

Facing Fear - keeping faith

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 March 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 2C

Psalm 27; Luke 13: 32-35;

Contemporary Reading: *Colours of Lent* by Gillian Hunt

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpPAN-eM-tQ>

Three weeks ago, I began my sermon with the words "*forgiveness is not denial, enemies are real.*"

Today those words, are again in my mind as I contemplate the devastating violence against praying Muslim people in the terrorist attack on Mosques in Christchurch, an attack perpetrated by a white supremacist.

Evil is real. Whatever forgiveness means, it does not deny that. It does not mean that anything about that was okay, or that we don't have to examine what is required in the face of such violence.

The words of Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr have also echoed through my mind in the last 48 hours:

*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that."*

Last night, Clare and I attended Peter and Michael's utterly fabulous wedding reception on the top floor of the MCA building at Circular Quay. It was a wonderful, amazing celebration full of love and joy. There were quite a number of New Zealanders present among the guests and kind words of sympathy and compassion were expressed by some of the speakers and by many people who spoke to us and were horrified at the attacks. On the largest sail of the Opera House, a silver fern was projected. It was one of the many times tears have welled up in my eyes since Friday afternoon.

During the ride home, our Muslim (I could tell that because his name was Mohammed) our Muslim Uber driver took a phone call. We could hear both sides of the conversation, but as it was in Arabic, understood almost nothing. But we heard the words Fiji and New Zealand. After the call, he told us that a friend who he had known for 25 years in Fiji was one of the people who had been shot in the terrorist attack on the mosque. His friend was an imam, and he had gone to Christchurch from Sydney, where he had just recently moved, to lead the Friday prayers at the mosque - and to stay to visit family. The phone call had been to tell our driver that his friend had died in hospital.

We told him how sorry we were, and of our connections with Christchurch – as the city where Clare had grown up and the place that both of us had worked as ministers. We spoke together about our concern about the media and political rhetoric that gives permission for hate. (I didn't say this to the driver, because at that moment what mattered was his grief and loss, but my former congregation of St Ninian's was in Riccarton the location of the first mosque that was attacked. While I was the minister there I had joined with others to found a group called "The Interfaith Forum for Peace and Justice." We supported and encouraged the mosque's first ever open day, as the Muslim community in Christchurch sought to develop good relationships with non-Muslims in the city - to increase understanding and reduce fear and mistrust about their faith).

During the conversation, the Uber driver said to us: "*we are all brothers and sisters.*" I thought that was incredible grace in the moment! When we arrived home and he dropped us off, we said we would pray for him and for his friends personally affected by the attack, wished him good night and God bless. Those of you who use the Uber app will know that it lets you leave a message to compliment or say that you have left something in their car after the ride. So, last night, I wrote a message that reiterated our prayers and wrote "salaam aleikum" - peace be upon you.

People rightly condemn politicians' cheap offering of "thoughts and prayers" in the face of gun violence and terrorism. And prayers are cheap and meaningless unless we are changed by them, unless we take the love that we have expressed verbally and channel it into action. For right wing politicians, such words are totally meaningless unless they repent of using migrant and refugee people, especially Muslim people, as pawns for political gain.

The perpetrator of the attacks quoted Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel in his manifesto. His interpretation was a terrible perversion of Jesus' message. As Christians, we have a particular responsibility now to amplify the love of Jesus in the face of hate and violence.

I want to share some thoughts written in a Twitter thread by Amanda Tattersall, the founder of the Sydney Alliance. I still have stitches in my hand from surgery and typing is not that easy so I'm indebted to Amanda for her writing.

She asked the question: How do we respond to the calculated shooting of praying Muslims?

The perpetrators sought to amplify hate. Amanda asks her readers to think about how we might amplify love. (And on Twitter, it was Hashtag Amplify Love.)

She said: "*What about at work on Monday leading an #AmplifyLove conversation with colleagues, in a group, where you take time to imagine what pain you would feel if it was people like you (your sporting group, your church) that had been targeted by a violent terrorist gunman?*

She says: "*then an #AmplifyLove conversation might ask - but why weren't you targeted? Why were Muslims targeted? Why? Because it looks like we might have a white supremacy problem. And (this is the kicker) what are white people going to do to take responsibility for the terrorists in our midst.*

“What if your kids’ school had an #AmplifyLove Assembly. They could talk about how our differences are our strength, lift up and love those differences. As a parent you could help make this happen, (I say, as a grandparent you could make this happen) go in and ask your Principal. You can support it.

“What if you did the same thing in your community organisation, had the same conversation with your mates at the pub, with your partner, with your kids? What if we all intentionally #AmplifyLove? Lots.

She says: “We can’t undo what was done. But we can take responsibility for how connected we are. No one else can do this for us. We are the ones who can call out racism when we hear it. We can build stronger bonds by getting to know each other better. That’s how we #AmplifyLove

“We can take responsibility for those who stand above us - our leaders. In the workplace, in politics, people either #AmplifyLove - or amplify hate or indifference. If we have “leaders” who preach hate, we have a duty to find new ones. Because that is how we #AmplifyLove”

She concluded her thread with a challenge to Twitter readers (who are often the epitome of the keyboard warrior).

She said (to them, and to me, probably): *“Don’t just read this and like it. That’s not amplifying love. It’s not enough. Amplification is about taking this to the conversations that we have every day. #AmplifyLove is offline, in real time. It’s not a hashtag it’s a way of living.”*

I want to conclude just with some very, very brief reflections on the biblical readings that we heard for today, from Psalm 27 and from Luke 13, about the prophetic activity of Jesus - and the cost. Psalm 27 illustrates the holding together of faith and fear, doubt and trust. In order to #AmplifyLove, I think we are called to form communities where people are allowed and taught to talk honestly. In response to culture's deep and pronounced needs for connectivity and authenticity, we are called to offer safe space, even to people whose lives, views of the world, religion or clothing style are not the same as our own.

Psalm 27 is a breathtaking affirmation of trust in God, even in the face of dangerous enemies. It does not however, disparage our doubts and our fears. It does not gloss over real violence; it does not minimise pain, it does not minimise injustice.

It proclaims in the midst of all that, the power of trust, and the benefits of doubt, in bringing out the best in others and ourselves. Trust in the Sacred working for justice, peace and love enables us to do more than we thought we could possibly do. It goes with us alongside our doubts and our fears.

For Jesus, God's passionate dream, God's compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God's human children closer and closer in God's embrace and love. That mission and that commitment is at the centre of Jesus' work. Like a mother hen. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome all God's children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of creation.

May we join Jesus in the days and weeks ahead in sharing the good news of a God who seeks not violence and revenge but who seeks to gather us together, under her wings, in love.