

Blessed be...interdependence

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 February 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 6C

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Gospel: Luke 6:17-26; Contemporary Reading:
Andrew King, *Stream by Which We're Nourished*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SkPzRMbFA>

Blessed be... Blessed be...interdependence

The notion of blessing is central to the biblical texts this morning. However, the Beatitudes, the “blessed are” statements, are not just pronouncements of consequences that result from certain actions or from people holding particular social positions.

They are pronouncements of interdependence.

We are all part of one another. The interdependence of humanity, of all God’s good creation, is core to the teaching of Jesus, as is his insistence on curses, or the intrinsic worth of those who are outsiders, impoverished, ill or vulnerable.

In blessings and woes, this “sermon on the plain” challenges the social and religious framework of insiders who deserve status, and outsiders who are expendable.

Most of us tend to be more familiar with the Matthew gospel version of this story, the “sermon on the mount”, where Jesus is seated on the mountain, teaching the disciples spiritual wisdom, away from the pressures of the crowd.

In Luke’s version, Jesus is standing in the midst of the crowd, at the foot of the mountain (which is why this passage is sometimes called the “sermon on the plain”).

And here there are only four blessings, or beatitudes; and the blessings are not particularly spiritual – as they seem to be in Matthew - but material, they are earthed in the lives of people in need: the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the condemned.

And only in Luke’s gospel are the blessings followed by curses or woes, which are equally grounded in everyday life.

And the crowd is not a homogenous group of Jewish people. Luke tells us that it includes Gentiles and Samaritans, people considered enemies of Jesus’ tribe and nation. In the constitution of his audience, and in the content of his teaching, Jesus redefines the boundaries of belonging for the people of God.

Questions about who is inside and who is outside, of who is deserving of care and protection and dignity, and who is not, are still powerful questions for us in our context.

Within modern western culture there is a strong impulse toward independence and individualism. This post-enlightenment aspect of western culture has had many positive benefits. Individualism emerged in parallel with the movement towards human rights and the recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of every human person. No longer were people to be constricted and constrained by the preconditions of family, race or class.

Though in truth the benefits of enlightenment individualism accrued most obviously for people who were white and male and wealthy.

In the mid to late twentieth century, the emphasis on independence and individualism intensified, but at the same time, there were philosophers, theologians and social scientists who also began to identify some unintended consequences, especially the loss of a sense of community.

Failure to value community is also starkly apparent in the policies of neo-liberal governments that see social support for the vulnerable, not as a benefit for the well-being of all society but as a cost to be controlled, and people who receive social supports are seen as undeserving individuals whose lives must be disciplined by the state.

The recent report about the negative consequences of the ParentsNext parenting payments program reveals the way that mothers of young children who are dependent on public assistance are being punished by having their Centrelink payments cut, for missing mandatory and often random activities or appointments, further entrenching their misery and further reducing the opportunities for them and their children to escape from poverty. ParentsNext also targets Indigenous people in ways that are clearly racist.

Family friendly Australia does have its limits and it makes value judgements about which families deserve support, about who we can afford to welcome and value.

As we celebrate the humanity of the passage of the Medevac legislation last week, that will allow doctors, rather than politically constrained bureaucrats, to decide whether mentally or physically ill refugees should be brought from Manus or Nauru to Australia for treatment, we must also resist the dehumanising rhetoric toward refugees that has been ramped up in a frightening degree since the law passed - against the wishes of the current minority government.

There is no sense of interdependence of human community in the racism and xenophobia that underlie the messages of politicians that are amplified by a compliant media. We are being manipulated to fear, to believe that care for the vulnerable will mean that we have less of the pie.

It was extraordinary to hear the Prime Minister tell drought stricken, flood ravaged communities that there would not be funds to support their plight because the Christmas Island detention centre was going to be reopened (apparently at a cost of around a billion dollars).

Images of scarcity and abundance came to my mind too, as I read the words from the prophet Jeremiah. Individuals as well as communities of faith, and broader societies, can live with a sense of fear causing us to turn inward, causing us to fail to act with the hospitality to which we are clearly called. When this happens anxiety and fear take over with the sense that “we don’t have enough” – enough money, enough people (especially people like us), enough ideas, enough faith.

