

Threads of hope and resistance

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 November 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Warren Talbot

Pentecost 24A

Matthew 25: 14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; *I Am Afraid* by Andrew King

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

It was Martin Luther King Jr who popularised the words of Theodore Parker in 1853:

"The moral arc of the universe is long - but it bends towards justice."

Listening to the marriage equality survey results, at five minutes past ten last Wednesday morning, I had the distinct thought that the moral arc was bending. Here was a moment of justice for LGBTIQ Australians!

Many Australians – many Pitt Street people – are rightly celebrating the survey result.

But reading today's parable from the Matthean Gospel I am left wondering if maybe Theodore Parker got it horribly wrong. The writer concludes the so-called "*parable of the talents*" with these words - ostensibly from Jesus - in verse 29:

"For to every one who has, more will be given. They will have more than enough. But from the one who has not, even what they have will be taken away."

Is this the moral arc of God's justice?

Last Sunday, reflecting on the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Margaret Mayman said that it was difficult to not hear that parable as being ungenerous, harsh and mean. That might also be a polite way of also summarising the parable of the talents!

Most commentators and preachers use the parable to extol the homespun virtue of sensibly using the many good gifts God has given us. There is no argument with that.

I prefer to read the parable from the perspective of the third slave which we heard in the poem which Liz read this morning. The third slave is the person who summons resistance and hope in the midst of fear. The poem commences:

*It could be me, standing there with the spade,
the crate of money beside me on the ground,*

The early Christ communities lived with an overwhelming hope that the Messiah, the Anointed One, would return – and soon. The political and religious oppression of the Roman Empire would be removed, and the community of heaven would be established on earth.

This hope-filled expectation is seen clearly in the text from 1 Thessalonians. That letter is interesting for at least two reasons. Almost all scholars, whether conservative or progressive, agree that the letter is authentic to Paul, unlike some other letters attributed to Paul. The scholars also agree that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest of our New Testament texts, possibly late 40s in the Common Era, or very early 50s.

The Christ community in Thessalonika is debating whether it is better to be alive, or perhaps to be dead, when the Messiah comes. Paul basically tells them to calm down, and encourages them to strengthen themselves with the virtues of faith, love and...hope.

A further 30 years have passed and the Matthean Jewish Christ community is still waiting for the Messiah. The Judean revolt against the Romans of 66 CE has utterly failed, and in 70 CE the Romans underlined their imperial domination by destroying the Temple in Jerusalem. As we will sing in two weeks' time: "Come, O Come, Emmanuel".

The Matthean writer gives us a perplexing set of parables, all focussed on the end times. Next week, when we celebrate the Community of Christ, Meredith Knight will be reflecting on the parable of the sheep and the goats.

My concerns with this parable were raised when most commentators referred to the wealthy slave master, as "God".

Really?

This has nothing to do with what I mean by the word "God" - even allowing for the mythological framework of 2,000 years ago.

William Herzog and others read this parable as a story of resistance and, therefore, hope. The hope emerges from the resistance, the actions of the third slave. Herzog describes the third slave as a "whistle-blower". A whistle-blower!

The economic setting is a first century agrarian society. Apart from the taxes imposed by Rome, and the obligations to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, Judean peasants were ruthlessly exploited by wealthy landowners – such as the slave master in today's story. The only way the first two slaves could have increased the talents given by the master would be to further exploit other peasants.

The third slave becomes the whistle-blower - in that he refuses to co-operate in that exploitation, despite his fear of the master. He knows he will suffer and be punished. In a later, non-canonical version of the same parable, the tables are turned and it is the third slave who is rewarded.

In my view, it is thus the third slave – and his resistance and hope - which provides clues for the community of heaven today; not the exploitation of the slave master, or the behaviour of the first two slaves.

Our context is very different to that of first century Palestine and the early Christ communities – although reading and thinking about the behaviour of the first two slaves and the way in which they were able to multiply their capital base, one had thoughts about speculative capitalism in our time!

In terms of the expectation of the return of the Messiah, I doubt if too many Pitt Street people are expecting a physical Jesus to coming floating through the skies any time soon. But the symbol of the “coming of the Christ” remains a powerful way of speaking about life and hope, resistance and change – whether personal or social.

I was impressed when listening to Senator Dean Smith deliver the speech introducing the marriage equality bill to Parliament on Thursday. Dean Smith stated that he was presenting the legislation with “*humility and gratitude*”. It would have been all too easy for Dean Smith and others, to lapse into a note of triumphalism, and I could hear Dean Smith’s own sincere faith in his words.

At Pitt Street we can demonstrate that same response, whilst acknowledging our active role, the resistance we have offered in the matter of LGBTIQ equality over many years. The Uniting Church’s first major discussion on blessing same-sex relationships took place in 1991, after a Covenant Service for two women was celebrated in this building by the Reverend Dorothy McRae-McMahon.

When the Australian Marriage Equality organisation was established in 2004, thirteen long years ago, an early speaker at one of their public meetings was the then Pitt Street Minister, the Reverend Ian Pearson.

In 2017, our Minister, Margaret Mayman, has not only shaped the response of this congregation, but has had a leading role as the national chairperson of Australian Christians for Marriage Equality. In a very respectful way, Margaret and others have challenged the misleading monopoly claimed by the Australian Christian Lobby.

We know that “*The moral arc of the universe*” does not always bend towards justice. It seems to bend in many different directions.

- In 1863 Abraham Lincoln proclaimed emancipation for the slaves. But in 2017, in response to the killing of African Americans, the Black Lives Matter campaign is absolutely essential.
- In 1954 Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees. In 2017 the Australian Government, supported by the Opposition, holds many hundreds of people in cruel and dehumanising offshore detention.
- Last Wednesday we celebrated the results in the marriage equality survey. Tomorrow is the international transgender day of remembrance. It’s called remembrance day due to the number of people killed throughout the world solely for being transgender.

The moral arc of the universe, it seems, does not always bend toward justice!

So, in all of this, where is the moral arc of the universe? I am sure that everyone here would respond to that question in a different way. Here is my response:

Hope cannot be limited to feelings, emotions, optimism or positive thinking. The other side of the hope coin is resistance. That is, acting in concrete ways to improve practices, policies, laws and behaviour – including church policies and practices.

In the policy of the Uniting Church, all LGBTIQ people are systematically excluded from the church's marriage rite. My friends, that has to change.

I like the well-known words of Reinhold Niebuhr:

“Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a single life-time; therefore we are saved by hope.” Niebuhr's point is about the long haul – the persistence and patience needed for personal and social change.

I personally don't know, ultimately, about the moral arc of the universe. I simply don't know!

But I trust, as best as I can, to live my life as if – as if - the moral arc does bend towards justice. Of course, I fail more often than I care to think about. To quote the Apostle Paul writing to the Romans, I “hope against hope”.

I know that the threads of hope and resistance are woven and nurtured, broken and healed, lost and found, only in community.

Thanks be for the hope and resistance of the Pitt Street community.

Thanks be for our Life Together.

Thanks be for the Spirit of Life.

Amen.