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All Justice is Social

A presentation by

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Video and audio versions of this speech are available at
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About the presentation:
What does a just society look like? Many of us could probably give our own answer to that question. But how do we go about creating one? Here is where things get a bit more difficult. Father Rod Bower discusses the barriers preventing us from achieving an inclusive and respectful community, and offers insight on how these can be overcome.

Father Rod Bower
Get angry and then get organised. I'm angry. I don't know about you. Are you angry? We're all angry. Okay, let's start to get a little bit organised.

Anger is the human natural response to injustice. Whenever we feel a bit of injustice, our natural response is anger. That's what the terrible twos are all about, when we get the throwdown and the screaming and the kicking. That first dawning consciousness that we live in a world that sometimes just isn't just. That's why we're angry.

I was born into injustice. Any society that takes a child away from its mother, when that mother is perfectly capable of raising that child if surrounded by a just society where that mother belongs. That society is quite simply unjust. I've spent the last 56 years being angry because I've spent the last 56 years deeply conscious of the lack of justice within our society.

But now I've got something else to be angry about, because I've now got grandchildren born into an unjust society. This is a picture of the oldest of my four grandchildren. Isabella Rose, or Izzy, as she likes to be called, or Munchkin, as I call her. Izzy has just had her ninth birthday. We hired an indoor climbing centre and about a dozen of her friends gathered together and climbed. It was a Pokemon party. To keep everybody comfortable at the party the very tasty Pokemon cake was gluten-free and nut-free.

And the cake was vegan, because three or four years ago Izzy decided to be a vegetarian. She said, "Pa, if we eat all the little lambs there'll be no little lambs left." She's quite interested in the justice issues that surround us. So the cake was vegan, and it all went very well until we came to cut it, when Pikachu sustained a mortal wound and 12 little kids were severely traumatised. My grandson, who's three, was hiding under the table vowing never to eat cake again because Pikachu had fallen under the knife.

This was a special day for my granddaughter. She was surrounded by friends, and that's not something that's been easy for Izzy.

When Izzy was three she could recite the periodic table (now I'm going to get all upset, please excuse me). Izzy's superpower is autism, but that means she finds it difficult to find belonging. She was home-schooled for a little while, but then she decided that she wanted to go to school. It was an exciting day when

she got her school uniform. She didn't know what a school uniform really meant, but she knew that it was really cool to have one, so off she went to school.

The trouble was that on her first day Izzy decided that she wanted to teach the class, and the teacher didn't respond in a particularly helpful way to Izzy wanting to teach the class. Izzy was basically given the message that she had to fit in.

She said to me, "Pa, they want us to fit in. They want us all to be the same, and I'm an individual." Izzy's foray into the education system was very unproductive because she's not a little girl who fits in easily but she's also a little girl with a desperate desire to belong. Izzy learnt, and I think I began to learn and to reflect and to understand even more deeply, that belonging and fitting in are not the same thing. To fit in, she had to be something that she wasn't. She had to deny something of herself, and that's the opposite to belonging; because we can only belong when we are truly ourselves, when we are truly who we are.

Izzy went off to Guides. At the time the family lived in a tiny little town in the Pilbara.

Now while Guides had a uniform, just like the school had a uniform, and had rules and regulations and all sorts of other very important things just like the school did, the agenda for this little group wasn't about fitting in, it was about belonging, and that made all the difference to Izzy. All of a sudden she began to feel that she belonged and that she didn't just have to fit in.

Fitting in is the responsibility of the individual. It's something that we as individuals feel that we just have to do. But belonging is the responsibility of the entire community, and that's what we have to be on about, because each and every one of us struggles to belong sometimes. Did anybody wake up last Sunday morning after the election and feel as though they belonged a little less than they did on Friday morning? Why was that? Why did we feel we belonged less on Sunday morning?

My wife Carrie was up until two o'clock on Sunday morning on her phone looking for jobs for me in New Zealand, because all of a sudden we felt that we didn't belong as much as we'd thought we had, because there was something

going on that made us feel we didn't quite fit. That's a really important thing to remember when we start to think about people that we may not agree with or we may not feel comfortable with, people who are different from us.

Because I'm an adopted person, I grew up in almost exactly the place where your school programs are going in the Hunter Valley. In the valley I grew up in there was a high level of familial identity. Everybody was related to everybody else, except me. I had a lovely family, a wonderful family who love me very much and communicated how much I was wanted and all of that kind of stuff, but there was still that nagging sense that I didn't belong.

I can clearly remember the day I was having this testosterone competition with another 12-year-old, as young boys do, and we were arguing about whose family had been in the valley for the longest. It came to a stalemate about six generations back where we both came to the same great-great-great-great-grandfather. Then he said, "But that doesn't count, because you're adopted." I felt a deep sense of, "I don't belong, and so I've just got to try harder and harder to deny who I am and to fit in with everybody else."

That pretty much destroyed my entire adolescence, to be honest, because as I grew I got into a habit of denying who I was. I left school as early as I could, and I got a job in a shop in Newcastle. One of the jobs for the apprentice was to go out every morning and sweep the footpath. Another friend of mine from school who escaped school at the same time as I did, a Torres Strait Islander, had got a job at the BHP works, and he used to catch the bus just outside the shop every morning.

