

# Prophet problems

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 July 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 8B

Amos 7:7-15, Mark 6: 14-29

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

---

At the Assembly there were lay people and Ministers, but the Ministers could be divided into 2 groups – those of us who were going to preach on Sunday and those who were going to have a bit of a holiday. I really wanted to be here with you – even though my voice is in a terrible condition. But for those of us who knew that they were going to be preaching, there were some macabre conversations during the week about the lectionary readings and about the kind of connections that we might draw from John the Baptist's head on a platter and Assembly's processes and decisions.

Sometimes, in the midst of stressful situations, dark humour is called for.

But it is a terrible story! A prophet is going to be hurt, a life taken, the body beheaded.

A story in which there is no redemption. When life is ended and hope destroyed - because John had the guts to speak as a prophet, calling Herod to account for the abuse of his power, his moral failings! And, as a result, he was killed.

John seems to be haunting Herod, even though in prison, he hears the echo of John's words through Jesus, through Jesus and his disciples. Herod fears that Jesus is somehow back and he needs evidence that the problem has been taken care of.

The reading from Amos also speaks of prophet problems.

The reading tells us of a small part of the conflict between Amos and the high priest Amaziah. The religious establishment is not happy with Amos' message, and they want him to disappear.

Amos preached in a context of inequality and injustice in the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was a good time economically but the benefits of the good times were not being shared equally. The urban elites and the wealthy landowners were enjoying luxury goods while the rural poor suffered.

Earlier Amos accused them: "*they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals -- they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way*" (Amos 2:7). Economic injustice was Amos' central concern.

God's deep concern for human injustice is expressed in Amos' language of judgment and threat; but God is not angry for the sake of being angry. God's anger is not in opposition to God's love.

As theologian James Cone writes, "*Most theological treatments of God's love fail to place the proper emphasis on God's wrath, suggesting that love is completely self-giving without any demand for obedience. Bonhoeffer called this 'cheap grace.'*"

God's love demands righteousness, and failures to hear God's call to justice and love cause God grief. Amos shows us that God is not indifferent to human suffering, oppression, and injustice. Cone goes on: "*The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed.*"

(James Cone, "God is Black," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, rev. and exp. ed. Edited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 108-109.)

For Amos, God's judgement - which is an idea that progressive Christians have often struggled with - God's judgement is a manifestation of relationship with a living God, a God of passion who cares deeply. A God who is affected by us as we are affected by God.

In our time, Amos still speaks to churches and social structures that are committed more to their institutional survival than to listening to the voices of people on the edge, voices that need to be heard.

Amos' emphasis on systemic social injustice made him a favourite of Rev Martin Luther King, Jr. In his letter from Birmingham jail (1963), King writes to a group of well-intentioned white pastors who really wanted racism and inequality to end. But he wrote to them because they had urged King not to act too quickly, not to push his agenda for racial equality with urgency, and not to employ strategies of civil disobedience. In response Dr King called for a strong, disturbing stand against injustice. He called for extremism.

King wrote, "*Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.'* Was not Amos an extremist for justice: '*Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*'

Amos, John the Baptist, Martin Luther King, Jr – all called for social and religious revolution. And all of them were met by resistance from social and religious authority.

For us, in the Uniting Church today, these texts are a searching call for self-reflection. When does our well-meaning comfort mask indifference? When does our lack of love and justice make our own religious practice meaningless? How do the institutions that benefit us build barriers that block the deep rivers of justice?

In the light of reflection on these powerful texts, I want to share with you a little of what happened at the Uniting Church Assembly in Melbourne this week.

While marriage was the subject of awareness in much of the church and in the coverage that the Assembly received, there were many other important issues that were discussed. We heard about some of those in our service a couple of weeks ago.

We discussed and accepted statements about Domestic Violence, about Care of Creation, about implementing the findings of the Royal Commission – and then we discussed the issue of Sovereignty of Indigenous People. So, before I speak about marriage, I think that was the other thing that really moved me to love and respect the Uniting Church through their process.

The Assembly affirmed that Aboriginal and Islander Peoples, are sovereign peoples in Australia.

After consultation with working groups (which is part of the lovely process – and sometimes trying process - of a Uniting Church Assembly) the wording was amended to give an expanded definition of sovereignty as the *“way in which First Peoples understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians”* of the land.

The proposal that was passed referred to the Statement from the Heart at Uluru, recognising that Sovereignty is understood by the First Peoples as *“a spiritual notion, reflecting the ancestral tie between the land and the First Peoples.”*

I was impressed by the speaker, past President Stuart McMillan; he pointed out that while the preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church says that the first peoples understand themselves to be sovereign, we need to move to a place where, as a church, we could affirm this sovereignty,

Dennis Corowa, the former Chairperson of Congress, also stretched us to understand the political dimensions of this claim. He said that the journey in the church *“has been a work in progress, a journey for us to be able to live comfortably within Australia, feeling neighbourly love in community.* He said that we are moving closer towards this – and that Congress has led the way on this journey. And Congress, through people like Dennis continue to lead. I was really impressed that he also said: *“We need to be in Federal political life, we have Aboriginal leaders there already, but we need a voice to Parliament directly elected by the First People”.*

He pointed out: *“We already have this in the UCA, with the collective voice of our people in our councils, elected by First Peoples.* There was a sense that, in the Uniting Church, making this statement and acknowledging the centrality of the partnership with Congress in our life, we may have a place to stand to offer moral voice to the nation on justice for the First Peoples.

