: 'We must become ancients and heathens ourselves.'<sup>1</sup>

In 1907, Missionary Carl Strehlow published the first volume of a 7 volume work "Die Aranda und Luritja Stämme". To this day it remains a seminal collection of Arrarnta Lore and culture and its great breadth and size is evidence of the respect shown by Missionary Strehlow to the language and culture of the Arrarnta people.

During the 1930s and 1940s, missionary F W Albrecht was successful in lobbying the government to remove the pastoral industry from lands within the western desert thus keeping it as a sanctuary for the Luritja and Pintubi tribes.

During the late 1970s, missionaries G. Stoll and P. Albrecht influenced the government to implement a system of land rights on the former Mission land nowhere else implemented in the country- a system that sought to take full account of the realities and intricacies of Indigenous Land Law.

### **Non-blessing two: the death of vocation.**

The original Indigenous economies have almost been fully destroyed. Not only directly by the theft of land and water, but indirectly by the arrival of the western economy. Since the 1970's Australian Governments have actively sought to bring Indigenous people within the embrace of the mainstream economy. The impulse behind this policy has not been malicious. Rather it has genuinely been felt that such an embrace would be of benefit to Indigenous people. And so the Government encouraged the establishment of stores supplying foodstuffs in most of the remote desert settlements. In the absence of any western industry in remote settlements, and

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<sup>1</sup> Otto Siebert quoting Max Müller, in his letter 28/3/1900, in Chris Nobbs, "The Bush Missionary's Defence" *Strehlow Research Centre Occasional Paper 4* Alice Springs, Northern Territory Government, 2005, p 37

the consequent lack of employment as understood under a western model, the Government has provided unemployment payments to most Indigenous residents of Central Australia.

And so a culture that held a massive body of wisdom enabling physical survival in the most fragile and delicate of environments has now become optional. That is; no longer necessary to physical survival. As more and more of today's generation accept the embrace of the western economy, customary law, traditional knowledge and the intricate social rules required to govern a hunter-gatherer economy are disappearing. For they are not being used.

The sunlight which would guide a hunter to an animal food source or a gatherer to a source of berries and seeds now shines on a desert supermarket and a pension office. The hours of the day which were once occupied with brutal physical exertion in search of water and nourishment now remain vacant.

Old vocations are disappearing. And meaning. And reason for being.

### **Non-blessing three: the second coming**

First, second and third generation Indigenous Christians confess the second coming of Christ not as a far distant possibility but rather, as modeled by generations of mission-driven biblical literalists, a soon to occur event. Some, like St. Paul, express an almost palpable exasperation that Jesus has not yet come.

And one wonders whether the listlessness induced by the death of the Indigenous economy and supported by alcohol addiction is also not further aided and abetted by the other-worldly focus outlined above. For if Jesus really is just around the corner, then today's economy or lack of economy is indeed of diminished concern.

In 2005 an Indigenous Lutheran Pastor said to me: "I want to die." "Why?" I asked. "It's so Boring." "What's so Boring?" "Waiting." "Waiting for what?" "Waiting for Jesus."

Waiting and alcohol. If waiting is boring, alcohol helps to make it less so. So too does a belief in a magical Jesus.

### **Non-blessing four: a magical Jesus**

In the face of the highest rates of diabetes and renal-failure in the world, (the alcohol industry in Central Australia should be brought before the International Court of Human Rights and charged with genocide), many seek prayers of healing. The Jesus brought and taught by long-gone missionaries is clung to tightly by those seeking a miraculous way out of an early alcohol- induced death.

Although the miraculous healing sought by so many does not come, the comfort of a relationship with Christ when death is at the door is sought by many. At times during the year there is a funeral almost every day at the Lutheran Church in Alice Springs. The population of the township is 25,000.

One observes that a belief in a magical Jesus, while comforting to many in the time of death, also provides a psycho-spiritual safety net to those undertaking the trapeze act of alcoholism. As the alcoholic Christian walks on the high wire of alcohol over-consumption one wonders whether the Jesus 'safety-net' is actually masking the brutal dangers of this lifestyle ; thereby, in effect, shielding and thus encouraging risky and harmful behavior.

### **Non-blessing five: No prophets.**

Returning from a funeral in 2006 an Indigenous Pastor stated softly: “God like whitefella more better I reckon.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed when one surveys the life of Indigenous people in central Australia in contrast to the wellbeing experienced by most white residents of that landscape one could well come to a similar conclusion.

