

# The Evolved Sheep

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 November 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Meredith Knight

Pentecost 25A

**Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46; Song “Meet Me In The Middle of The Air”  
by Paul Kelly; Contemporary Reading: “The Great Turning” by Christine Fry**

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

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## Contemporary Reading

You've asked me to tell you of The Great Turning,  
of how we saved the world from disaster.  
The answer is both simple and complex.

We turned.

For hundreds of years we had turned away as life on earth grew more precarious.  
We turned away from the homeless men on the streets,  
the stench from the river,  
the children orphaned in Iraq,  
the mothers dying of AIDS in Africa.

We turned away because that is what we had been taught.  
To turn away, from our pain,  
from the hurt in another's eyes,  
from the drunken father  
or the friend betrayed.

Always we were told, in actions louder than words,  
to turn away, turn away.

And so, we became a lonely people caught up in a world moving too quickly,  
too mindlessly towards its own demise.

Until it seemed as if there was no safe place to turn.  
No place, inside or out, that did not remind us  
of fear or terror, despair and loss, anger and grief.

Yet on one of those days someone did turn.  
Turned to face the pain.  
Turned to face the stranger.  
Turned to look at the smouldering world and the hatred seething in too many eyes.  
Turned to face himself, herself.

And then another turned.  
And another.  
And another.  
And as they wept, they took each other's hands.

Until whole groups of people were turning.  
Young and old, gay and straight.  
People of all colours, all nations, all religions.

Turning not only to the pain and hurt but to beauty, gratitude and love.  
Turning to one another with forgiveness and a longing for peace in their hearts....

### REFLECTION

I had failed to come up with a title for this reflection by the time our liturgy was printed on Friday. It came to me at 3 am this morning. I have called it "The Evolved Sheep".

Over the last two months, a Great Turning, like that described by Christine Fry in our contemporary reading took place, as Australians turned towards the LGBTIQ community with a conviction of fairness and justice to return a Yes verdict in the Marriage Equality postal survey. This was a hugely significant moment in the life of this nation and of LGBTIQ people, our families and our allies. I have been actively involved in various aspects of the LGBTIQ community for the past 41 years and when I think of what members of my community have been forced to endure over that time, especially in the 70s and 80s, I never thought that I would see the day that Australians would turn with such widespread compassion and egalitarianism.

I was standing amid thousands of people in Prince Alfred Park, Sydney waiting for the announcement. You could have literally cut the air with a knife. There was a quiet hopefulness but not a certainty. The meaning of the result for many, including myself, is far deeper than the right to marry the one we love. It is a validation of who we are; it means that we can finally hold our heads high because we truly know that we are no longer regarded as second-class citizens by most Australians.

The survey had been difficult and harmful to many people because homophobia, which had been obscured for many years under a thin veil of political correctness, had been allowed to raise its ugly head once more. I hope and pray that healing is now taking place in the lives where it is needed.

Of course, there are those who were disappointed by the Yes verdict; many of whom are now arguing for greater protection for the freedom of religion and the right for anyone to discriminate in the provision of goods and services for same-sex weddings. This is unfortunate but not unexpected.

Recently, Father Rod Bower, the parish priest of Gosford Anglican Church said the following about freedom of religion:

*“The only valid theological foundation for freedom of religion for a Christian is the freedom to serve others regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. This is true religious freedom”*

Father Rod’s statement is intrinsic to justice which is the theme of today’s parable about the sheep and the goats. This parable tells of people being judged according to whether they have looked after others in their physical needs. Have they done justice to them? Have they worked to see that they have adequate food, clothing, friendship? This criterion applies to both believers and non-believers alike; it is how we treat others which is of ultimate concern.

However, the parable is also troubling because it is so dualistic and judgmental. On the one hand, are the sheep who are the good guys, they have looked after the needy, what Jesus calls “*the least of these*”, and in so doing are granted divine favour. Whereas the goats, well these are the bad guys, they have turned their backs on the needy, and, as a result, are condemned to eternal punishment. This seems harshly exclusivist and overly-simplistic. Aren’t we all sheep-like at times and, at others, goat-like in the ways we relate to others? Don’t we all fail to respond to someone now and again, in their time of need, for a variety of reasons? We wouldn’t be human otherwise.

Theologian Richard Rohr states that when Jesus uses dualism it is because he wants to make a teaching blatantly clear especially around issues of social justice, which people are inclined to avoid. Jesus had to be unambiguous otherwise it is far too easy to shirk issues of justice for the poor, and inclusion of the outsider. Rohr states that the actual trouble with this passage is our response to it because we tend to focus on the threat rather than on Jesus’ promise of “eternal life”; whatever our individual beliefs are about that.

After presenting his teaching in dualistic terms, i.e. the sheep and the goats, Jesus then goes on to explain it in a non-dual way that encourages universal compassion. He says, “*Whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me*”. Jesus creates a moral equivalence between what we do to the “least of these” and what we do to Christ. This response is motivated by love, the Greek word “agape”.

