

The very public and political coming of the Prince of Peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 December 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Elenie Poulos

Advent 3B

Isaiah 11: 1-9; Luke 1: 26-38; Contemporary Reading:
Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light by Jan Richardson

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

The words of faith from the prophet Isaiah speak of a new shoot from the stock of Jesse, a new king from the dead stump that was once the towering tree of the royal line of David. In Isaiah's vision, the king's very being and his rule (his law and his judgement), will be the outworking of the spirit of God on him: politics, law, faith, and God, inseparable, bearing down – through the King - on the world in order to transform the world.

There is a great deal being said about politics, law and religion in Australia at the moment. I doubt that personal faith has ever been referred to as much by politicians as it was during the most recent parliamentary debate on marriage equality. MPs and Senators were claiming personal Christian faith and family religious traditions, and quoting religious leaders, local ministers and priests, and religious constituents, to explain and support their position in favour of marriage equality or against it.

And there's nothing wrong with that per se. I claim my Christian faith as a foundation for believing in the equal dignity of all people and I'm confident that many of you do too. And yes, it was a conscience vote, so references to personal faith were always going to be made. But the whole premise of the political conscience vote is deeply problematic, and especially so in light of the message of the third Sunday in Advent.

Conscience votes, or free votes, in Australian parliaments are defined as ones where politicians can vote according to their moral, political, religious or social beliefs. There have been conscience votes taken on issues to do with advances in bio-medical science like cloning and stem cell research, on euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion, family law, sex discrimination legislation and of course, marriage and divorce. In 1973, homosexuality was decriminalised by a conscience vote, and in 2005, the right held solely by the Minister for Health to approve use of the abortifacient drug RU486 was removed by a conscience vote.

You could easily categorise these as life, sex and death issues and they are often described as 'social or moral issues'. But these categorisations don't hold up to any scrutiny. What about all the other life and death issues parliaments deal with? Where are our lawmakers' consciences on these issues – on matters of justice for First Peoples; economics, taxation or mining; health, welfare or the criminal justice system? Where are their consciences on the protection of the planet?

These are life and death issues too, profound social and moral issues, but rather than being left to the unpredictability of people's individual consciences, they are subject to political power games, party policy platforms and the influence of powerful vested interests in a mostly casually, sometimes seriously, corrupt politics.

And more broadly in our democracy, when citizens are moved by religious conviction to act and speak in the public space on these social and moral issues, a common response from politicians is to tell them to *get back to sitting in the pews on a Sunday and tending to the spiritual needs of the flock*. Clearly, how we treat our nation's First Peoples, refugees or the natural world we depend on for life, are not appropriate issues for religiously framed responses. And if you dare ask a politician why she or he might not be exercising their conscience on these matters on a regular basis, you'll be pretty quickly told that conscience or personal religious beliefs don't and shouldn't figure, because politicians are elected to govern for all people, regardless of faith. Now this is true. As citizens we're better off for it and I for one wouldn't want it changed. But the recent conscience vote has exposed the disturbing divide between the private and personal, and public and political realms of our life together.

What we have is a supposedly neat and obvious distinction between personal religious (or moral) belief about a small bundle of 'life, sex and death issues' (what is in the private domain), and everything else which sits in the domain of the public, including the political.

This is the common understanding of the religion/secular divide in western life: a constructed divide, dating back at least to the development of the modern European state. Vastly oversimplifying a terrifyingly complex history, as the modern European state began to claim its independence from the structures of the church, the church claimed its own side of life, the interior and bodily lives of the faithful. And so, in western European states, the divide between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, was born. Governments were freed (to a point) from the shackles of Christian ecclesiasticism and religious doctrine, and what we call 'religion' was privatised, giving the church free rein to exercise an unfettered power on the souls and the bodies of the faithful – those precisely identified life, sex and death issues.

Just as an aside, it's no surprise, then, that in an increasingly diverse society, when the traditional forms of church are collapsing, and society is expressing in law a more progressive social morality than is held by the institutional churches, the leaders of the almost entirely patriarchal churches are working so hard to maintain their privileged control over life, sex and death issues, now commonly referred to in Australian public debate as 'religious freedom'.

The prophetic vision of Isaiah holds no such distinction between private religion and public politics, between faithful living and the politics of the nation. It's a challenge to us, especially in the political and social context I've described, that Isaiah's vision of a king filled with wisdom and insight was a public, political and spiritual vision. It was a vision for a future imbued with the transcendent power and presence of God reaching into the worldliness of law, politics, economics and ecology.

There is no 'religion' separate from the rest of life here; no religion and politics, no spiritual thirst separate from the thirst for social and economic justice. There is just life infused with the justice and peace of God.

With the breath of God enlivening him with wisdom and insight, the new king will not be moved or influenced by power or wealth (those things most easily seen and heard), but by righteousness and faithfulness to God. And God will be seen in justice delivered for those who are poor, and those whose voices are not heard, 'the meek'. And God will be seen in the consequences dealt to the wicked, those who, the great biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann says, have violated the vision of equity and justice.

This new king will change the nature of creation. Imbued with the breath of God, he will overcome violence and brutality and transform all relationships of hostility. Through the vision of wolves lying with lambs, cows and lions living together, children with no fear of snakes, Isaiah is declaring a king who will create, as Brueggemann says, '*new historical possibility where none was available*'.¹ This will be the Prince of Peace and he is coming to transform the world.

God's transformation through the shoot that springs from the dead stump of Jesse will be total. It will be personal, religious, political, economic, ecological.

In the last week of Advent, in this land of privatised religion, casually corrupted politics and impoverished public debate, we are challenged to break down the compartments we have constructed between religion and politics, personal and public.

The Christian faith looks to Jesus as the one who most embodied this: the most holistic and expansive of visions for the reconciliation of all that is in the world, and the world with God. As it turns out, the gospel has very little to do with regulating people's bodies and everything to do with challenging injustice and violence. In Jesus' execution on the cross, we see just how profoundly he challenged the social, religious and political order of his day.

Christians believe that we are called to spread the good news of Jesus. This news is about personal transformation but it's not at all a private matter. It is profoundly public and deeply political. It is the good news for all, and especially for those who are marginalised, oppressed and beaten. It is the good news of social inclusion, economic justice, ecological flourishing and peace among all creation. It is the good news of the coming of the Prince of Peace.

May the spirit of God rest on us too, that we may live with wisdom and insight, standing for all that is good and true and just in this world, glimpses and reflections of the hope and peace given to us in the coming of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

¹ *Isaiah 1-39, Westminster Bible Companion*