

Program No: 09:29
For Broadcast: 19th July 2009

FITTING IN

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I walked out of my office at school one day and noticed a young Aboriginal man – perhaps about 19 or 20 years of age - sitting in the foyer. What was unusual was that he was dressed in a suit. We don't see too many people in suits in Alice Springs! An ill fitting suit with a yellow t-shirt clearly visible underneath the suit, but nevertheless, a suit. He was sitting there patiently waiting. But waiting for what? I asked one of our staff.

I found out his name was Moses (not his real name) and he was looking for work at Yirara College. Apparently he had grown up with mostly white people, some of that time in Adelaide. He spoke good English, was more comfortable with whitefellas, but had not progressed far academically. Back in his home community in northern South Australia Moses was regraded as an oddity. Apparently he wanted to speak to me but he hadn't said anything to my secretary. He was just sitting there...

So I invited him in. I asked him what sort of job he wanted. He told me he had been a classroom assistant back in his home community, and so he wanted to do the same thing at our school. He wanted to help other students to read and write. I asked him to read something for me. He mumbled something about not having brought his glasses. I then asked him for some contact details – what was the address of where he was staying in Alice Springs? What was the phone number? None of those things he could answer.

Finally, I found out that when Moses arrived in Alice Springs, he withdrew all his money from his key-card and gone to the shop to buy a suit for this interview at Yirara College, in the expectation that he would get a job. When I heard this I felt like weeping.

Our nation prides itself on being a successful multi-cultural society. And in many respects we have managed to integrate large numbers of people from a wide spectrum of cultures into mainstream society. And wherever you go in Australia you see this interesting and vibrant mix of racial backgrounds. I recall reading some years ago that after Canada, Australia takes more refugees, per capita, than any other country in the world.

But there is an irony here. We seem to have been quite good at integrating people from different ethnic backgrounds into Australian society. Yet many Aboriginal people – the original inhabitants of this nation - still do not fit into the world we have created in Australia.

My experience with Moses still bothers me: This polite, pleasant, eager to please young man is caught between two worlds, and it seems he is unable to live in either. He is a misfit, an oddity, someone who had no real identity in the Aboriginal or the non-Aboriginal world. He had no literacy ability. And he had even less skills, let alone acceptance and identity, to actively participate in the indigenous world.

How did this happen? I have a fair idea, but in the end it doesn't really matter. The point is that I have met too many young indigenous people just like Moses in the years I have been living in Alice Springs.

I suspect that such people, caught between conflicting worlds, are also among our recent immigrants. I have many conversations with taxi drivers as I travel interstate for meetings and conferences. Most are immigrants to Australia. They tell me that they do not fit in – they drive taxis, for instance, because they cannot work in their field of expertise. They are happy to be in Australia for the sake of giving their children a better life. Their children will fit in and find a place here. But they will never be at home in this country.

However, the struggle to fit in to society is not limited to Aboriginal people or recent immigrants. We also have those who are fourth or fifth generation Australians, and for a whole host of reasons, don't fit in.

I think of a lady our church is caring for. She has some very unusual social skills. Probably most people think she is strange. She can't manage money. She is constantly afraid. She rings up my wife many times a day needing support, someone to listen to her. Life will always be a struggle for her. She will never quite fit in.

It has been said that the real test of a society's maturity is how well they look after their most vulnerable. How well are we looking after our most vulnerable people?

One of the reasons I am a Christian is because I have seen that throughout centuries, it is God's people – those who call themselves Christians, those who organise themselves in churches, who have taken the lead in assisting the marginalized, the weak and the vulnerable. Just look at how many charities in this country have Christian origins or are tied to the church- the Salvation Army, 'the Vinnies', World Vision, just to mention a few.

I know Christians and churches are not perfect. They make mistakes too. But this tells me something important about the God that Christians believe in and follow. It tells me that God – who showed himself in Jesus Christ – is a God of compassion. In the Bible God particularly points out to his people to look after migrants and widows and others who were most vulnerable in those times. When Jesus lived on earth he spent much of his time healing the sick, deaf and blind, and listening to the heartaches of everyday people. Jesus told his followers to love. He even showed them how to love to the end when he died so that all people could be given a chance to know God.

This same God now commands his followers to look after the vulnerable, create community where there is none, and work to bring unity out of diversity.

Every time I meet a person like Moses or like this woman my church is assisting, I feel like weeping at the sadness some people go through in their lives. But I also am encouraged by those people who go out of their comfort zones to take seriously God's command to love others as you would wish others to love you. I not only thank God for the Salvos – I thank him for all the followers of his who want to