

Peace be with you

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 April, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Will Ray and Ruth Lambert

Easter 2C

Acts 5:25-32; John 20: 19-31

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9sPX8iZfRY>

WILL

Good Morning Pitt Street. It's good to see you. I'm glad you made it in through the brisk morning air. I know this morning I woke up and rolled out of bed and realized that I probably should have turned the heater on last night. I'm glad that you're here today. Ruth and I are sharing the lectern. So for my half, I'll be sharing just a short story with you and hopefully share a word of encouragement.

Did you ever climb trees as a kid?

I know I did. I loved it because there's sort of a thrill of the challenge of trying to get to the top of a tree. There's a bit of fear of falling down and an injury. And that success that you feel once you've conquered a tree, only to look up and see how many more there are to go conquer and try to fix.

Truman and I, my best friend growing up, wanted to climb every single tree in our neighbourhood, which was no small feat. We lived near a forest, so it was going to keep us busy for a long time. We would get up in the mornings on the weekends, or go out after school, find a new tree or an old tree that we still hadn't conquered yet and go off and try to figure it out. Over the years as we got taller, we'd be able to do new things or we'd get a bit smarter and realize that we could actually work as a team to help each other up these trees.

And we'd give them names, over time, on the things that made them unique or made them uniquely challenging. So we had the sharp tree, which had really tough bark that would scratch up our arms and legs every time we tried to climb it. Thankfully once we did it we were finished with that tree.

There was another one called the crown tree - and we called it this because there was a point in the tree where all the branches would splay out and it created a nice little place to sit for one person, which we called the crown; and we would sometimes bring food up there to eat after school. It wasn't a particularly difficult tree, but it was one that we came back to a lot, because it was just a lot of fun to sit in.

One day, Truman and I had taken our box - afternoon lunches - up into the crown tree and we were sitting and eating.

Truman's can of grape crush - the tab on top of it had broken off somehow so he was no longer able to open it to get that delicious nectar inside.

So he came up with a brilliant plan - which he thought was brilliant - which was that he would take a little knob, a notch on the tree, take the can, slam it into the knob - which would puncture a hole in the can and then of course this grape crush would come out and he would hold it up like this and drink it. It would look really cool.

So he climbed around the Crown tree a little bit, found a spot, took the can, slammed it into the tree.

And that did not happen!

What did happen was that the can exploded in his hand, raining down this purple rainstorm of sugar water - on to myself and onto the sidewalk below. What made it even worse was that we lived in a residential area near a primary school, called Kennedy Elementary. And this was the time of the day when the kids were coming home. So there was a woman pushing a pram with her child underneath the tree at the same moment that Truman slams his can into the tree. So this purple rain comes down, not only on me but also sprinkles down on to her. She looks up and notices that were in the tree. Suffice to say she had a few choice words for us and we chose to remain in the tree and not come down.

I looked up to Truman after this and asked: what were you thinking? You were not ready to do that. And in a bizarre moment of clarity Truman looks down at me and says: *William you'll miss out on a whole lot of life waiting to be ready.*

I thought: wait a second! Is the guy who just took a can of soda and slammed it in a tree - giving me life advice? I was not ready for that.

Like, when I go to church, I'm there, I'm prepared, bring in some knowledge. But when I'm sitting in a tree I'm not really ready for something like that.

And it's a phrase that has stuck with me over the years.

There are so many moments in my life where I've been afraid because I didn't feel like I was ready for that challenge or ready for this opportunity. I certainly was never ready to move here I certainly wasn't ready to try out some of the new roles in my work. I certainly wasn't ready to try out things in relationships when it's another person that you can't control. And it's a really scary thing for starting a business. There are so many moments in our lives where the thing we want to do is something we cannot be prepared for.

I tell you the story for two reasons: one because I like making fun of Truman when I get the chance; and two, because I wonder in the stories this week if the Apostles felt ready.

I mean, think about it! The person who came before you is doing miracles - turning water into wine, raising the dead, raising himself from the dead, conquering the grave. And now he says: OK your turn.

That's quite a big act to follow! Quite big shoes to fill.

So how is it that they would move forward with it anyways and yet gave us something that was incredible and unique in the Acts - and in all the letters and spreading the early church. All of this incredible work that they did, even though they probably, I would think, didn't feel ready.

So if I could offer you a word of encouragement this week, it'd be that, in those moments of hesitation and nervousness, that you realize the importance of what you're trying to achieve for yourself. And if God put you up to it then God is going to help you through it.

That those moments when we're not ready for something and our confidence has gaps that our faith fills in those pieces - and God helps lift us to a place that we never thought we could get to.

So I hope that over the coming weeks, when you're presented with opportunities and challenges to do things that you just feel like you're not ready for, I do hope that you take the opportunity to help God show up in your life because you can't do it alone that's part of why Jesus is here and that's OK because Jesus is here to help you get there.

Thank you

RUTH

Some 8 weeks ago, before we had arrived on the soil of Iran, we were already being welcomed in Dubai airport. 14 women from the Heartcentre meditation centre in Vincentia on our south coast were waiting to board the plane to Shiraz. We had put on our hijab scarves, long tunics to cover our bodies and as we waited a woman similarly garbed approached me and asked: where were we all going. *To Shiraz in Iran to pray and get to know the people of Iran.* I said *we come in peace and friendship from Australia.* She began to weep and hugged me and said how pleased they were that we were coming. We are kind people she said and you are all welcome - looking at the group. This sort of welcome was given to us by men and women over and over again, wherever we travelled over our 5 weeks in Iran and Turkey.

