

# Dreaming of a revolution...

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 November 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Community of Christ B

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; John 18: 33-37;

Song: *The Revolution Starts Now* by Steve Earle

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

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May God open our eyes to see, our ears to hear (even in alt country rock), and our hearts to love.

Today is the last Sunday before the season of Advent begins, leading us, inviting us, to the manger - where once again we will gaze upon the child who ushers in the reign of God, a reign of reconnection and wholeness, justice and peace, compassion and love.

And yet on this Sunday, the gospel connects us not with Jesus birth but with his impending death. The reading from John's gospel, the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, is also read on Good Friday. Today it invites us to consider what kind of world Jesus was inaugurating, how it contrasted to the systems of the powerful of the world. This reading invites us to consider the nature of the revolution that was the basileia, the reign or kingdom of God, that Jesus claimed, and it invites us to embrace the basileia vision of God's all-inclusive love for ourselves and for the world.

This Sunday in the church's year used to be called "The Feast of Christ the King". It's quite a recent feast day in the life of the church, beginning in 1925 under Pope Pius XI. More recently it has been called The Reign of Christ...and at Pitt Street we have re-named it yet again as Community of Christ Sunday.

The move here to speak of the Community of Christ explores what it means to speak of the risen Christ, no longer bound by the masculinity of Jesus of Nazareth but liberated from maleness, and from individuality, into the Christ of what Nicola Slee, Rita Nakashima Brock, and other feminist theologians have named: the Christ in Christa/Community; into what Matthew Fox has called the Cosmic Christ.

But our understanding of the Risen One, our understanding as Christians, is always to be grounded in who Jesus was, and his basileia vision of a world reconciled.

The inclusion of the passage from Daniel provides interesting background in understanding Jesus as both located in Judaism, and also reforming it.

In the face of persecution, Daniel claims God's blessing and protection, and God's judgment on the unrighteous.

The images of the powerful judge are striking. They are hierarchical and patriarchal – here God as an old man provides proof texts for patriarchy. But it is important to note that the text was authored during the Maccabean revolt, as the Jews lived, once again, under military occupation. When understood in the context of subjugation, this strange vision speaks of hope and expanded possibilities for a people suffering ongoing tribulation. It claims that there is a Source, an Ultimate Reality, that is beyond the day to day realities of injustice.

Here in Australia, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we do not live under occupation or imperial rule, but we can understand the profound importance of hope for resisting the powers that be. Such hope as infused that lone young man who stood defenceless and yet defiant before an army tank in Tiananmen Square.

We see this resisting hope in many places: we see it in scientists and activists who relentlessly educate about global warming in the face of government and corporate denials. Some of us will join in that resisting hope next Sunday when we take part in the Carols Against Coal in support of the ARRCC, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change.

We see this resisting hope in every action taken against the unjust nation state. And, sometimes, against the unjust institutional church.

Daniel, and Jesus before Pilate two hundred years later, stand in resisting hope to claim that the God who is above all and below all, the beginning and the ending, can be trusted as ruler and protector.

The account of Jesus before Pilate invites further reflection on the nature of God.

In the initial session of the study "*First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom of God*," that we are doing as part of Exploring Faith, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan discuss Daniel chapter 7 as they look at the Roman occupation, the political context in which Jesus lived and died. The book of Daniel spoke of a fifth great kingdom or empire that would be inaugurated by the godlike Human One and the holy people of the Human One.

In Jesus' time, the Romans claimed to be the fifth and glorious empire.

Jesus lived in the political reality of Roman Imperial rule, of occupation and oppression, but he also lived in the religious reality of Jewish faith. Faith in a God who would inaugurate what Borg and Crossan call "*God's great clean-up of the world*" in the interests of justice and love. In Jesus, Israel's God was on a collision course with the empire.

But what kind of ruler, what kind of reign, would be inaugurated by Jesus?

There is a phrase in the midst of the passage from John's gospel that we heard read, that has contributed to the unfortunate belief held by many Christians that the revolution of Jesus was for heaven and not for earth, for the future and not for now...

