

Silence and spirit

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 July 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 9B

Jeremiah 23:1-6; 'Silence' by David Whyte in *Consolations*; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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

This is a recovery sermon. I'm recovering from the virus that I caught at Assembly, and I'm also recovering from the spiritual exhaustion that I feel - alongside the profound joy of the Assembly decision on marriage.

Today, we have Mark's gospel, where Jesus instructs his disciples to care for their spirits. It is a wonderful text full of life-giving insights, but it is so easy not to live in accord with this teaching. This is a word from God for people who skip lunch (I'm glad neither Clare nor Cynthia are here this morning) and a call to a life of spirit and compassion.

Spirituality has become a buzz word, embraced in secular as well as religious world-views. In a secular sense, spirituality has become associated with the things we love, the practices that give us life. So people talk about cooking, gardening, walking, reading, listening to music as things that feed our spirit.

Challenging this framing of spirituality, one of the writers I read preparing for today, Cláudio Carvalhaes, wrote that, "*Very few understand that spiritual disciplines actually entail painful processes of learning to listen and to deal with our desires and our death drive.*"

Carvalhaes challenges another kind of reductive thinking about spirituality; the tendency to equate spirituality with justice, where we throw ourselves into works of justice to change our world and to change ourselves.

I've thought about how much of my life in the past couple of years has been caught up with struggles for justice for LGBTIQ people in society and in the church. I've questioned why this is so for me, because like many of you I also care passionately about other justice issues - about the refugees who are imprisoned on Manus and Nauru for five long years and the little children who have spent their entire lives on Nauru - people whose physical and mental health is being destroyed by a system that is nothing short of evil.

Doing the "Walking on Country" experience profoundly shaped my understanding of the experience of Indigenous Australians and my commitment to explore what it means for people in the Uniting Church to live out the Covenant that we have with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our church and beyond.

Passion for the sake of planet earth is another justice issue that has spiritual meaning for many of us at Pitt Street - thinking about how we can make a difference in terms of both political advocacy and in changing the practices of daily life to reduce our impact on the eco-system in which we dwell.

Over the past week, I've wondered about the relative amounts of energy that we can give all of things we are passionate about. The amount of my time that has been spent on equality for LGBTIQ people has been disproportionate... and yet I know that in both the Postal Survey and in the Uniting Church marriage process, I was able to offer leadership because of my experience in advocacy in the church and in politics.

Marriage equality can seem a bourgeois aspiration in comparison to other struggles for justice, but I have always understood it to be about much more than access to a particular institution. It is about dignity and full humanity. I think about people coming to terms with who they are, about the children in families that will not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity, about kids in rainbow families who needed to hear that their families were worth protecting and upholding, about the homophobic violence that still makes it unsafe, in some places, to be visibly LGBTIQ in public, about workplace discrimination, and the terrible scourge of suicide particularly among LGBTIQ youth.

When the government or the church refuses to name the relationships of LGBTIQ people as worthy of the recognition and protection that marriage brings, the message is clear that there is something fundamentally wrong with being gay or being trans.

I have received many lovely, affirming messages over the past week. But one was particularly healing. On Thursday evening I was out at the Centre for Ministry for Clare's rather belated induction into her role in UME and Uniting. One of the people at the service was a lesbian minister who had texted encouraging messages several times during Assembly. I thanked her for care, as she had thanked me for my part in the Assembly. And then she said, *"you make me think of Esther."* I looked blankly, and she said, *"you are here for such a time as this."*

She was referring to Esther 4:14 when Queen Esther is told by Mordecai that she must not keep silent at such a time as this, but rather use her position to influence her husband the King to protect the Jews. Mordechai says, *'Perhaps you have come to your royal position for just such a time as this.'*

I was deeply moved to hear the leadership I have been able to offer by virtue of being in ministry at Pitt Street Uniting Church, named as being *"for such a time as this."* I believe the honour of that naming also belongs to you.

