

The unthinkable, and a Christian response

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 2 June, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Thea Ormerod

Easter 7C, World Environment Day

Ephesians 1: 17-23; John 17: 20-26; Contemporary Reading: “*What I Have Learned So Far*” by Mary Oliver – from *New And Selected Poems Vol 2*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNG_W9X8h8A

Today, of course, or around this time, is World Environment Day.

I don't know about you, but I'm gradually recovering from the election result. My reaction has been evolving from shock to mourning to anger and now, wrestling with the unexpectedly dismal reality. Of course, we have been here before, most of us. It's more of the same, but it's also not.

In the past we have been more easily able to rest in the knowledge that social change takes time and to trust, as Martin Luther King once said, that “*the arc of history bends towards justice*”. In respect to climate justice at this stage in history, we simply don't have time. The IPCC Special Report, last year, said that *humanity has just eleven more years to about halve our emissions, if we want to stay under the guardrail of 1.5 Degrees C, the level that scientists now say we should not cross.*

I feel this climate angst deeply, and increasingly so from the mid-1990's. My faith in Jesus is what probably most helps to make it bearable. When I feel shaken to the core, I can usually connect with my trust in Jesus' promise, “*And remember that I am always with you until the end of time.*” (Matthew 28: 20)

My faith draws me back to the fact, as it says in the reading from St Paul to the Ephesians, that Christ is “*far above every principality, ruling force, power or sovereignty, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under his/her feet, and made him/her above all things...*” There is no power greater than God, so the Universe is ultimately ruled by a Creator God who is unerringly just, compassionate and life-giving.

More than that. God loves us and is one with us, as John says in today's Gospel. God is not just a distant fair-minded, kind ruler. But s/he dwells intimately within us. We can at least sometimes rest, when we remember to, in the beautiful reality that we are ultimately safe – for eternity.

At some level I know this as a constant thing, but day-to-day I can easily lose that assurance and I need to come back to it consciously and in prayer. When I take the time, I come back to it, often falteringly.

But I've been asked to talk about my story.

First, the overall sketch. I'm a Catholic Christian, married to a Theologian. We had four kids and now have eight grandchildren. I'm a retired social worker, counsellor-trained and long-time activist. For the last eleven years I've been involved in ARRCC, the multi-faith Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. There were some traumatic experiences along the way, but that is for another day.

How did I become so keenly aware of climate change when so many are not awake to it? I guess I've always had a big picture view of the world, so I came across the science of climate change in the early 1980's. Having a vivid visual imagination, I found it very disturbing even then, and basically, just hoped that it wasn't true.

The way I've responded to that awareness along the way is inseparable from my faith journey. My childhood faith was inspired by the Gospel stories about Jesus and about the saints. I loved Jesus like an invisible friend. The spiritual dimension of life was a different, beautiful world, where Love was the guiding principle. It still is. With that, came a love of the bush as God's work of art, and an inclination to feel for the suffering of others. The nuns would ask us to give our pocket-money during Lent to the hungry people of the world. My heart has always gone out to those most in need ever since, especially people in countries of the global South. It still does.

At Uni I became sensitised to social justice issues through conversations with Catholic students on campus. I met my husband Neil at that time, who has since been my wise and devoted companion and is similarly committed to creating a better world.

While bringing up a young family, I became involved in a local parish peace group, and then faith-based organisations like Jubilee 2000 and Micah Challenge. All the while, I felt I was "doing my bit" for climate change by making choices like using public transport, minimising air travel and installing solar hot water. I thought, hey, rich countries are going to work on preventing climate change if only to save their own skins! I was worried about the climate but was reluctant to get really involved, for fear that I would worry about the problem incessantly.

From a distance I watched the UN climate negotiations and came to realise, to my dismay, that rich countries were way too selfish to act. People in poor countries were beginning to pay the price in terms of droughts and intensified cyclones, and the injustice of it made me angry. I remember going on a Walk Against Warming in around 2006 – and there were only 200 people at the march. People in rich countries were asleep! It was about then that I shifted climate up my list of priorities and it was about then that The Climate Institute advertised for a faith campaigner to start a new multi-faith climate action organisation. That was funding looking for people, and my hand went up! Miriam Pepper got the position but she needed people to work with her.