I do want to say something about marriage, too. And I want to share a little bit of the process, too, which at the end of the Assembly is something I want to affirm. The process was incredible. Incredibly hard, incredibly long, and incredibly involved; but, I think a process that was worth going through.

The Doctrine Working Group had brought to the Assembly Standing Committee, a very comprehensive report which many of you have looked at. The Assembly Standing Committee took from the options presented by that report one that would change the understanding of marriage in the Uniting Church to being between *two people* instead of a *man and a woman*.

There was also lovely theology in that report that added to our previous understandings of marriage contained in the statement that was made in 1997 – which as well as saying that marriage was between a man and a woman also said lots of good things about the richness of marriage and what it has to offer families and church and society.

But, not so much about society – and I think that's what this report brought to us. So the proposal that came before us began with the claim that:

*Marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family.* Then it went on to talk about the relationship between two people who live together in a lifelong union that is expressed in every part of their life; and people in a situation where they can encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship. It talked about fruitfulness, not just in the sense of bearing children, but about a fruitful life in whatever way you were engaged with other generations, contributing to the well-being of society and strengthening the mission of the church.

Another key part of the proposal was that Ministers and Authorised Celebrants would be able to exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages, including (what the church calls same-gender marriages, but its marriages for LGBTI couples) according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.

That proposal was introduced on Monday afternoon (the Assembly had begun on Sunday).

On Tuesday people were offered the opportunity to ask questions but not to enter into debate. At that stage it became very apparent that there was a serious opposition to this. That was expressed through numerous points of order that aggravated the incredible patience of the President (who, I think, disguised her aggravation very well). That was an incredibly challenging task for Deidre Palmer to moderate - the whole week - but she did beautifully.

On Tuesday night, there was a strong feeling that members of Assembly, before we went into working groups to discuss the marriage proposals, wanted to hear more voices. So there was an opportunity for as many people as wanted to, to speak in two minutes (an incredibly short time) about why they were supporters or didn't support.

On Wednesday, it went to Working Groups, which is a group of about 10 or 12 people. My group was wonderful. It was incredibly diverse – it was like a microcosm of the Uniting Church. There were three Pacific women (two older and one younger; the two older ones were Ministers) an Asian man (second generation, pastor of a church in Melbourne) and a bunch of other Anglos of different ages, Ministers and lay people – and two people who were seriously opposed to the proposal (one a young man and one an older man who is a Minister).

So, we heard from one another – and at times it was very difficult to hear some of what was said and it was challenging.

Those groups all recorded their reactions and that went to the Facilitation Group. I don't know how many groups there were, but there were 250 of us there altogether, so lots of groups, lots of feedback. The Facilitation Group is another group to which I would like to give great credit, because they pulled all of this material together.

They came up with a new proposal at the end of that process by Wednesday – which was a mixture of the 1997 statement (so Part 1 was just to repeat the current understanding of marriage and Part 2 was most of what was included in the Assembly Standing Committee proposal).

There was yet more debate and another attempt to have a Working Group conversation. And other items of business were interposed all through the time.

I was really unhappy with the combined look of the proposal – with the '97 statement and the new one, because I was afraid that it looked like two problems. One was that it looked like there were two different understandings of marriage, for two groups within the Uniting Church - and the other that it didn't really express, by putting it like that, it didn't really express all that we did, in fact, hold together as a church understanding of marriage.

I thought that it was unnecessarily difficult and that expressed in every part of their life the two versions were too different, so I came up with an amendment, I think on Thursday night, (which I foreshadowed) which was to bring those 2 wordings together as much as possible. And then, to have a second part which just said we vary our understanding to allow two beliefs about marriage – one being that marriage is between a man and a woman and one that marriage is between two people.

It became clear, in conversations after that, that that was still unacceptable because opposite sex marriages and same sex marriage were incorporated in one statement, so I didn't actually end up presenting the amendment in the form that I had foreshadowed it, but I talked to a Minister from a quite conservative part of Queensland who was open to conversation, and about the need to be able to express it in two statements.

So, together, we worked on wording that would be one statement for a marriage between a man and a woman, and another that would say two people, but everything else about them would be the same - and they were a blending of the old and the new.