Hearing her words enabled the beginning of self-acceptance in relation to my concerns about the time and energy the task has taken, and the other things that have not received my attention – other struggles for justice, other aspects of church life, my family and my own spirituality. So it is from that perspective of self-forgiveness that I hear Jesus words calling me, calling us, to live in a life-giving balance.

In the passage, the disciples tell Jesus all the things they have done and taught, their work and their care.

Jesus didn't ask them for a report, or to evaluate their success against the goals in the mission plan. He said to them: *"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."*

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Jesus is attentive to the practices of his disciples and is aware of the conflicting demands upon their lives.

We can easily fall into the trap of working hard for the cause of justice, or in self-giving pastoral care (as many in this community do); without attending to our souls and our spiritual and emotional needs. Jesus is concerned with the ones who think they do not have time to stop, to think, to meditate, to ponder, to wonder, to pay attention.

He calls us to a deserted place.

In the place of the soul, we can have a sense of ourselves again. No noise besides the rattling of our thoughts and the wind, no presence besides our presence and our ghosts.

In the desert, there is no peace if our heart has no peace. There is only fear if our hearts live in fear.

The campaigns and the causes, the illnesses and need, however worthy, cannot distract us now.

In the place of the soul, we must control our minds not for the sake of controlling but in order to free ourselves from the grips of anxiety, fear, and endless motion.

In the place of the soul, we hear the words we speak, we hear the silence we produce, we attend to our bodies.

However, the deserted place, the place of the soul, is not an end in itself but a space that functions as a way in and out of our constant work for compassion and for justice. To know ourselves is to know how we might live more abundantly in the world, for ourselves and for others.

It does not mean that need will not impress upon us again, or that we will not respond as Jesus does, with compassion. The gospel tells us that this time the intent to go away was thwarted by the crowds who caught up with Jesus and the disciples, but that doesn't mean the intent was unimportant.

This week, as in every week, so many needs have impressed upon us deeply. The need for pastoral care for members of our community. A Tamil refugee torn apart from his wife and his little daughter, returned to Sri Lanka by our government, where he was immediately imprisoned. Donald Trump revealed to be beholden to the Russian president, imperilling the institutions of democracy - and imperilling peace.

Such is the precarious state of the world, and our community, that we need constant movement in and out of the desert, the place of the soul, that grounded spiritual practices provide. These practices become important because our presence and work as Christians in the world are crucial to the lives of those in need, the ones Jesus called the least of these.

In our daily lives in Sydney, we see the homeless, the poor. We see refugees close to destitution and despair because of cruel policies. We see indigenous people, traumatised by decades of institutional abuse, neglect and violence unable to negotiate the world we have imposed on them. We do our best to attend to their needs, to include them, to seek shelter for them, to undo policies of hatred and debunk feelings of xenophobia, fear, and anger.

We see the pastoral needs of people in our circle of care; grief, ageing, mental and physical illness, loss, broken relationships.

We see the needs of the earth, exploited and abused by our desires, greed, and entitlement.

We have so much to do, as Jesus says. At times, even Jesus couldn't stop. His heart was driven by compassion. But Jesus knew he – and we - needed to stop. No-one can do everything, unceasingly, without adverse consequences.

We are called to be attentive to all that is crying for our attention and demanding our care: people, creatures, the earth. As people of God, we are called to discern the spirit of the times and see where the Spirit of God dwells and what the Spirit is asking us to do – the work of God.

In the same way, Jesus is telling us that we have to pause and pay attention to our hearts, to our rhythms, and to how we are living our lives.

Without a strong spiritual life, oriented by daily spiritual practices of prayer or meditation, of pause and loneliness, we cannot do all the work that we need to do; we cannot be all that we are called to be.

I believe that we also need times to be the people of God together, as we are together this Sunday morning. Jesus does not call us to a life of spiritual isolation.

We need to return - to re-form ourselves as the body of Christ. Otherwise, we may be broken and poured out so often that we are no longer useful as Christ's hands and feet in the world. We may become so caught up in activity that we forget to spend time with the One in whom our works of compassion and justice-seeking are grounded.

And to do this we need to remind one another that we are not our own,

that we are not alone,

we hold each other

and God holds us all.