Our actions of altruistic or agape love become a way of life for us. Jesus says it is not enough to love him, but our love for Him is to be reflected in love for our neighbour. When this love flows out from the kind of people we are, we will not be conscious of when we respond to human need in the world. We will just do it.

Remember, that those whom Jesus declared sheep in this story were surprised, because they didn’t remember reaching out, as the text says: “*then the righteous will answer him, “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry, and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”* It was not the promise of eternal life or the threat of eternal damnation that motivated the sheep. Their good deeds naturally flowed out from who they were. They were..... evolved sheep.

When we respond from a place of agape or altruistic love our actions will be spontaneous. We will act by internal impulse, unpremeditated, unguarded. We will act without forethought, without conniving, without manipulating, without calculating or thinking about our own gain, or control.

This spontaneous action will then become, what one theologian calls, “a holy habit”; a way of life. When we respond from a place of love, we will positively affect the lives of others, we will make a difference on this earth. We will bring a measure of love, compassion and caring into this world.

This kind of love is grounded in justice. You cannot love someone if you are unjust toward them through your attitudes and actions. There is no *agape* until justice is also present. French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, states, that the meaning of one’s life is in the responsibility in the “being for” another person over and above the “being there”. Jesus epitomized the “being for” throughout his life in all his dealings, especially those whom society rejected. Jesus was as concerned about people’s physical needs as he was about their spiritual. He said “*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly parent feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*” – (Matthew 6:26)

At different times, we all find ourselves as one who does the caring and one who is cared for. I have received the most generous care from people within this congregation, including on one especially memorable occasion in 2009, in response to a place of intense personal pain and brokenness. I will always be grateful for that.

In his book *the Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen, describes a wounded healer as:

*“being one who has experienced the brokenness of life, but as he/she is healing their own wounds, they are reaching out to others and helping them heal their wounds. Healing comes from one broken person to another broken person”.*

As people, who are sheep, we are being healed by Christ and as He heals our wounds, we reach out and heal the wounds of others.

A story out of Manus Island this past week is a palpable example of this. Australian Christian leader, Andrew McKenna, and Father Dave Smith, an Anglican parish priest from Dulwich Hill, were smuggled into the closed detention centre on Manus Island by supportive local Christians. The two men spent over 7 hours talking with many of the 340 detainees still there. When McKenna and Smith left they were chased by the Papua New Guinean Navy. Smith got away but McKenna fell, badly gashing his leg. A voice came out of the darkness “*Brother, take my hand*”. McKenna was rescued by a tall, young detainee called Adam from Darfur, whom McKenna had prayed with earlier after hearing his story of having family members killed in the genocide.

Safely back at the centre, the detainees bathed McKenna’s leg from the little clean water they still had and shared with him from their meagre reserves of food. McKenna said that it was the most humbling expression of compassion in his entire life. He said, “*here were these men whom Australia has rejected and they’re washing the blood and mud off my feet*”.

It is to Australia’s shame that we continue to treat refugees and asylum seekers in this country so appallingly. If there is a final day of reckoning, as described in the parable, I can’t help but think that there are some who will not go unscathed.

On the night of the *Yes* verdict thousands paraded down Oxford Street from Taylor Square to Hyde Park, carrying banners, singing and chanting slogans. There was a group of young people holding a large "Justice for Refugees" banner chanting: "*we've achieved equality; now let's free the refugees*". Amid the celebration, it was a sombre reminder that whilst ever one is not free, none of us are free. As Nelson Mandela said, "*To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.*"

The message of the parable of the sheep and the goats is that when we see ourselves as being over and against others which leads to a failure to care for "the least of these", then we find ourselves ultimately against God. The sentence which is meted out to those who deny their connection to those in need is banishment, but it is banishment of our own making. We do it to ourselves. However, the good news is that whatever we do or fail to do, as the Apostle Paul tells us, nothing can ultimately separate us from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In this narrative of judgement also lies an invitation to recommit ourselves as a community of faith to seek and work for justice for the earth and all her creatures.

I give thanks for the countless people throughout Australia and abroad, including those from within this congregation, who work tirelessly for the rights of those whom Australia has so cruelly incarcerated.

To close with words from our contemporary reading:

*Yet on one of those days someone did turn.  
Turned to face the pain.  
Turned to face the stranger.  
Turned to look at the smouldering world and the hatred seething in too many eyes.  
Turned to face himself, herself.*

*And then another turned.  
And another.  
And another.  
And as they wept, they took each other's hands.*

*Until whole groups of people were turning.  
Young and old, gay and straight.  
People of all colours, all nations, all religions.*

*Turning not only to the pain and hurt but to beauty, gratitude and love.  
Turning to one another with forgiveness and a longing for peace in their hearts...*

Amen.

Blessed Be.