

Words that work for us

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 February 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 5C

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Contemporary Reading:
Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). From *Meditations***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3bWCa0FQIQ>

May God open our eyes to see, our ears to hear and our hearts to love.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is witnessing about the heart of the gospel and about his authority to proclaim it. From a progressive Christian point of view, the text contains assertions that we might rather not deal with. The first of these is the claim that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and the second is the insistence on the physical nature of the resurrection of Christ.

Believing these two theological abstractions (and a few more) has become the touchstone of conservative, right wing Christianity. The problem is that they have been ripped from their historical and cultural context. Modern 'witnesses' cite these claims and make belief in them mandatory requirements for salvation.

If you google 'Christian witness' you get screeds on how to convince unsuspecting non-believers that they too must believe these things, or they will go to hell.

We've all encountered this type of witnessing and I think it has contributed to our reluctance to share the place of faith in our lives. We don't want to be "those kind of Christians."

We are aware that people may have been hurt by "Christian witness" – and by the church itself - so we swing in the opposite direction – apologising for our participation in church, or avoiding mention of it.

Paul's claims that Christ died for our sins, that he was physically resurrected, had a particular context. They are grounded in Paul's culture and his world-view. They are ethical claims, not simply doctrinal claims – about what we do as much as about what we believe.

Operating out of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition from which he came, Paul understands that the end of this age will come about through a radical transformation that will include our resurrection – resurrection of all the people, and that Christ is a sign. Paul believed that what happened to Jesus would happen to all the faithful. In chapter 6, verse 14, he claims: "*And God raised Jesus and will also raise us by God's power.*"

The point here, for Paul, is not believing these claims. The point is that the gospel Paul proclaims is a call to ethical action, to a new way of living in the present age that is rooted in a hope for the age to come.

For Paul, the claim that “*Christ died for our sins*” was intended to express something of great significance about Jesus in order to make a difference in the lives of people and their communities.

In Paul’s letter, the theological message is no abstraction. It has to be understood in the context of the conflict and division that he has heard is going on in Corinth. Some members of the Corinthian church are exploiting the gifts of the Spirit to enhance their status within the congregation, and they are conforming to the wisdom of culture rather than faith. They are not living in the love of God and neighbour that Jesus exemplified, and that Paul will go on to amplify in the beautiful passage about love that we know so well in chapter 13 of the letter.

The “sins” of these Corinthians are symptoms of conventional worldly wisdom, with its system of social rewards and punishments, of hierarchy and exclusion.

It is a travesty of the gospel of grace, which asserts that none of us have done anything to deserve the great, unconditional love of the Sacred for the world, to suggest that believing particular doctrines is the way to salvation or redemption or abundant life. It is precisely this conventional scheme of rewards and punishments, insiders and outsiders, from which we are liberated by the love of God revealed in the life and death of Jesus.

We do not operate in an apocalyptic world view, expecting the end of the world. But like Paul, we are confronted with the world as it is, damaged and fragmented by human arrogance, by violence, by greed; and the world as we hope it may become, one in which all its inhabitants can share the gift of life in love for one another. We too live in a tension between conventional wisdom and the wisdom of Divine Presence.

Paul tells the people at Corinth that Christ’s death and resurrection reveal the way to live in this tension – between the world as it is and the world as we hope it may be. And as we believe that God hopes it may be.

If we are obsessed about whatever it was that happened at the end of Jesus’s life, we will miss the point that Paul is calling us to attend to: he is saying, if we “hold firmly” to the gospel message of unconditional love, of recognising the image of God in everyone, this is the way we are “being saved.” This is salvation, this living in love and the recognition of the sacred in all of life!

Receiving the gospel is discovering in the life and teaching of Jesus, a new centre of existence, a new power for living, and a new perspective from which to see everything.

That’s what matters. That’s what we are called to share with the world around us, just as Jesus called Peter and his friends in the gospel story that we heard.

So back to thinking about sharing our faith. You might remember that at the end of 2017 we had a mission planning session which was organised around an ecumenical schema called the five marks of mission. The five marks are ‘tell, teach, tend, transform and treasure.’

Tell, teach, tend, transform and treasure.

I think that the idea of 'tell' is particularly challenging for progressive Christians. We don't want to be 'God botherers' so we say nothing.

We struggle to find words that will not appear proselytising; appear to be disrespectful of the faith and spirituality of other people. And we seek to avoid words that would play into the idea that Christians judge people who do not belong to the Christian church.

