

Awake to the Sacred

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 December 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 1B

Gospel of Mark 13: 24-37; Readings from Jan Richardson's *Night Visions*;

Poem: "In Mary-Darkness" by Jessica Powers

Song: "Night Vision" by Suzanne Vega

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

Just three weeks from today, it will be Christmas Eve. This is the shortest Advent possible, a year when Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday. I'm a bit miffed that the season of waiting and wondering gets cut short! This may have something to do with the terror of realising that I have six services to prepare in next three weeks.

However, the spiritual challenge to us is to be still, and watchful; awake but not manic, despite all the pressures in our lives. Yours may be different to mine, but this is a time when many people feel stressed and anxious, when people do not take time to wait, notice, to pay attention, to be present.

The traditions of Advent, especially the lighting of the candles, have their roots in the northern hemisphere, in ancient pre-Christian festivals in which fires were lit for illumination and warmth to ease the shadows and chill of the season.

In the southern hemisphere, our Advent and Christmas times are hot and bright. Yet even here, night falls at the end of each long day, and we know that we will look forward to the coming of a new dawn. In Christian tradition, darkness is often contrasted with the light that Christ brings. Yet darkness is always with us and like light, is necessary for our survival. For it is in darkness that there is gestation and growth.

Advent demands that we not rush too quickly to Christmas but instead take time to reflect on what it is that we are waiting for. For some Christians it is for the birth of the one who will save us from our sins. But there are other ways to tell the story.

In the context of debates about marriage equality and families, we notice that the family into which Jesus was born would not have passed muster with the dominant Christian voices of our times. Christmas is the story of an unwed mother who with the sacred source of all life, brought forth new life and a new way of being human. And her family was named Holy.

For some it is the story of the birth of a revolutionary who would liberate the oppressed people from the powers of empire.

Jan Richardson suggests that the story can be told as a tale about a love that longed for us so much that it took flesh, formed in the dark womb of a woman who shared her body and her blood to bring it to bear.

Much of our liturgy for this Sunday came from, or was inspired by, Jan Richardson's book *Night Visions*. Jan Richardson was inspired to title her Advent reflections: *Night Visions* – by Suzanne Vega's song that we heard. Suzanne Vega sings as if to a child afraid of the dark. The song tells of her longing to give the child vision to see in the night. It does not deny the darkness, but instead finds other ways of seeing and knowing, finding the shape of things in the shadows. Perhaps, in Advent we are called to know and name the gifts of the night and to share the visions that come from the darkness. For the holy is present, moving and calling, in both darkness and light.

Through Advent we name our visions and find strength in awareness of the Presence that accompanies us.

Some years I have approached Advent with a sense of desperation. I've told these stories and preached these sermons so many times. Surely, there is nothing more left to say? But Jan Richardson says of the telling of the Christmas story "*with each telling, more of the story comes to light*". Darkness can become the tending place in which our longings for healing, justice, and peace grow and come to birth.

Another thought that I have had most years, but particularly in years like this when we focus on readings from Mark's gospel is: *good grief, why are we talking about the end of the world as we are preparing for Christmas. Couldn't the lectionary compilers have come up with something a bit more cheerful?*

Theologian John Cobb suggests that the readings "*understand Advent to be the season of anticipation, of expectancy, and hope generally... [and that] in all the texts the hope is grounded in faith in God.*"

From the standpoint of Mark's original readers around 70 CE, much of Jesus' speech sounds like commentary on the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

In our time, this text is used by conservative Christians to predict the return of Jesus. They read the signs of the times and see in them evidence that Jesus is about to return. The very existence of the Facebook page "*Australian Christians for Marriage Equality*" led more than one of our unhappy commenters to conclude that the end of the world is indeed very near.

I don't see much point in reading this text as a prediction of the future.

I think that John Dominic Crossan is right when he says:

"The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen soon. The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen violently. The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen literally. The Second Coming of Christ is what will happen when we Christians finally accept that the First Coming was the Only Coming and start to cooperate with its divine presence" (Crossan, *God and Empire*, 2007).

Politically, I see Mark's gospel as a warning that the enemy is not any one empire; but that all political and economic powers are liable to be co-opted by "the powers that be": who seek their own worldly agenda at the expense of ordinary people.

I see this in the rejection of the Uluru statement of Aboriginal leaders seeking to have a voice in the governing of this nation.

I see it in the callous disregard of the lives of men on Manus Island and the women, men and children on Nauru who have done nothing illegal in fleeing persecution in search of safety.

I see it in the willingness to use the lives and relationships of LGBTIQ people by factions within the coalition government to maintain power.

I see it in those who are willing to sell out the planet and future generations for the short term financial gains that the Adani mine may or may not produce.

Jesus' warnings remind us of the call to political vigilance.

Learn to see in the dark. Beware. Keep alert. Keep awake.

There is also a personal message in the text. A message of paying attention which connects with Jan Richardson's valuing the darkness.

'Stay alert!'
Ears tuned.
Eyes open.
Aware of..
Sensitive to..

Not in the future, but now, in the present moment,
in the ordinary, in this place, among this people:
Engaging meaningfully in life.

There is a story told by Jungian therapist Thomas Moore about D T Suzuki, an early exponent of Zen in the West. Suzuki was dining with a number of distinguished scholars.

A man at his side kept asking him questions. Suzuki ate his dinner patiently and said nothing.

The man, who obviously had never read a Zen story, then asked: *'How would you sum up Zen for a Westerner like me?'*

With unusual vigour in his voice, Suzuki looked him in the eye and said: *'Eat!'*

Spirituality is seeded, germinates, grows and blossoms in the darkness, in the mundane. It is found and nurtured in the ordinariness of daily activities.

In such ordinary moments as eating with friends, we become aware that the holy does not always come, maybe does not often come, in a blaze of glory but in the everyday. The holy dwells in the shadows, in the night, even in total darkness.

Staying awake matters, not so much to protect ourselves, but to notice the beauty of the moment. By staying awake, we may catch the second when the branch is tender, and we may learn that summer is near.

Amidst the Christmas parties, shopping trips, and even in the mass production of liturgies, the gospel reminds us to be awake to the Sacred in the world – in mundane times, among ordinary people. This is not a call to insomnia, but a way of being awake that might actually be restful, and give us peace.

Advent - rooted in our everyday, mundane experiences.

And in the landscape and world around us, with all its glory, with all its pain.

Incarnation.

Emmanuel, God with us.

Make us courageous in the dark of night

to guard the dream of God

for a world reborn.