

A sacred rock

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 January 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Cathy Ashcroft and Mr Jolyon Bromley

Epiphany 3B

Psalm 62: 5 – 12; Contemporary Reading:
The Poet Dreams of the Mountain by Mary Oliver;

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

Cathy

*Rest in God alone, my soul! God is the source of my hope.
God alone is my rock, my safety, my stronghold, so that I stand steadfast.
In God is my refuge.*

Marcus Borg describes biblical metaphors for God as evocative and carrying many rich associations of closeness, relationship and connection. God as rock can suggest either God's distance or God's closeness. The Hebrew word for rock means a mountain or high place, which can be a place of refuge and safety. Fortresses are built on high places, and a mountain may have caves where one can hide or seek shelter and refuge. God as 'rock' is something that you can be 'on' or 'in'; it's an image for nearness.

Walter Brueggemann characterises God as an enduring voice of fidelity, of faithfulness, of steadfast love. Fidelity is a commitment to stay with us no matter what.

So how does my soul find rest? Where do I find refuge, what is my stronghold and where do I get strength and hope?

I think we're all faced with grief and despair at some point in our lives. It's in the depth of darkness that we need or even reach out for hope, refuge and safety. The psalms invite us into a more honest facing of the darkness. The reason the darkness may be faced and lived in is that even in the darkness, God is present.

I've been brought to my knees in total despair through loss, especially through the death of my son and my mother and father. I felt such abandonment that grief and fear overwhelmed me and I felt completely broken. When I reflect on it though I know that after inhabiting that darkness I discovered God's fidelity. Something carries me through that I never knew was there.

Hope is rooted precisely in the midst of loss and darkness, where God is surprisingly present. When we face the darkness in our life it's transformed not by easy light, but by the power of God's relentless solidarity. Out of the darkness we are given new life and we don't know how.

The challenge of embracing darkness and seeking rest and refuge through the sacred has profoundly changed me. It must be one of the hardest things for anyone of us to trust, let go and know that we are not alone.

It's God's relentless solidarity, God's faithfulness in staying with me no matter what that gives me strength, hope, safety, wonder and above all rest. In God is my rock and my refuge.

Jolyon

When we hear the Psalmist and ancient prophets refer to God as my "rock", my "stronghold" it makes me think of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the most holy site for Jews, where God's presence was most strongly felt.

But, despite this, in 1967 when the Israeli army captured East Jerusalem and all of the West Bank of the Jordan River, they wisely left the Temple Mount under the control of the Jordanian religious authorities. It is a very sacred site for Muslims, as well as Jews.

About this time last year, I was climbing the wooden ramp up to Haram Al-Shareef (The Noble Sanctuary) as it's known in the Muslim world, looking down to where Jews gather in prayer at the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall. This is the closest they can get to the temple site, the base of the wall surrounding the Temple Mount, now their holiest site, where Jews experience God's presence most strongly today.

Although it's not forbidden, Jews find it personally very difficult to go to the site of their holy temple built upon by others. The Rabbis in our group declined to go. No symbols of other faiths are permitted to be seen there – a woman in our group had to remove a cross she was wearing around her neck.

The surprising thing when you get to the top of the Temple Mount is the vastness of the area. Herod the Great actually levelled the mountain top to build the second temple. Now at the southern end is the Al-Aqsa mosque and just nearby are the remains of the Templar headquarters, for the knights dedicated to protecting pilgrims after Jerusalem was captured by the Crusaders. Then there is a large area of parkland and lawns and trees leading up to the magnificent building known as the Dome of the Rock at the Northern end. This is a holy place for Jews and Muslims covering the precise rock that was at the heart of the Jewish Holy of Holies - and Muslims believe this is the place where the prophet Muhammad began his night journey to heaven. The glittering, golden Dome of the Rock dominates the city and stands as an iconic symbol of Jerusalem today.

Here in Australia we have our own rock, our iconic sacred site at Uluru.

I found it a moving experience to go there and walk around the base. Aborigines believe the great, primordial, dreamtime ancestors who shaped the landscape are asleep under the rock. We hear these stories and legends but we can't really penetrate them to grasp their deeper significance.

I believe we only have a very superficial understanding of Aboriginal spirituality. It emerges out of such a different consciousness, that experiences a sense of oneness with the earth and the whole natural world that we really can't understand. As we develop concepts of the earth as a living organism we can move closer to experiencing the sacred in Aboriginal sites.

On another level, there is a tradition that seems to cross many cultural/geographical boundaries from the Middle East to the highlands of Scotland, that is, gathering stones, building a pile to mark a special place, a sacred site.

On the Camino to Santiago de Compostela there's a tradition of leaving a stone at certain points to mark the end of a phase of the pilgrimage, to let go of something, to symbolically leave something behind as you move on. There are places, particularly on the top of mountains where there are vast piles of stones, left by pilgrims over the centuries, marking an incredible achievement, to have reached that point. There are also, other smaller piles of stones along the way, marking significant places or moments of personal revelation or encounters or conversations, a decision at a cross-road, even memorials for a death or injury.

The act of leaving a stone can be given a personal significance; an act of thanksgiving, of remembrance, of letting go, concluding a phase.

In a moment we will have an opportunity to bring a stone to the table as we sing the chant *Laudate Dominum* (in Latin). Before that we'll have a time of silence for you to contemplate what it is you want to leave behind or celebrate in this phase of our pilgrimage of life.