

# Jesus is not your superhero

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 April, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 5C

Psalm 126; John 12:1-8; Contemporary Reading: “*Tree of Life*” by Nicola Slee

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMq9jqyFkkk>

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As Lent draws toward Easter, the church tells of Jesus turning his face toward Jerusalem, and calls to the people to follow, to watch his encounter with violence, with the violence of the state and religious power, and so to depend on him to save us all.

The world loves a hero, one who single-handedly saves the day. Even better a superhero, one with magical powers who overcomes the forces of evil. Such stories make good movies – whether cartoons or thrillers, or bio pics about inspiring people who took on the powers that be to effect social change. I love that genre – Erin Brockovich, Karen Silkwood, Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr in Selma, Harvey Milk in Milk.

It's also true of hero genre in movies that glamorise Jesus' crucifixion and emphasise the depravity of humanity such as Mel Gibson's Passion of the Christ.

We love a super-hero, but as American writer Rebecca Solnit, pointed out in her essay this week “*When the Hero is the Problem*,” heroes are usually effective when they are part of a movement. And public focus, she says, on individual heroes can mask the necessity of movements in the work of social transformation.

Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg is a remarkably articulate and inspiring leader, who has catalysed global climate action. However, focusing just on her passionate communication on behalf of her generation, and the planet itself, may obscure the involvement of millions of other young people in the climate movement. She is significant because she has evoked a response among the world's media which is finally paying attention to the momentum of climate action that has involved millions of humans, many of them young, raising their voices and doing whatever they could to draw attention to, and to mitigate, the crisis that is climate.

Greta Thunberg has been spoken of as a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. If she wins, I have no doubt that she will honour the movement, just as other Nobel Peace Prize winners have credited the movements of which they are a part in their acceptance speeches.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern response to the white supremacist terror attack in Christchurch has also been considered by some to be worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize. I admire her enormously and I do believe that she models the compassion and inclusion that could well be emulated by bellicose politicians around the world.

But I know that she does not want the story of her political leadership to obscure the actions of other heroes, and the national commitment to face down the racism and anti-Muslim bigotry of white supremacists.

I also want us to remember Daoud Nabi, a 71-year-old retired engineer who migrated from Afghanistan to New Zealand after the Soviet invasion, who extended the hand of friendship to the gun-toting killer as he entered the mosque, greeting him with the words 'hello brother,' before he was gunned down.

Daoud's sons Yama and Omar said their father made it a habit of going to the airport to greet refugees and help them begin their new lives in Christchurch.

*"He's helped everyone who's a refugee," one of the sons said. "Whether you're from Palestine, Iraq, Syria — he's been the first person to hold out his hand."*

I want to remember Hosne Ahmed, 44, who was in the women's area of the Al Noor mosque when the attack started.

After helping women and children to safety, she was killed as she ran back into the mosque in search for her husband, Farid Uddin Ahmed, who is confined to a wheelchair. Farid and the couple's fourteen year-old daughter survived the massacre.

I want to remember the school children who gathered in Hagley Park in support of the Muslim community and gathered in grief at the deaths of two students from Cashmere High school.

When we remember, let us tell the stories of these children, Maori, pakeha, Pasifika and other migrants, who drew on the spirituality of Maori culture in performing haka and singing waiata.

When we remember the massacre, we should tell the stories of hundreds of thousands of non-Muslim people in Christchurch, in Sydney and around the world who attended mosques the Friday after the attacks to offer solidarity, friendship and protection.

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When we only look to a single hero, we valorise that person and there is a risk that we may not take the small actions that we might take to make a difference because we are choosing to depend on the hero to save us.

Rebecca Solnit's article examined the dependence of the American left on the work of special prosecutor Robert Mueller who reported on the actions of the Trump campaign in regard to collusion with Russia. But, she wrote, as that report has been produced and delivered but not made public: *"counting on Mueller to be the St. George who slew our dirtbag dragon was a way of writing off our own obligation and capacity."*

When legal expert and writer Dahlia Lithwick, who was planning a book on women lawyers who successfully took on the Trump administration in numerous high-profile civil rights cases, it was suggested by some that she instead write a book on Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

Solnit wrote about that: *“To consider only Ginsburg is to suggest that one transcendently exceptional individual at the apex of power is the one who matters. To look at these other lawyers is to suggest that power is dispersed and decisions in various courts across the land matter and so do the lawyers who win them and the people who support them.”*

When we see a single hero capable of Doing Something, the rest of us are then free to grumble about abuse of power, economic inequality, inaction on climate change, stigmatisation of Muslims, and otherwise to go on about our lives.

