

Service Call

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 4 February 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Cynthia Coghill

Epiphany 5B

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39; Contemporary Reading
“To be of use” by Marge Piercy

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

When I was interviewed for the position of Presbytery Secretary in 2005, Rev Bill Crews asked whether God had called me to the position. He gesticulated and said:

“Did the skies part and a booming voice say ‘This is the job for you.’”

My reply may have been underwhelming as I said, no, I’d not had such a calling. There were only two occasions that I’d been given, what I thought, was a clear indication of where I was, or wasn’t, “meant” to be.

The first time I’d been away from Australia for 4 ½ years and sensed that it was time to come home. I couldn’t pinpoint a reason for this feeling. I sat on my bed and said to God that if he really wanted me to return home, then it would be best to give me a blatantly obvious sign. The next day I received a call from Australia with the offer to return to my old job.

The second time I ignored the “still, small voice” clamouring to be heard. I chose what I refer to as, my “job from hell”. I was more interested in the corporate name and higher wage, than being patient for the right job. My time in that role was short lived.

I learnt I could relate more to people who spent their lives in service, than to those who were served, and I was comfortable in that place. It would be a number of years before I appreciated that service didn’t mean being subservient.

John proclaims Jesus’ arrival, Jesus is baptised, immediately begins his ministry, calls his first disciples, heals a man with an unclean spirit and then comes to Simon and Andrew’s house. All in the first chapter of Mark.

Today’s Gospel reading follows on from Jesus exorcising the demon from the man in the Synagogue. Simon’s mother-in-law is laid down with a fever. Jesus walks across to her, takes her hand and heals her. She gets up and resumes her place serving them.

Why was Simon's mother-in-law serving everyone as soon as she was healed? Didn't she get time to rest and regain her strength? On reading the background to this passage, I began to understand that to Simon's mother-in-law, her role was important. She serves them. Her role is clearly defined, appreciated, and honoured - she embodies Jesus' ministry of service.

Jesus also knew precisely where he was called to be and what he needed to do. Jesus had begun his healing ministry earlier in this chapter. He has a strong sense that his work there is done and so he wanders off to pray in peace. On returning to Simon's house he says it is time to move to neighbouring towns to preach the good news.

Simon is hesitant about this. He'd rather Jesus stay at his place and continue to heal those who came to him. Unlike his mother-in-law, Simon has lost sight of what being a disciple of Christ is - being ready to serve each other and to go where they are needed.

Jesus didn't question his ministry and purpose for being made flesh. He knew exactly what he was to do and didn't waiver from it. I don't remember Jesus saying, "*Do I have to?*" or "*That's not my job.*" He did it willingly knowing what was to come.

Throughout his ministry there was a deep sense of purpose and responsibility. He was responsible for the welfare of humankind, offering us a blueprint for living like no other we had previously experienced. He had little interest in the high fliers, preferring the company of those shunned or despised by society. Think of Zacheus (Luke 19:1-10); Zacheus had to climb a tree. He couldn't see Jesus. Jesus came across to him, asked him to come down from the tree and went to dinner at Zacheus' place. Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1-3) had been shunned - and yet Jesus took her into his inner circle, and she was with him.

Jesus ... takes her hand and heals her. The element of touch is also important in this passage. When done respectfully, and with permission of the other person, touch can be of great comfort to the sick and dying.

One of my sisters-in-law is a pastoral care worker. When my mother was dying, Lois asked if mum would like a hand massage. Mum thought it would be lovely. Lois sat by mum and massaged cream into her hands whilst talking with her. Lois gently caressed each finger and her palms. After she'd finished, she continued to hold my mother's hands and I saw the joy in my mother's face as this simple act of kindness and love was undertaken. For that time, she was at peace amidst the pain.

For many years I worked as a volunteer in a local Drop In/Op Shop. Our regulars had no interaction with people other than us at the drop in. We offered tea/coffee and biscuits, and, for our regulars, a hug. Jennifer, one of our regulars, said she loved to come to such a welcoming place where she was always greeted with a smile and looked after with a warming cuppa. The hospitality side came naturally to me whereas those receiving it felt really special.

Sometimes we overlook these infinitesimal acts of service for something on a grand scale. Jesus' miracles may have been on a grand scale; however, he also took the role of servant and saw no difference in these two sides to his ministry.

In her essay, *The Needs of the Soul*, Simone Weil says:

The fact that a human being possesses an eternal destiny imposes only one obligation: respect. The obligation is only performed if the respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way; and this can only be done through the medium of Man's earthly needs.

Further on in the same essay under the heading *Responsibility*, she states:

Initiative and responsibility, to feel one is useful and even indispensable, are vital needs of the human soul.

Two of our most basic needs are that of being employed and having a roof over our head. In our affluent country, it is depressing to hear the employment figures and see the level of homelessness increase. We are told unemployment has declined; however, the reasons for this are the temporary positions created where people have no certainty of long-term employment.

Society defines our lives with a limited view to responsibility as being that which only affects us as individuals - what we do, our success, and/or the amount of money we earn. Our goals become centred around ourselves. Yet it is our communal responsibilities and place in service, stewardship and hospitality that exemplify God's kingdom on earth. God enables us to seek beyond the superficial and live a purposeful life by assisting others, whether family, friend or stranger.

Recently I met a lady who had returned to Australia after an 8 year posting overseas. Her husband was doing odd jobs and she was unsure of how to re-enter the workforce. She wondered how to explain what she had done in her role that would encourage someone to employ her. Even though they had tertiary training and both their roles were comprehensive, they were struggling to find employment.

Isaiah offers hope and courage to us in times of struggle and doubt:

*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Grandmothers Against the Detention of Refugee Children hold their monthly meetings at Pitt Street. Gaby said to me last December, "*I would like to say we won't see you next year but with the way things are going, we'll be back.*" These grandmothers continue to peacefully fight the injustice of those detained on Manus and Nauru. They appear tireless, as do all the organisations and individuals who work for those whose voices have been suppressed. I've yet to see the Grandmothers tire; however, I'm sure there are times when they wonder if change will occur in their lifetime.

Similar to the Grandmothers and many people like them, we are given immeasurable assistance and strength by God when we feel our strength diminish.

We just have to be open to it.