

God Unknown

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 May 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 6A

Acts 17: 22-31; Contemporary Reading: “*God moves on*” in C S Song, *The Compassionate God: An exercise in the theology of transposition*, p. 260;
John 14: 15-21

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

Two weeks ago, I preached on the earlier section of John 14, where Jesus is reported to have said “*I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to God except by me.*” And I commented on the limitations of understanding this to mean that only Christians have a relationship with God.

We live in a pluralistic, secular world. Our being Christian does not depend on denial of people of minority religions, or of people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

I remember, not long ago, seeing a huge sign outside an evangelical church proclaiming “Jesus said I am the only way to God.” It reminded me of one of those classic “arriving in heaven joke” stories.

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, “*What religion are you?*”

The man says, “*Buddhist.*”

St. Peter looks down his list, and says, “*Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.*”

Another person arrives at the gates of heaven. “*What religion?*”

“*Muslim.*”

“*Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.*”

A woman arrives at the gates. “*What religion?*”

“*Hindu.*”

“*Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8.*”

She says, “*I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must we be quiet when we pass room 8?*”

St. Peter tells her, “*The Christians are in room 8. You need to be quiet, because they think they’re the only ones here.*”

The sad implication of the story is that for Christians it wouldn't really be heaven if we thought we were sharing it with others. This exclusive ethos is a tragedy when you think about the way "commonwealth of God" is presented by Jesus as a party to which everyone was invited.

In today's reading from Acts, Paul is in the city of Athens, a sophisticated centre of philosophy and culture. Paul faced a challenge. How was he to communicate the Gospel with people who did not share his culture or his religion? Sharing the good news in Jerusalem was easier because the speakers and the hearers shared a Jewish background. Now in Athens, where could he find common ground?

Paul begins with what the people of Athens know and what they seek. Commenting on the abundance of shrines in the city, Paul commends the Athenians for their interest in religion. He points to the altar inscribed "*to an unknown God.*" Drawing on the wonder of creation, he speaks of God as the creator of all. He quotes the Greek poets' belief that all human beings are offspring of God. He found and named "common ground."

But Paul then goes on to tell them what they cannot discern from the natural order nor find in the writings of their own culture—the work of God that has happened in the teaching and ministry, the death and resurrection experience of Jesus Christ and his community. Paul calls the Athenians to turn to God as the one who knows them and liberates them.

This is hard work. What Paul says makes no sense to some of the Athenians and he loses their interest. Others, however, go on to claim a stake in the Jesus story and in the God whom Jesus knew.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, writes about Paul's visit to Athens as part of his agenda to show that the Jesus story is good news for all people: for rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, simple and sophisticated. The speech in Athens shows those of us who often cringe rather than communicate our faith - ways of engaging with people whose culture and values differ substantially from our own.

In a world of ethnic rivalries and religious wars, in school classrooms and in city streets, the need for such conversations is profound.

The text raises questions about how we communicate our faith in a context that does not persecute us but simply believes that we are irrelevant. Our Australian experience as Christians is in stark contrast to the ongoing experience of persecution of Christians in many parts of the world today, in the Middle East and North Africa, and increasingly in Asia. Pakistan, where two of our Pitt Street members came from, is listed as the fourth worst country for violence against Christians.

For most Australians, however, the church is not hated or feared, but rather regarded as irrelevant.

Nevertheless, there are many Australians who are spiritual searchers. The story of Paul, speaking to the Athenians about their gods and the unknown god, invites us to consider what conversations are we having, or not having, with people who are seeking.

Some progressive Christians suffer from a serious cultural cringe in relation to our faith. We are so appalled by the tactics of conservative Christians: by their Bible bashing, by their church signs, by their judgmental attitudes, and by their pre-scientific world view; that we have often responded by turning inward and adopting a stance of letting others be.

When so many Christians are God-botherers, we have responded by choosing not to bother anyone.

I think today, listening to that story in Acts, I want to find a path between the stance that says that Christianity is the only path to God, and one that says that all faith is the same and that sharing the gospel is not necessary.

The reality is that there are elements of Christian faith that are decidedly counter-cultural, which profoundly challenge the dominant culture of individualism, market economics and militarism.

I don't doubt that an experience of Divine Presence can be found by other paths: paths illuminated by Mohammed, Buddha, Moses and others. But in our world, our context, where secular people are searching for meaning and for community, are we not required to take the risk of meeting at the altar of the unknown God and sharing the gifts that we have been given?

The religious impulse that plays out in our predominantly secular culture is two-fold. It is evident as people seek meaning; and it is evident as people seek spiritual or religious experiences.

