

A new Way of living

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 March 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 5B

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

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

In this week's gospel reading from John, we have a rich, enigmatic, metaphorical, and frankly quite difficult teaching.

Without its context, it doesn't make a lot of sense. It needs to be located in the narrative.

The discourse of Jesus, in response to the enquiring Greeks, about the grain of wheat, about dying to life, and about Jesus being lifted up...follows John's gospel's account of Palm Sunday.

In this reading, it is already Holy week. Previously Jesus had been in Bethany with his beloved friends Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom he also loved, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. At the end of the meal, Mary had taken costly perfume and extravagantly and intimately anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Judas was outraged...the Jesus movement was not going according to plan.

Crowds gathered when they learned that Jesus was in Bethany, not only because of Jesus but also because of Lazarus. The religious authorities plotted to kill Lazarus. They believed that it was because of him that people were deserting them and following Jesus.

The next day Jesus entered into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the crowd's enthusiastic hosannas ringing in the air.

Now it is Passover...Now the hour has come.

Earlier, in several places in the gospel, Jesus has said that the hour had not yet come.

What changed?

Lazarus has increased the anxiety. Jesus' popularity was rising. Passover was always a tense time in occupied Jerusalem.

And now "The Greeks", Gentiles, have shown up and are looking for Jesus. This movement is spilling out into "the world."

“The ‘hour’ arrives because opposition to Jesus has reached its inevitable outcome: the officials will seek his death.

The ‘hour’ arrives because of Jesus’ success in the world... “*Yet, the world is a thoroughly unreliable place; neither its hostility nor its adoration can be trusted.*” (Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year B*, p. 238).

The crowds are divided between wanting to be with Jesus and wanting to kill him.

In the midst of impending danger, Jesus articulates his understanding of the relationship of the divine to the human, and his place in this.

There are references at the beginning and the end of this reading to “glory”.

What does faithfulness in the face of suffering on the part of the Chosen One, have to do with glory?

Why does Jesus, when told about the Gentiles who want to see him, speak of himself using a title that is usually translated as “*Son of Man*,” a title that evokes suffering? Why does Jesus who reveals fear with the words “*my soul is troubled*,” then tell of glory?

And what of this grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit? What of loving life and losing it, and hating life and keeping it eternally? In the interpretation, these assertions have been used to minimise death and deny the world, the world that only last week we heard is the world God loves. It doesn’t seem to make sense.

Jesus doesn’t answer the Greeks who want to see him directly but invokes the metaphor of the grain of wheat. This odd analogy may be our best clue to understanding what the verb ‘glorify’ means. Jesus will die, not to appease God’s anger over human sinfulness; Jesus will die because he has disrupted and destabilised ‘the powers that be’ and yet in his suffering he sees the possibility of life, of full humanity for the people. Because a death like this, though it has not been sought, can be a means for bearing fruit.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated by a Salvadoran death squad as he celebrated mass, had found consolation in those words when his life was threatened as he stood with the poor and the oppressed of El Salvador.

Jesus’ impending death was not required because of original sin. This is more about God’s grace than humanity’s failing. God moves to reconcile us from ourselves, not from original sin.

God reconciled Godself to humanity not by denying the suffering of the world, and certainly not by orchestrating or requiring it, but by entering into it. Jesus does not go lightly or peacefully on his way to the cross. His soul is troubled. His suffering is real.

I believe that, in this teaching, Jesus is calling people not to hate life but to understand life differently, especially to understand that we are who we are in relation, in relation to God and to one another. Individualism is not the Way of Jesus. The meaning of life is to live for others in community. The seed, abiding alone, is useless. Abiding in the Spirit, in the power of relation, is eternal.

Eternal in John's gospel does not mean "everlasting life" or "life after death". It means the fullness of life in the eternal now.

The life or self in this teaching is the individual, unrelated self. So Jesus is not saying that we must hate ourselves or our lives; Jesus is saying that we are to resist abiding only in ourselves.

Jesus rejects a human selfhood that is at home in the Domination System, the order of things that has been constructed for some to succeed and others to fail, that measures success by power and security, and denies our responsibility for all others. The self that is comfortable in that world will lose its life. The self that 'hates' - rejects - opts out of that world and that transactional understanding of the self will be alive in a way that has neither a beginning nor an end.

We are who we are in relation. Life cannot be hoarded like grain that is protected and stored. Life must be lived with risk and in relationship. The husk must be broken open for the fullness of abundant life to be liberated.

Our Western culture is consumed with self-identity and self-preservation. What would it mean to truly live for the Sacred, to truly live for others? How can we die to this culture of consumption and boredom, isolation and domination, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and the violence that underlies and supports and sustains this system? How can we move from "*let this cup pass from me*" to "*thy will be done*" as we risk our lives for love and liberation.

And what of the church, in its institutional and in its local forms? How will we die? Like a single seed, holding on to our power, our privilege and our preferred styles of worship, or in a way that gives new life to the world?

Are we willing to accept Jesus' invitation to be drawn into the suffering of the world through the cross? Following Jesus means following Jesus up to the cross and into the suffering of the world. Are we willing to do that? To be present in the broken places, to stand alongside people in their pain.

All of these things that Jesus said were precipitated by those Greek outsiders who wanted to see Jesus; who didn't want to be given a lot of information about Jesus; who wanted to see deeply to encounter Jesus! As Lent draws closer to Easter, do we want to see Jesus on the cross of human existence, or will we choose to look away?

If we dare to look, we will see violence, but we will also see the One who did not waver from the message of universal love, grace, and liberation, even though it would cost him his life.

If we dare to look, we will see the one who declared solidarity with all who are abandoned, colonized, oppressed, accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered.

We will see the One who burst open like a seed so that new life could grow and replenish the earth.

We will see this Jesus who loved and loved and loved, revealing in his life and his being, a Divine Presence whose love can no longer be questioned.

We will see the One whose death calls us now to co-create, in the church and in the world, a channel for communion and hospitality for all people.

If we do not turn away this Easter, we will see Jesus who, in being lifted up, draws all people more deeply into the reign of God.

We will see Jesus who comes to demonstrate Divine strength through vulnerability, Divine power through what appears to be weak in the eyes of the world.

We will see Jesus who calls those who would follow in this way:

to share God's compassion,

to enable God's justice,

to seek God's peace,

and to embody God's presence.

Here and now. Amen.