However, we can choose to live differently, with a clear sense of hopefulness, with eyes to see the abundance of divine blessing.

Jeremiah says, *“Blessed are those who trust in God, whose trust is God. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”*

The image of the tree that does not fear the heat or the drought is one that focuses on the hope and abundance that comes from the sacred: God in all things, and all things in God. When we see ourselves as interconnected and interdependent, there will be enough.

When we see ourselves as interconnected and interdependent, we will do something about climate change.

The readings from Jeremiah and Luke cluster around a fundamental vision shared by Jews and Christians: living open to the Divine Presence is life-giving.

But, in the midst of that passage in Luke, Jesus makes the apparently nonsensical claim that those who are poor, hungry, sad or excluded are actually blessed.

Within this pronouncement is the faith claim for outsiders, for the weak and the vulnerable, that there is more to life than the sum of our circumstances.

Within this pronouncement for insiders, the strong and the secure, is the claim that our well-being is also interdependent with that of the ones who are seen as expendable and less deserving.

Those of us who are rich, well-fed, happy or popular are often not ready to respond to such a life-giving opportunity; such a life-changing opportunity. When we simply settle for a life of privilege, this reading is telling us that we are actually cursed. We’ve insulated ourselves from much of the pain and suffering in the world, and in so doing we miss the intensity of living fully into the common, risen life that God offers. This fullness of life includes and goes beyond material circumstances.

Through this ancient text, Jesus still calls us to start living with justice and with compassion, here and now (verses 27-31). *Bless those who curse you. Love your enemies. Share with the poor. “Do to others as you would have them do to you”* (verse 31). For Jesus, especially for Jesus as recounted to us by Luke, “matter” matters, this life matters. God’s life-giving reign makes a material difference to material people and to our ecological systems.

In Luke’s version of the beatitudes, Jesus’ blessings and woes find their context in his healing ministry. Power was with Jesus to heal them of all their diseases, even those – maybe especially those - that alienated them from society and condemned them to social impurity.

Jesus' power to heal is not grounded in his own abilities, but arises from his constant openness to God's life-transforming energy.

Open to the divine, Jesus' touch and Jesus' words changed lives and restored hope to the hopeless. Open to God in our time, we too can perform "miracles" of transformation. Miracles that are deeply natural, not supernatural, yet life changing.

The blessings and threats are part of a larger perspective in which Jesus embodies God's universal urge toward wholeness and blessedness.

Often when we describe how lucky we are as Australians, as people who live in Australia, we forget that our well-being has been bought at a price. The shadow side of our wealth are the struggles of the poor; the millions who labour in the two-thirds world to bring us cheap consumer goods; the hunger of the masses in so many places on earth, and the devastating realities of climate change.

To be authentic and life-giving, blessedness must extend to the least of these. If we fail to hear the cries of the poor, we may in our affluence fail to hear God's aim for our lives.

Neglecting the essential interdependence of life will eventually lead to the destruction of everything that the wealthy and powerful have prized for them and for their children. For us and for our children. If our planet is to flourish, we must turn from independence to interdependence.

Relationship with the Sacred is intended to nurture and inspire creativity and action, rather than passive acceptance of the status quo. Somewhere I read that "*God needs partners not puppets in healing the world*". The blessed interdependence that is experienced in relationship and openness of the divine will inspire grace toward our fellow creatures and our planet as a response to the grace that we have received.

Trust and hope in God, Jeremiah counsels us. Only trust will deliver us.

So we have some choices.

Will we be wayward, trusting the finite gods of each moment, or will we see God – the sacred, the divine presence - in all things, and all things in God?

This is both a matter of choice and a matter of practice – we awaken ourselves to a trusting relationship with God, with the sacred, through constancy in prayer and meditation, and a commitment to live with gratitude and with the affirmation of the interdependence of all people, all creatures, the planet; of all of life.

Gratitude connects us to the wellsprings of life and expands our awareness and commitments to include realities much larger than ourselves – our community, our congregation, our country and our planet; the non-human world, and the ever-present life-transforming processes of God.

So - blessed be interdependence.

Blessed be relationship.

Blessed Be God in all things and all things in God.