A bunch of us liked the name, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, with its acronym "ARRCC" and its allusion to the Ark story in various scriptural traditions.

Initially ARRCC had to decide what we stood for and outreach to diverse religious groups. On environmental questions, it was surprisingly easy to get consensus among people from divergent faith traditions. We decided that our pre-eminent concern was for people bearing the brunt of climate change, those in developing countries who had done nothing to create the problem.

We started off thinking that science and a strong moral case would win over our political leaders.

Oh, what a naïve view! We have now shifted to building people power, and to do this well, we've gone for training in community organising skills.

In terms of messaging, we have realised that our independence from institutional structures allows us to provide an uncompromising ethical voice in the public debate, one which is aligned with the science. We don't aim to make our message "politically acceptable", just the truth. We do aim to be strategic, in collaboration with the broader climate movement.

Grandchildren coming along has turbo-charged my passion for climate action. I've become quite terrified, really, that the unthinkable will happen. So I've phased myself out of paid work. I've been blessed to be financially able to dedicate myself to taking action, because I find it's a way of soothing my angst.

Some of you know ARRCC for our civil disobedience work. That was a journey in its own right.

Personally, until five years ago, I thought civil disobedience was unnecessary in democratic Australia – there were plenty of other ways to drive change. The turning point for me was a protest I attended, organised by the AYCC – the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. The young people had done their research on the potential impact a mining company would have on the climate and the Great Barrier Reef. They'd created a persuasive pamphlet to hand to shareholders as they walked into the building where the AGM was being held. I stood with the twenty or so very polite young people with their colourful props and placards. They were volunteers, ready to hand their materials to whoever was walking in to the AGM – mostly prosperous people in high heels or suits. There were also fifteen police officers preventing them from doing so.

It appeared to me that the police were being used by the State to protect the rich and powerful against the young people who were working for the common good. My eyes were opened that day to the police, and the legal system as a whole, being routinely used by Australian governments to protect vested interests, not the good of society, the climate, water, indigenous rights or any number of important values.

Along with others, I got training in nonviolence and recognised that civil resistance has been an important element in all successful fights for justice - the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Apartheid movement and numerous national independence movements. At Maules Creek I again saw the power of the State pitted against indigenous people in their battles to protect country, and against conscientious citizens standing against the climate-wrecking, ecologically destructive, profit-seeking greed of the mining industry. Standing authentically against the principalities and powers of this world, sometimes requires risking arrest.

That brings me back to today. The recent election was to be the start of a new dawn in addressing climate change in Australia. Instead, we're back to trying to get through to a blind and deaf Coalition Government. Nonetheless, we are still in a climate emergency. And there is still a moral imperative to act.

The challenge is to stay on course.

Some things have changed for the better. Not since 2007 has there been a federal election where climate has featured as a top tier issue for voters. The fact that people were conned by a campaign of fear and lies does not change the fact that the majority of Australians do care, and they do want climate action, more than ever before.

Nonetheless, most Australians don't put that concern into action in any way. With all that is at stake, this should not be us as Christians. It is true that God remains "*far above every principality, ruling force, power or sovereignty*" but this gives us reason to hope. It's not an excuse for sitting on our hands! We pray so often for God's reign "*on earth as it is in heaven*". Let this be more than words.

People of faith should be at the forefront of taking responsible action and not be letting the secular environment movement do the heavy lifting, which is what it is today. With 60% of the population identifying with one or other of the faith traditions, the dream is to awaken at least some of them to the urgent need to act. It's all there in the teachings of our respective traditions. We need people of faith to be awake to it all, and to put it into practice.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed – and I think most people feel overwhelmed. If you don't know where to start, ARRCC offers a few options. Most people can opt to eat less meat, or reduce their flying or switch to GreenPower, all of which are quite effective. Our Living the Change campaign supports people wanting to make lifestyle changes like this. We also need people to protest, to divest, to donate and to join advocacy groups like ARRCC.

Please take a look at our website or Facebook page and there'll be something you can manage. Take one step, and then take another. Join this movement to save life as we know it. It needs all of us.