Solnit criticised rugged individualism and hero culture in the American context, but it is also part of the story of white colonisation and settlement in Australia.

So why am I talking about heroes before talking about Jesus and this amazing story that we have read - about Jesus' dear friend Mary of Bethany who loved so wastefully, anointing his feet with oil during the meal he was sharing with his friends before he faced toward Jerusalem?

It is a profoundly significant story in Christian tradition, one of only a few that is included in all four gospels.

In Mark and Matthew an anonymous woman comes into the house with a jar of expensive ointment. She pours the oil over Jesus' head, perhaps as a prophetic sign that he is the messiah, the anointed one. In Luke the anonymous woman is a “sinner” who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them dry with her hair, anoints and kisses them.

In John's version, it takes place in the context of a party to celebrate that Lazarus has been brought back to life by Jesus. The woman with the ointment is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus. She anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair.

In the Matthew and Mark versions, Jesus tells the disapproving disciples: *“she has done something beautiful for me. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”* A few days later, in an upper room, as he shares bread and wine, he tells his friends, *“do this in memory of me.”*

In memory of me. And in memory of her.

Jesus didn't act alone. He called followers who became friends. He loved - and received loved. I am convinced that in order to turn his face toward Jerusalem, he drew on the body memory of a woman expressing love in a powerfully embodied way.

As we remember her, we recall that Jesus' full humanity means that the violence that was done to his body was real, just as real as a gun massacre is in our time. He was not some cypher standing in for human sin. He was a human one, flesh and blood like us, feeling pain, knowing fear, in need of love and touch like us.

As he entered Jerusalem, Jesus was needing encouragement and love to face the powers and to live out the way of non-violent resistance. Mary's extravagant love made it possible for him to show extravagant love in what follows. As he washed the feet of his disciples, surely he must have been remembering her as he did that; as he did that even for Judas who would betray him. That love went with him as he handed himself over to be arrested, as he carried his own cross, and as he died on that cross.

Mary of Bethany loved Jesus into that future as God's love for the whole world.

This is mutuality. Jesus needed Mary's love as much as she needed to show Jesus how much she loved him. For this to make a difference in our lives we need to recognise that this is exactly how love works. How relationships work.

We don't really need heroes. We need to tell one another: "*yes, you can do this;*" loving one another into our future as Jesus was loved by Mary.

So, let it be told in memory of her. And then let us face our needs, the needs of our family and friends, and the needs of the world that are always with us. Let us face them together.

In saying that we would always have the poor with us, Jesus was not condemning a class of people to permanent poverty, he was inviting his followers to the love and justice that he exemplified. He was inviting them to see his face in the face of the poor, long after the powers that maintain poverty and all injustice, had killed him.

The words '*the poor you always have with you*' have been abused to justify apathy in the face of entrenched poverty. From the punitive actions towards poor people in Australia, especially single parents and those attempting to survive on Newstart, it seems that these words occupy the collective consciousness of governments.

Jesus said, "*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me*". We can't separate Jesus from the poor. Among poor people, is where we find Jesus now.

Jesus' actions and words in his life consistently challenged the oppressive political system of his day. Although the Empire promised peace and prosperity, it did so through systems that polarized the distribution of wealth, enriching the elite and leaving the majority impoverished. Such a system sounds horribly familiar to the global systems, and local systems, that we live within.

Jesus resisted these systems so much that he was executed as an enemy of the Roman Empire. To focus on Jesus is to work toward the reign of God, to challenge systems of oppression, and to side with the vulnerable. I would claim that it has nothing to do with a sacrificial death to pay the price of human sin.

The church's emphasis on human sinfulness over human moral capacity to join the Sacred in the transformation of the world, has led to us making Jesus a super-hero.

It has made people dependent on the church as the channel of forgiveness for unworthiness, and led to the abnegation of our responsibilities to love one another, to love the world into a better future.

So let us tell the stories of ordinary people who are the hands, minds and hearts of Divine Presence in our community and our world.

And let us go toward Jerusalem with Jesus, not as the unworthy, but as the beloved. The ones whom Jesus now entrusts to continue God's love for all people and God's good creation.