But by the time it got back to the debate, it seemed that was not going to be acceptable to people who were holding to a deeply conservative and traditional understanding of marriage. They really wanted the '97 statement to be included in this decision. I felt some grief about that, but David Baker, who was the Moderator of the Queensland Synod (with whom I have a relationship – particularly after the “Daring” conversation) suggested that what we could do instead was to have the '97 statement as it was, and have a second version of the '97 statement that used the language of “two people” and “a couple” instead of “a man and a woman”.

So, that was brought before the Assembly and David moved it and I seconded it – and I had an opportunity to speak to it. I really felt conflicted about where we had ended up, because it was so much less than what I had come to Assembly hoping for. So, I want to read to you a little bit about what I said in seconding it. I said:

*I came to Assembly hoping we would fully embrace an inclusive understanding of marriage that was included in the report of the Working Group on Doctrine - and hoping that proposal 8, beautifully crafted by the Assembly Standing Committee, would be agreed to by the Assembly.*

*(Referring to my first go at an amendment) Yesterday I expressed hope that we could say as much as we possibly can together. I now understand that it is imperative for some members of the Assembly that the '97 statement is maintained and I am grateful for conversations with David Busch and David Baker.*

*As imperative as it was for them to have the '97 statement, it is also imperative for **other** members of the Assembly that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer members of our Church are able to be married, with their friends and family, in their communities of faith.*

*I do not want us to perpetuate the development of silos, with understandings of marriage that differ beyond the issue of gender.*

*I want it to be clear that the marriages of LGTIQ people are not 'marriage B' but the same marriage gifted to us by God for love and for life and liberation.*

*I support the amendment because I believe that God wants us to continue to work together in this Church in all our diversity.*

*Though this is not what I hoped for, and far less than what I dream of, which is a church that will embrace the full equality of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender members in every area of its life...*

*I believe that this proposal reflects where we are, and affirms all that we do share together.*

So, the amendment became the substantive piece of work that we engaged with at the Assembly through an incredibly complicated process – many speeches for and against – and some of the speeches against were really hard to listen to.

One of the parts of the Uniting Church process is that you get to a point at the end of all of those speeches and then - when there is clearly, from the show of cards in the consensus process, not agreement and not willingness of people to stand aside to form agreement – the next step is the question: “*Do we need to decide now?*”

That was one of the most harrowing moments of the Assembly for me, because the threshold for that is very high. I can't remember now if it was 66% or 75% - Eleni probably knows, but I think it may be 75 – it was really high – and it seemed to me, at that point, that the 25% of people who didn't want it would be able to stop the whole process! But it did pass the threshold and it was harrowing.

Then there were more speeches because the President wanted to give people more time to think before we actually went to a formal vote, which was going to be a secret ballot; and I have to say that those speeches got worse and worse and it was really pretty agonizing to listen to.

So there was a sombre mood when it came time to vote – and even in that time, I didn't know what was going to happen. There were also harrowing procedural discussions about what percentage of the Assembly would need to support the decision. The first person moved that we need to achieve a 75% threshold – and that wasn't passed, but the motion that we would need 66% - 2/3 – was passed.

So, we waited while the votes were counted – and eventually heard the news – the President, Deidre Palmer announced that it had in fact passed, and that it had passed by a significant amount more than the required two thirds.

I think I sat there for the next two minutes or so thinking: *“Oh, I wonder what procedural motion is coming next and what else do we have to do”*.

Then, gradually it dawned on us that this had happened and this was possible; but everyone was very very careful to respect the fact that there was diversity. One of the things that I really appreciated by doing that new expression of the proposal was that it allowed conservative people who would never bring themselves to celebrate marriage for a same sex couple to support the proposal because they believed that we are a church that could hold these views together.

So the sacrifice of that wonderful language that we had at the beginning seemed to me to be worthwhile – and my enormous self-doubt about having moved this was somewhat relieved – and I was very grateful for the voices of those conservative people who stood in that kind of wilderness space where they know, probably, that they will get quite a lot of criticism, including David Baker who will have to go back to Queensland and hold together some fairly passionate views on that.

But, that was the moment of hopefulness. And I thought about Amos after that. I thought that Amos probably would have got a lot angrier in the Assembly than many of us got, but maybe the psychology of human beings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is different and maybe we have been touched by the spirit of Jesus, who does remind us that we are to engage with love and with prayer, even for those whose expressions seem to be hateful to who we are.

So, I'm glad that we went and we spoke; and that we also expressed the hope, the vision that we held on to for our church, and the vision that we believe is God's vision for a church of justice and equality for the LGBTI community; for the migrant communities who have come into this church and finding their place to stand; for indigenous people; for people who are survivors of abuse; for our fragile planet that needs our care and our commitment.

So, holding on to all of the dreams that were part of that Assembly, now that I am back here, it is time to celebrate this thing that we have done together. I am grateful to you, as a community, for the love that you sent me out to do simply with; and for the allies and friends I found at the Assembly for declared love for me – which included a card per day with a beautiful picture and a message to get me through.

And the joy that I know that I can come back here and be with you, knowing that we will be a place of welcome and love. And there will be some really lovely weddings in the next few months.

Thank you.