

Out into the world

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 July 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Clare Brockett

Pentecost 7B

Mark 6: 1-13, Psalm 123

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

On New Year's Eve 1999, Nelson Mandela stood in his old prison cell on Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town and lit a candle for hope. He then passed the candle to Thabo Mbeki, his successor as Prime Minister, and to a group of children. Standing in the darkness, they received the candle and promised to carry the light for South Africa.

This passing on and picking up on the work of justice and hope is also the task of our community of faith here at Pitt St Uniting Church, as we take progressive Christianity out in to the world.

We too are called to bear the light of hope.

As bearers of hope, I find myself curious about religious communities and our stories of faith and belief. We all know that faith is not about belief in the modern sense but rather about trust, and living boldly in the hope of a new way of being for ourselves and our world.

In my work in aged care chaplaincy I would often find myself reflecting on the people who chose to come to our weekly church services. Many were people of faith from their early childhood. Some were more recent people of faith – recent as in a couple of decades or so! And some were people who began to attend some time during my chaplaincy.

I realised that for some, the sense of connection and community was important. For others, it was linking them to traditions that were in their DNA, the familiar hymns, and seasons of the church year. And for yet others, it became a place to hold together the fragments of their lives, knowing they were not alone.

There was a sense of freedom – they had long passed worrying about trivial things, and now, however they understood God, being given time and space to reflect, was deeply important. As they faced the last years of their lives, many knew that relationship with others was crucial, for it was alongside each other that they found a new appreciation of what it meant to face the loss of close family and friends, illness and their own mortality.

Like Joy Cowley's poem, as they listened to each other's stories and the faith stories we shared, they realised their lives were enhanced by the pilgrim story of who walked with them, physically or metaphorically, be it in church, at dinner, in the garden, or in the hallways.

Reflecting on faith, belief, and community, I wonder what it would be like to describe ourselves as a hope community. Not vain hope. But the kind of hope that inspires you toward a vision of a new way of being, a new way of living, and a new world where humanity expresses divinity.

Our heritage in faith and hope are Bible stories, and the stories that have become part of the human tradition since biblical times.

I for one am so grateful to have this powerful sense of connection to other seekers of wisdom who have gone before us. They might not have had the scientific knowledge that we have now but, like us, were seekers of wisdom and meaning.

We too are keepers of the stories, sharing in the prophetic legacy, the legacy which Jesus embodied and which was rejected by the people of his hometown of Nazareth. I guess in some ways that's a little like progressive Christianity being rejected by secular humanists and conservative Christians.

But Jesus appears not to be daunted by the rejection.

He has a community of justice loving friends and with them he journeys on, risking, negotiating, taking what has been received through tradition and transforming it for life ahead.

As disciples of Jesus, I believe that it is part of our role to listen to this dream and to keep it alive. Believing in Jesus, for us, means be-loving the way of justice, of nonviolence, of compassion and of hope.

Considering the importance of tradition and story is still significant for us.

Images of journey, of dream, of rainbow remain part of our interpretive structures in this church. In communion, we celebrate that the common stuff of earth, of wine and wheat; that in these, we are connected to the earth and to the community of seekers for meaning who have gone before us.

It is with Jesus and the early Christian communities of women and men, our forebears in the faith and hope, that we remember who we are.

We receive the stories and the traditions of the past, not as literal truth, but as symbols of meaning that we can weave into our own lives. And once in our own lives, we then put the stories into the hands of others, to become strands in the weaving of their lives. The religious task is imagining, creating a framework in which we live our lives in a way which is not contradicting science, but contradicting market and empire, and hopelessness in the face of them.

We learn to love the journey not for the destination but for the realisation that the journey is our home.

Our journey needs marking places, like Jolyon referred to yesterday at Jenny and Tim's wedding. Places where we stay with one another and celebrate who we are - and that we are people on a spiritual journey.