I quote *"the sons of Adam are limbs of each other, having been created of one essence. When calamity of time affects one limb the other limbs cannot remain at rest. If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others thou art unworthy to be called by the name of a human"* written by the Persian poet/philosopher Sadi in the 12th century and on the entrance to the United Nations building in New York.

What a privilege to have these words read to us in Farsi/Persian in Shiraz when we went to honour Sadi's wisdom at his shrine the day after we arrived. For me there is something powerful about reading the words aloud of a wise teacher at their shrine that helps me feel their presence.

Our pilgrimage was to experience the beauty and sacred devotion of the Iranian people. We went to the Nasi-ol-moth mosque - a pink mosque. Like many mosques, there is the most beautiful 'bee-hive' architectural structures, cleverly made with timber and mosaics over the entrances.

The stain glass windows capture the light at different times of day and reflect pinks/blues on the columns. Christian crosses were present on the fresco paintings as the designer-kings acknowledged the Christian heritage of previous centuries- together with tiles and elaborate mosaics that give glory to God/Allah. Like Hagia Sophia in Istanbul there is evidence in Iran of Christians and Moslems worshipping in the same place in peace. The importance of this respect and peace was not lost on us - we were in Iran at the time of the Christchurch tragedy. We joined our Iranian sisters to weep and pray for peace and healing for our broken world.

We were 'girl mobbed' - young people wanting selfies with us in our scarves- boys also - rare for these school children to see western women, let alone 'grannies' or 'golden girls' as they called us. Wherever we went, through our guide we asked to pray in the women's section of the mosque and usually after some negotiation we donned chadors, slippers and prayed with the Iranian women. They were keen to pat our faces and let us know the joy they felt in us being amongst them. There are also mirrored mosques where the walls and ceilings are made of small mirror pieces to reflect light and colour - not the person/oneself so that you let go of yourself/your identity to see only God. The women asked us to pray for the women of Iran - which I continue to do!

God/Allah is so revered in the mosques - it was a privilege to pray and be with these devoted people. We were safe and respectful wherever we went and we would be reassured that the local people, men and women, are not like their government. We sang a Zikr (meaning there is no other God but God, love only love) also in our meditation each morning and evening and very often the staff in the hotel, particularly in Isfahan where our meditation space was adjacent to the kitchen would want to join in.

We spent time opening our poetry books which we had taken to Iran to read the poetry of Hafiz (a 14th century Sufi mystic) at his garden shrine in Shiraz. For example I read (page 141):

*I am happy before I have a reason
I am full of light even before the sky
Can greet the sun or the moon.
Dear companions,
We have been in love with God
For so very, very long.
What can Hafiz now do but forever dance!*

Our Iranian guide, Ali and his wife Fatima read to us in Persian, translating Hafiz's words like an oracle at his shrine. In a mystical way I did feel his presence and the blessing of his wise words.

For me it is important to honour the wisdom of the wise ones that have gone before us. Isfahan brought more delights of beautiful mosques with sacred inscriptions and clever architectural structures to transport sound in the vast dome constructions and learning about painting miniatures that included Hafiz.

Both in Iran and Turkey, we were welcomed into the homes of local people. In Shiraz our guide organized for us to share a meal with his friends - the wife is becoming a chef and her husband is a professor in horticulture in the local university. These young people were so generous with their hospitality as was the Mevlani (Rumi) devotee, Zumrut whom I had met 5 years ago when we went to Turkey - Konya to visit the shrine of Rumi.

This year, in Konya we again read the wisdom of Rumi (page 211 Light upon Light):

*Define and narrow me, you starve yourself of yourself.
Nail me down in a box of cold words, that box is your coffin. I do not know who I am.
I am in astounded lucid confusion.
I am not a Christian, I am not a Jew, I am not a Zoroastrian,
And I am not even a Muslim.
I do not belong to the land, or any known or unknown sea.
Nature cannot own or claim me, nor can heaven:
Nor can India, China, Bulgaria.
My birthplace is placelessness,
My sign to have and give no sign.
You say you see my mouth, ears, eyes, nose- they are not mine. I am that cat, this stone, no
one.
I have thrown duality away like an old dishrag.
I see and know all times and worlds
As one, one, only one
So what do I have to do to get you to admit who is speaking?
Admit it and change everything!
This is your own voice echoing off the walls of God.*

We honoured Rumi's gift of dervish dancing by attending the dervish concert twice - so sacred - the devotion of the dancers is inspiring with the music, played on ancient instruments.

There are many paths to God, in Pitt Street ours is the Christian path; Jesus calls us to seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened and love will come tumbling down. I felt the love and acceptance of my Persian and Turkish brothers and sisters.

This year we went by ferry on Bosphorus to the Mevlani dervish's Zumrut home, enjoyed sacred Sufi music and home cooked Turkish food before seeing her beautiful calligraphy. We also sang to her and her kind musical friends; and as we started singing the Zikr she stood up and started gently whirling - such a sacred expression of her heart felt devotion.

We were blessed on so many levels during this sacred pilgrimage - so many stories to tell but the main one is of giving and receiving peace and being peacemakers.

Be grateful for wherever, whoever and whatever comes through the windows of your life. Jesus is offering us peace. Before you ask Jesus for what you want, first thank Jesus for what you have. If you truly want to be an instrument of love, kindness and peace, then take time each day to welcome God into your life and give thanks.

As the peace prayer of St Francis says:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace....

Peace be with you all.