So I'd go out in the morning, sweep the footpath, say hello to Wane, and then come back in, until one morning a new manager began in the shop. I went out and I swept the footpath and had a chat with Wayne, and then I came back in. The new manager just looked at me (I can still remember) over the top of his glasses in that intimidating way that older people look at younger people and said, "So you talk to blackfellows, do you?" From that day on, I waited until Wayne got on the bus before I went out to sweep.

What's going on there? What's going on there is that desperate need we have to fit in, to deny ourselves, even to deny our friends, so that we can fit in. That workplace wasn't a workplace of belonging. It was a workplace of fitting in. It

was what we call a domination system. Domination systems are not about belonging, they're about making people deny who they are and fit in.

All cultures have domination systems. They normally have five elements - ethnic, cultural, spiritual, gender, and a sexuality dynamic.

We mostly live in a white western male world. Sorry, ladies, but when you walked out to the toilets during the break you knew the blokes were in charge, didn't you? Because all the women were queueing up to go to the loo and the men were just walking straight in and out. We still live in this male, psychologically-dominated, heterosexual, white, western, world, and that requires people to deny just a little bit of who they are so that they can fit in. For every one of those boxes you can't tick your life gets that little bit harder, because we live in a society that's about fitting in. Maybe that's why we felt a little bit less at home on Sunday morning than we were comfortable with. Because we were afraid that from now on it could be a little bit more about fitting in than it was about belonging.

So what are we to do? There's a lot there to get angry about, but how do we get organised?

The first thing we need to do in this place, if we want to think about belonging, is to listen to the people who belonged here for 65,000 years. They were a group of people in tribes that were incredibly different one from the other. 500 nations, 800 languages, all existing and thriving in the same place and yet they all had a deep sense of belonging. Belonging has got something to do with sharing that same space, that same place, walking on that same land, and, in doing so, sharing that same humanity.

Over the next three years we're going to hear a lot about what it means to be Australian. We're going to hear a lot about what Australian culture is, and we're going to hear a lot (especially if you belong to a minority group of some description) about fitting into that. As we have to remember, though, and what we need to keep talking about, there are only two things that are required to belong here. One is a consciousness that we must all walk gently on the same land, in the same place, and the second is that we must do so recognising each other's humanity. That's what belonging is about. That's the place that we have to start.

I was very active in the marriage equality campaign, and that was because I think belonging is about participating in the same civic universe as everyone else. When we don't participate in the same civic universe, then we can't belong together. When human rights are divorced from belonging, it becomes confusing for everyone. The first place to begin with human rights is in the place of belonging, and when some people don't belong quite as much as everybody else then their human rights are indeed in jeopardy.

What do we do? What we do with those people in a just society? If all justice is social, if all justice really comes down to everyone belonging, then what do we do with the people that we find it hard to belong with? How do we stop from otherising? How do we actually delight in the unique otherness of the other which creates a healthy society?.

The guy's from Melbourne, one of yours, I don't want to claim him. His name is Neil Erikson. He was in court the other day for invading a gay church last Sunday. He invaded our worship about a year ago, actually, in Ramadan, this time last year, because of my support for the Islamic community, especially in Sydney and New South Wales.

What he did to us was incredibly traumatic, and he did it again to another church only a couple of Sundays ago. He invaded our church with a loudhailer and traumatised our congregation. It's happened to us a number of times now. What I recognise in him, though, is a deep sense of not feeling he belongs anymore. The world is changing around him. He belongs, he thinks, to a white western male nominally-Christian heterosexual-dominated society, and that's changing around him, and he just doesn't know what to do about it.

He thinks he and his group benefit from that white, male, western, nominally-Christian, heterosexual community, but in fact they really don't. They don't have a job. They don't have any life partners. They don't benefit from the society that they are trying to hold up and hold together. Just as the people who voted for Donald Trump in the United States and are most supportive of Donald Trump now are the people who benefit least from his regime. And, sadly, what we'll find over the next three years is the same dynamic emerging here.

Queensland miners, for instance, will benefit least from the vote that they cast last Saturday. If they'd voted for renewables and renewable manufacturing, they would have job security well into this century. So why do we do that? Why do

we shoot ourselves in the foot so often, and why do we support structures that don't actually help us? Because they create the illusion of belonging. But it's an illusion, because it's not really about belonging. It's just about fitting in.

I was doing an interview the other day and a very insightful young person asked me, "Who would you most like to have lunch with?" So many names came to mind. I asked, "Do they have to be alive?" I wouldn't actually mind having lunch with Jesus, because I'd kind of like to know what he was really on about. Barrack Obama, too. He'd be a really cool person to have lunch with.

But then I remembered I'd put up this sign.

So I said, "Actually, if I'm all about belonging, if I believe belonging is the pathway to better communities, to healthier communities, then the person I really need to have lunch with is Pauline Hanson." The people whose humanity I really need to be able to see and understand and connect with more deeply are Pauline Hanson and Neil Erikson and those people. Now I don't pretend for one moment that I would enjoy that lunch, but it's the lunch we need to have. Because until people who push the kind of policies that divide people can actually feel that they themselves belong, then they will continue to behave in the way they are behaving.

When we go back to our workplaces with our anger, an anger that is real and valid, because our society is not yet just, we go back into our jobs, our neighbourhoods, our communities, our workplaces with a question: "How deeply do I feel I belong? How deeply does the person that I'm speaking with feel they belong?" When we've asked those two questions the next question is always, how can we together create a deeper sense of belonging? When we have done that, some of the answers to the other questions will become beautifully and manifestly obvious.

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