What progressive Christianity offers is a belief that meaning and spiritual experience are best shaped in the context of commitment to a world shaped by justice, love and mercy. That our religious path is not a matter for the individual, but for the inclusion of all creation, human and non-human, for the earth itself. What progressive Christianity has at the heart of its God-experience is a life commitment, not life as an abundance of things, but as abundant life.

It is also true that we must have respectful conversations with others whose God is not unknown. When we do this with people in our city, in our community who are Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, or whatever, we will receive as well as give. In respectful conversations, we may learn about what gives meaning to others. And we don't have to reach the conclusion that all faiths are the same. We can become aware and confident about the claims of our faith, about its distinctiveness as well as its similarities with other paths.

Some years ago, when I was living in Christchurch, I was friends with an Islamic lesbian scholar, Ghazala Anwar, who taught at Canterbury University. She was a practitioner of the Sufi mystic tradition of Islam. Out of her faith, she had an ethical commitment to all living creatures, so she was a vegan. I found that a challenge to my own thinking about creation and my relationship to creation. I also found it a challenge when I was trying to find a restaurant at which we could both eat when she came to visit me in Wellington!

Ghazala and I talked about Jesus and she shared the Muslim belief that Christians have it wrong about Jesus being the son of God. I talked to her about the different understandings of what that claim can mean, particularly that it need not mean that we are denying Jesus' full humanity. We found some common ground there.

But on another Muslim belief we couldn't agree. Muslims believe that Jesus, who they see as a prophet of Allah, did not die on the cross. For Muslims, it is unthinkable that such a shameful thing as crucifixion should happen to a prophet.

I told her that this belief, which is after all historically attested to by independent writers, was crucial for me in my faith. And not just because it seems likely to be factual. Central to who Jesus is for communities such as ours, is the tradition that he was crucified because he was a threat to the religious and political status quo. He died like that because he lived and loved in ways that turned the values of the world upside down.

My Islamic colleague and I had some things in common. We both oppose the fundamentalists that are destroying and deforming the faiths that we love. We also share much in our understanding of the mystery that is God, the sacred, the holy, the divine, Allah.

We recognised that we have more in common with each other as progressive, lesbian women of faith than we did with conservative practitioners of our own religions.

Ghazala had come to New Zealand after fleeing from a teaching position in Pakistan because her views on homosexuality had become known - and enraged some of her colleagues and students.

This was shocking to me, but I also have gay male clergy friends who have received death threats from Christians. I know that when episcopal priest Gene Robinson was ordained as Bishop of New Hampshire, he wore a bullet proof vest under his clerical robe.

Meeting people of other faiths at the altar to an unknown God doesn't demand changing our faith. It just demands an honouring of the other as what Martin Buber called a "thou," as one with whom we enter into relation and share the heart of who we are. I admit that this position that I am taking is different from what Paul was advocating in the reading we heard, which was one of conversion, but it is nevertheless a valid progression from his position of taking context seriously when sharing faith.

While the people such as Ghazala, for whom God is not unknown, present us with opportunities for really good conversation, I think it is actually easier to engage in such conversations with people of other faiths than it is with the growing majority of Australians who claim that they are not religious at all.

How do we converse with people with whom we do not have an obvious "common ground" in faith? Even though it is hard, as it was hard for Paul, I think we should try - because there seems to be so much spiritual longing and hunger in our community and we have, either by grace or by accident, spiritual resources which we have no right to hoard for ourselves. Somebody shared the faith with each one of us at some point. For many of us that someone was from our family, but for others we had contact with someone who invited us in, who welcomed us into the community of faith.

It seems to me that it is community that marks the difference between what Christian tradition and other faith traditions have to offer, compared with alternatives available in the postmodern spiritual marketplace.

Whatever Jesus experienced of the sacred, he felt compelled to share - for free - with those he encountered on the margins of society. And he communicated it, not just in teaching, but in the creation of barrier-crossing community. He reached out to the expendable people of his society and he healed people by bringing them back into the community. He didn't give them charity, he gave them humanity and the experiencing of belonging.

The community was created and bound together by this vision of the realm of God. It was sustained by the practice of inclusive community. Jesus believed that his experience of the sacred could be translated into human relationship and community.

Jesus' vision of human community came from his experience of God. For us this doesn't have to be a patriarchal, theistic God, but sacred energy in many images and forms. Not just beyond us, but within us and around us; a reality running through all of existence whose fundamental nature is love.

As we continue to reflect on our mission as the people of God at Pitt Street Uniting Church, may we be moved to share the experience of the sacred that we have had with others, not to dominate them or to change them, but to invite them to a community where the table is open to all in the spirit of love and life.