It's the part where Jesus says: "*my realm, is not from this world. If it were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Temple authorities. But as it is, my realm is not from here.*"

Preachers have, for too long, taken these words of Jesus and used them to entrench an unbridgeable divide between God's realm and our earth. Because Jesus said his reign was "*not from this world*" some Christians have claimed there is no need to be concerned about God's reign on earth, because we will experience it in an after-life.

Some Christians hold that the sole responsibility for bringing in the kingdom belongs to God and has little to do with human effort. Some even seem to have concluded that we do not have to love our neighbours in the present, because Jesus' rule applies to some heavenly world.

But such ideas and such teaching come from a misreading of the text – and a misreading of Jesus.

Jesus' comment is not about the location of the *basileia* but about its origin, its source, its strength. When Jesus says, "*my realm is not from here,*" it means, "*my realm has its origin in God.*" Jesus tells his friends that if you want to be part of this realm, you must love one another. And not just one another: you must love your enemies.

Jesus announces God's reign as not of this world but it is definitely in it.

You can see Jesus' understanding of the Divine in this teaching. The motivation for human love, for human non-violence, is divine non-violence – even when dealing with violent enemies.

In this way Jesus marked out a path that separated him from much of the religious culture around him, where people longed for a messiah who rescue them, who would lead them in armed resistance against Rome.

Pilate and Jesus dramatically confront one another; the Realm of Rome embodied in Pilate, finally faces the Realm of God incarnated in Jesus.

In proclaiming "*my realm is not of this world*" Jesus is not saying that it is in heaven or in the future. He is saying of his realm: "*No violence ever, not even to release or save me.*"

Dom Crossan puts it in a contemporary idiom. "*Jesus is saying to Pilate, if my realm was of this world, my followers would be in here, Pilate, beating the shit out of you. But they're not.*"

The crucial difference between the Realm of God and the Realm of Rome is Jesus' non-violence versus Pilate's violence.

Interestingly, Jesus does not mention Pilate or Rome by name. The violence of Roman Empire was but one manifestation, in the first century Mediterranean world, of the violent normalcy of all of human history.

Empires come and go, but the practice of empire endures. Human sinfulness in Jesus' eyes is not our individual moral failings, but rather that normalcy of violence. This violence which, in our time, threatens not only our species, but our entire world, God's global creation.

Jesus died from that sin of human violence. His non-violent resistance incarnated the character of God, the realm of God, and the collaboration of human and divine that he had announced as open to everyone. He gave his life, crowned by that death on a cross, as a gift both to God and to the world.

The Uniting Church Basis of Union claims, in paragraph 4, that Christ is the Word of God, and so it is through Christ that we interpret scripture.

We must refuse to amplify that ancient lie that God was violent in the Old Testament but non-violent in the New Testament, because if you actually read both of them, there is evidence that there is a violent God and a non-violent in both.

So how do we, as Christians, decide between these divergent violent and non-violent biblical images of God? The answer is clear – we trust the vision of God that is embodied in the historical Jesus, embodied in his praxis and his preaching.

And we look to participate where Christ's energy and impulse are still at work in the world by the grace and power of God's Spirit.

And then, knowing ourselves to be beloved and blessed, reconciled and forgiven, we continue in the work of bringing the kingdom, kin-dom, the basileia, the reign of God closer still, by being part of a community. Part of a community that heals broken heartedness, that struggles for justice and love, that resists violence in all its forms: domestic, sexual, structural military. A community that exercises the kind of "wilfulness and hope" that Jesus did.

We do not do this on our own. In this is the 'community' of the community of Christ. We are part of something bigger than our individual selves, when we live into the reign or the community of Christ.

This shared experience makes us belong to one another and belong to God; to the God who invites us into community and accompanies us on the way.

This is the place where we can get to know who we are as friends of Jesus, and who we are together, as a community of faith.

The kin-dom of God is here.

In a community of belonging,

in lives lived in compassion and justice,

the revolution starts now.