The cry contained within the statement of the Pastor is Jobian: ‘Is God our friend, or only a friend of those who have everything?’ ‘Is God on our side, or is God not on our side?’ But the Pastor who voiced this question can receive no comfort from the book of Job, or from the laments of the psalms or the words of the prophets as they proclaim Yahweh’s love for all those whom the world considers ‘unblessed ; the poor and the oppressed. For the Indigenous Lutheran Churches in Central Australia are essentially churches without the Old Testament. After 130 years of Missionization only sections of Genesis and Exodus and a small selection of other Old Testament passages have been translated.

In the cry of the Pastor is voiced a theology which is almost the exact opposite of what has become known as the theology of liberation. Liberation Theology states boldly that God in fact ‘likes poor marginalized people more better I reckon’—as it proclaims God’s prophetic concern for the wellbeing of those suffering oppression.

But here in the deserts of Australia, the opposite: God being seen as a God not on the side of the poor, but as a God who favors the ‘whitefellas’ , that is, in effect; those with material wealth and those with political power. In Central Australia, God is not seen, as one who is on the side of the poor, and powerless.

If we have a theology that is experienced as the opposite of liberation—then what kind of a theology is that? Certainly in the eyes of at least one Indigenous Pastor we have a ‘spiritual economy’ in which Indigenous people -as they do in the mainstream economy -see themselves as second-class citizens.

### **Blessing Where?**

The experience of Indigenous Lutheran congregations in central Australia brings into stark relief the need for what might be termed a Lutheran theology of blessing; a theology which responds to the search for the blessing of God in daily life, even in the midst of dispossession, the destruction of vocation, despair and alcoholism.

Before we set out on this direction we place one further reality on the table. The popular theology of the desert has received a messianic impetus from travelling Pentecostal crusades. The current understanding is that blessing ought to come to one super-naturally. Hence medical patients will sometimes happily confide that they have not been taking prescribed medicines but praying instead.

And aspects of the traditional Indigenous world view, particularly in relation to disease and sickness; for example; that illness is a result of cursing or other supernatural forces, seem almost a natural fit with a messianic theology promising health and blessing supernaturally.

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<sup>2</sup> fella= humanbeing

## Blessing, Bible, Luther

When understood biblically, blessing encompasses wellbeing across the full range of human experience: physical, emotional, spiritual, familial, social, communal, political. The blessing given to the Creation in Genesis 1:22,28 is primarily the power of fertility. And this understanding of blessing as God's life-giving power is extended to include all that is needed for the sustaining of life;

'He will love you, bless you and multiply you, he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to your fathers to give you' Deut 7:13

Luther, writing in the Large Catechism, also includes in 'the blessing of daily bread' all that is needed for bread to arrive on our table, that is ; peace and good governance, fair trade and employment.<sup>3</sup>

## A Lutheran Theology of Blessing in Central Australia

### 21 Theses +2

1. All of nature is unconditionally blessed by God in Creation. This blessing of life, and all that nature provides for the support of life, is sheer gift.
2. The Creation is not blessed in response to faith, or attached to it. Instead God's blessing is given as grace.
3. Luther underlines this in his explanation of the first article of the Creed confessing God as Creator; 'all this is done ...out of pure mercy'.<sup>4</sup>
4. The Creation is blessed to ensure the ongoing provision of life for all living things, for all people, across all cultures.
5. The powers to develop, enhance and bless life are also seen and contained, as Luther writes, in systems of law and governance, justice, trade and vocation.<sup>5</sup>
6. The Law and governance systems of ancient cultures are also transmitters of the wisdom required for the maintenance and creation of life.
7. As such, the ancient cultures of Central Australia are also transmitters of God's blessing of life and fertility, governance and vocation.
8. The God of Genesis invites the Creation and humankind to be co-creators of life. Humanity and human culture are co-opted by God to be both distributors and co-creators of his blessing.

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<sup>3</sup> Luther, Martin *The Large Catechism* The Our Father, The fourth petition. 1529.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on Luther's understanding of the relationship between Grace and Creation see article by Niels Henrik Gregersen on this topic: "Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited" in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol 44, No. 1, Spring 2005

<sup>5</sup> Luther, Martin *The Large Catechism*, The Our Father, The fourth and seventh petitions. 1529