In the schema, the 'tell' aspect of the five marks is to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom – and we changed it to Kin-dom. The team working on the Mission Plan (which will be brought to the congregation at the Annual Meeting in mid-March) expands this in Pitt Street language (this is language which came from the congregation or consultation and from the small group working on the plan).

We said:

- *"Our faith calls us to deep inner reflection, soul-searching and questioning; and our faith calls us to radical action in the world, wherever there is a need for change and compassion.*
- *We express the timeless values of our faith using progressive theological insights and accessible, inclusive language.*
- *We look for and support signs of the coming of the kin-dom of God – of the common-wealth of God - in the city of Sydney."*

The framework that we've set up inside the mission plan develops each of the marks through three steps:

1. What is the new thing that we will do?
2. What is the next step we will take forward with the new thing?
3. (the crunch one) - What resources: human, property, financial are needed?

Under "tell" one of the new thing for Pitt Street is: "To build capacity for sharing the insights of Progressive Christianity in order to make the Good News accessible and relevant for spirit-seekers in our secular context."

And the next step is "*Resourcing the congregation to reframe mission and evangelism as positive things for progressive Christians: developing our ability to speak about the practice of our faith – and the community of our faith - to people outside of Pitt Street.*"

For me, that means thinking about faith and spirituality and community as blessings in our lives which we can share with the world around us. Rather than being embarrassed or silent, we might regard ourselves as having received a gift which it would be selfish not to share. Rather than thinking of mission and evangelism as cringe worthy, we might think of them as invitational.

Paul invited his hearers to consider the ways in which they were a continuation of the gospel story. And we can do the same to consider the ways in which the Sacred has been made known to us and transformed our living.

I wonder if telling each other these stories might not form the foundation of our sharing this community and the radical hospitality of God, with the world around us.

How has Jesus, or the Spirit, or Divine Presence appeared to you?

In what way has that appearance transformed you?

In what way has it shaped the way you live?

Paul's expressed the centrality of Jesus for Christians in speaking of his life and his death and his resurrection. What might we say in our context?

I would venture that a key understanding is that Christ is the revelation to us that God, is Sacred, is incarnate, embodied, in all of creation.

We stand in a particular historical lineage, a tradition rooted in Jesus of Nazareth. It is in this place, as interpreted by us through the mediation of our Christian forebears, that we have come to realise something about God. Something about sacred.

From this understanding, we claim that God is present, embodied, incarnate in the whole of things. God is not separate from creation; and within creation God is not to be identified with some particular place, or some particular people, or some special way of life.

We must not presume that we can speak with certainty of the will of God (for it is horribly clear how much evil human beings have done and continue to do when this view is held). However, we do not have to give up the claim to speak with confidence from and for our Christian tradition.

The definitive Christological claim of progressive Christianity is the audacious claim of the incarnation carried to its consistent conclusion, i.e., that the divine is truly and fully with us and the whole of creation.

Progressive Christians are this-worldly Christians because in the life and teaching of Jesus, we have seen that God is a this-worldly God. And we are inclusive Christians because the God incarnate in Jesus Christ is an inclusive God.

There is not sufficient time to address the gospel story in this reflection, and yet it was in my mind as I curated the liturgy for this morning. The call on our lives and our community is as real as it was for Peter and the many friends, female and male, of Jesus.

There is an epiphany in the gospel story. Epiphany means to behold the world or our life with new eyes. It is when something becomes clear to us in a way we have never seen or noticed before. A pathway in the mind or spirit opens and suddenly we see things in a new light. An epiphany is a revelation and a challenge to how we live our lives.

The epiphany in the Luke text is not the great catch of fish, but rather Jesus' catch of Peter and the implications of that catch for whomever else Jesus is calling into the beloved community.

From the voices of Paul and Jesus and our Christian forebears and foremothers like Hildegard of Bingen, who deeply understood the nature of incarnation and creation, we can ask ourselves some profound questions:

- *Where do I need to grow?*
- *What deep waters call to me?*
- *Where do I need to take a risk in order to claim God's adventure in my life?*

We are also invited to ask ourselves, as the congregation of Pitt Street Uniting Church, *“what new, and apparently impossible, adventure does God call us toward?”*

Like the disciples, we may feel inadequate and unprepared, but God’s speaks through our experiences of limitation, inviting us to become more than we can ever imagine.

As persons and as community, we can respond to the call to be agents of reconciliation, to be partners - the partners that God needs to heal the world.

And we can find the words to ‘tell’

that love and healing working in our lives.

And we can find the words to tell our hope for the world,

that it will be in accordance with the Divine will:

a place for love, a place for justice,

a place for reconciliation and a place for peace.