Mark's gospel has, for us, stories of Jesus moving around the countryside and taking voyages across the lake and back several times. It is a travel narrative of journeying to Jerusalem, despite the risks.

I strongly believe that the community of faith and hope has an important role in our life's journey; providing a strengthening of spirit that enables us to carry on the mission of making justice, love, and peace. And also the journey of making ourselves; by our choices, by our acts, by our imagining. Reassuring us that it is not stupid or futile to hope for a different world.

So, on this Sunday, where are we on our journey?

We are invited to reflect personally. For each of us to think about what we need to sustain us.

We are invited to participate in practices that will shape us and our world toward divinity. Practices of worship, meditation, corporate prayer in which we express our gratitude, and greatest hopes and fears for ourselves and our world. Practices of hospitality, and welcome.

For our Church, and our journey, is grounded in who Jesus was - and how he understood God's way.

Through Mark we hear, in this season after Pentecost, instructions on the demands of discipleship, of what it means to follow the Jesus Way. We are invited to see our lives as a pilgrimage with Jesus, who though it makes no sense rationally, is still present with us in the stories and in our community.

Our task, as progressive Christians, is to go and be in the world, to reflect on both who Jesus was and what his 'way' is.

It is true that, of course, we live in different times.

However, we hear in the biblical stories that, as Jesus journeys he establishes a pattern of life for his disciples that presents uncompromising expectations, especially in relation to what he called the "kingdom of God."

In these stories, a vision of the justice and love of the reign of God is revealed.

In their context of Palestinian peasantry under Roman rule, Kingdom/reign of God has to be understood as an absolute conjunction of religion and politics.

It evokes an image of how the world would be if God (either understood personally, or non-personally as the source of life and the power of love), not Caesar, were on the throne.

It casts a critical shadow over the structures of human power.

It's not about the end of the world, as commonly presented by fundamentalists.

I don't believe that Jesus was focused on the end of the world in the sense of divine cataclysmic intervention to restore peace and justice to a disordered world, but rather that he pointed to a way of wisdom, of how to live here and now today so that God's present power is visible to all.

This way continues to be revealed to us.

Today, I am reminded of what it means to live in God's way - as Margaret and many others make their way to Melbourne today for the start of the Uniting Church Assembly.

Where will wisdom be found, in the expected or unexpected places? How will the voices of all who have gone before be heard? The ones who shaped the way of how to live fully as God's people here on earth. The ones who remind us of the need to become disciples in our own time.

And this time we are in, this time at Assembly, is post the Royal Commission on Institutional Sexual Abuse, it follows the hideous postal survey on same gender marriage, as well as the current happenings around religious freedom/discrimination. This Assembly will bring forward conversations on Euthanasia, on Sovereignty of First Peoples, and of course whether or not the Uniting Church will allow its ministers to marry couples of the same gender, among many other topics of conversation.

There is a wisdom in the stories of our hope community. There is meaning in the images of rainbow, dream and journey.

While you may think that the discipleship images in Mark do not present us with a particularly comforting picture, they point us toward a demanding life.

But alongside that, they provide us with inspiring vision:

The church as a community of solidarity and resistance.

This church is that for us, a place for keeping the dream, the hope, alive.

Yet, to keep that hope alive, what will we need to change in order to be a community of hope and welcome for the generations that follow us?

How will we listen to their visions of hope, and their need to live out being disciples, while lending them our strength and courage and wisdom?

While sharing our stories of delving to the depths in order to discover a fullness of life we never imagined possible.

It can be frightening, and at times overwhelming, to be a follower of the Jesus Way, because we know that there is strong, sometimes violent, opposition. But God, the god who is a beloved source of compassion and justice, goes ahead of us, calling us on, and we are not alone.

We come this morning, seeking less to understand God and the Spirit, than to open ourselves to its sacred flow, released in us through this simple act of gathering, of singing, of praying, and holding one another and our beautiful, yet broken planet in love.

May it be so