9. Traditional Indigenous culture attached deep significance to the role humankind plays in co-creating and co-distributing the blessings of the Creation. Totemic rite and ritual have long taught an understanding that humankind are essentially connected to the bringing and distribution of blessing.
10. The role Indigenous culture has played in distributing and co-creating God's blessings of life, governance and society in Central Australia needs to be acknowledged and acclaimed. So doing would establish the basis for a dialogue regarding the way in which Indigenous people can continue to involve themselves in distributing and co-creating the blessing of God in with and under the new historical circumstances in which they live today.
11. The blessing of vocation is included by Luther amongst those elements included in the 'blessing of daily bread'. Understanding the way Indigenous Australians are today separated from their past vocation is the starting place for pursuing the creation of vocation for Indigenous Central Australians in the contemporary setting.
12. The blessing of daily bread can be blocked and destroyed. When humankind does not establish channels to ensure humanity has access to governance, justice and also to vocation, then the powerless and poor are denied the blessings of creation.
13. When ancient systems that channeled the blessings of creation are demolished, and new systems implemented that do not harness the life, energy and imagination of a community, then the vacuum left by an absence of vocation is destructive.
14. When humankind does not take on its role as co-distributors and co-creators of God's blessing, then blessing is diminished across a vast array of contexts.
15. A theology of vocation is the understanding that every human has a sanctified role to play in the distribution and co-creation of God's blessing. As such those who are unemployed or non-engaged in society or the surrounding culture are denied one of the blessings of daily bread.
16. An expectation that blessing will arrive supernaturally to those with faith is an expectation that ignores the way God has blessed the creation and blessed all life to be co-creators and co-distributors of blessing.
17. An expectation that blessing comes supernaturally devalues the work of blessing God shares with the Creation, and underplays the significance of vocation.
18. The expectation of supernatural blessing associated with faith undermines the cornerstone of the reformation. For when blessing is made dependent on our faith then our relationship with God is no longer dependent on Grace. Our faith has become a work. Those who do not receive the expected supernatural blessing are left to contend not only with an absence of blessing but an absence of grace.
19. Not much investigated by the community of faith in Central Australia is the way in which the Indigenous cultures of the desert are able to bring blessing to non-Indigenous cultures. The Indigenous cultural emphasis on the value of family and

kin relationships is one that could well assist the creation of blessing within the mainstream culture. Likewise Indigenous relationships to the land hold wisdom and knowledge well able to contribute to the ongoing blessing of the natural environment.

20. Working to ensure that the blessings God gives to humankind through nature are accessible to all, means actively participating in the governance of society.
21. A key and primal gift of blessing that the people of God can bring to each other is the blessing of companionship and solidarity.
22. Participation in the blessing of God does not mean the absence of suffering, or of struggle. (cf: the Beatitudes of Matthew 5)<sup>6</sup>
23. Christ's blessing of those the world sees as unblest, and of those who have been denied the blessings of the creation, links the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> articles of the creed, and encourages the Church in its mission to bring the blessings of the Creation to those without.

Developing a theology of Blessing in Daily Life that addresses the need for wellbeing in Central Australia, could go some way to helping lay the foundation for a sustained improvement in the life circumstances of Indigenous Australians.

Not to develop a Lutheran theology of blessing is to leave the community vulnerable to a religious outlook that is pacifying, disempowering and ultimately grace-denying and life-negating.

### **Universal Dimensions**

Some of the questions regarding life and blessing arising within the church in Central Australia will find resonance in the experiences of other dispossessed and disempowered peoples. Some of the questions raised will also find resonance amongst religious communities of the mainstream and the middle-class. Indeed the theology undertaken on the 'frontier', or in extreme circumstances, is often a bellwether for similar theological concerns more hidden under the deeper comforts of affluence and security.

What is blessing?

How does it come?

What role does humankind and all life play in blessing?

Why be religious if blessing is received by both the religious and the non-religious?

Why be faithful if it is not necessary for blessing?

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<sup>6</sup> "It's true that in the Old Testament the person who receives the blessing has to endure a great deal of suffering (e.g Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph) but this never leads to the idea that fortune and suffering, blessing and cross are mutually exclusive and contradictory – nor does it in the New Testament. Indeed, the only difference between the Old and New Testaments in this respect is that in the Old the blessing includes the cross, and in the New the cross includes the blessing." Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Letters and Papers from Prison* pp 374-375 Simon and Schuster, 1997

Why do we experience poverty if we are supposed to be blessed?

What has happened to the blessing God intended for us?

How do we ensure the blessings of the creation are available to all?

Luther's view of creation and blessing as acts of grace, are a corrective to those theologies that teach of blessing tied only to faith. His understanding that the blessing given with, in, and via creation is itself grace, ought to inspire a Church of grace to be actively engaged in the bringing of such blessing to those with whom it shares the planet's life, and especially to those in its care. If such blessing is grace, then the movement of grace will include not only absolution, but engagement with the community to ensure that the blessings of daily bread, work, medicine, water, just governance and vocation are shared with all.

“Wo von seggen gesagt wird,

da ist das Euangelion”

Sermon on Genesis 22:18 <sup>7</sup>

### **Postscript**

A church in which grace is understood to include the gift of co-creating and co-distributing the blessing of God, will not only involve waiting.

A church in which grace is understood to include the gift of co-creating and co-distributing the blessing of God, will not only be boring.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, “In Genesis Declamationes” (1527), WA 24,394