

A Monday Night of Contrasts

As the week began, twenty or so of our boarders from Hong Kong, Singapore (and even Hokkaido) trekked up to Lane Cove to celebrate Chinese New Year, the Year of the Monkey, with a banquet at the Lane Cove Chinese Kitchen – that familiar haunt of hungry boarders for many years.

As I looked around the tables, I had cause to reflect. Only four decades ago, the White Australia Policy was dismantled. Prior to that, Chinese-Australians more than likely traced their ancestry to indentured labourers, workers kidnapped from Chinese ports, or those who came for the gold diggings, and later as city merchants and market gardeners. Fears mounted concerning this imagined “menace”, discrimination flourished – even fears of an invasion. With legislation, migration then all but ceased. Anti-Chinese sentiment was fostered in many periodicals right through to the early twentieth century – offensively expressed in word and racist cartoons and posters. Now we look back and ask ourselves, “How did we get it so wrong?”

Now here we were, with other diners, joining the boarders, rejoicing in another culture, learning of customs and traditions, welcoming in a New Year with its mysterious history. A second point of reflection was to remind myself of Ignatius’ encouragement to the Jesuits in his nascent Society to accommodate, to enculturate and to adapt when they travelled to the Middle or Far East, to Africa or to the Americas. The starting point was always to engage with another culture or a faith tradition with respect, with conversation, with finding common ground, to discover where human values and pursuits were universal.

Meanwhile, as we dined, across the city at the Town Hall another eight boys from our A T Thomas Advocacy Group, established to promote and defend human rights. They had asked to be join the *#LetThemStay* vigil to appeal for compassion from the Government in our nation’s handling of asylum seekers – particularly the thirty-seven babies about to be sent back to Nauru’s offshore processing centre. Professor Gillian Triggs, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission (who addressed a College Assembly last year) indicated that medical teams rated these children as the most traumatised they had ever treated. At least fifteen women who had suffered sexual assault or harassment were also to be returned to the scene of their suffering in the near future. Some might ask why these young men were standing in solidarity with the defenceless, why they were reminding the nation of moral principles – indeed why they were so outraged and disappointed? The answer is that it was an expression of their faith. For anyone who is part of the Jesuit family, a partner in a Jesuit ministry, or shaped by Jesuit formation there is one non-negotiable: Living the Faith and doing Justice are inseparable aspirations.

When some of the lads from the Vigil later joined us at the restaurant to share their experience, I wondered even further. Maybe in a few decades there will be Riverview boys – including Afghanis, Syrians or Iraqis – dining together in Lane Cove for some cultural or religious celebration. Enjoying the richness of difference and diversity. And maybe looking back to these shameful days, asking once again, “How did we get it so wrong?”