

Feeding, healing, bringing life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 May, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 4C

Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30; Contemporary Reading:
“An absolutely ordinary rainbow” by Les Murray, in *The Weatherboard Cathedral*.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZVVfN_mGhM

In the weeks after Easter each year, the Bible reading lectionary presents us with what I call “sheep season” from the Gospel of John. Week after week of shepherd-related readings that don’t particularly speak to our context, or even to our understanding of Jesus. The fourth Sunday after Easter is traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday”.

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd probably reminds you of pictures you saw when you were a Sunday School kid - if you went to Sunday School - of Jesus, wearing white flowing robes, holding a little lamb while other sheep sleep peacefully at his feet.

It’s a sort of sentimentalised, sanitised scene. It has stood as a symbol of the relationship of Jesus to Christian people for centuries. But I think it fails to inspire in our urban, twenty-first century world. It doesn’t even really work for rural Australia, where farming is so often about agribusiness and people who work with sheep no longer have a close relationship with animals. In Jesus’ time, the sheep knew the voice of their particular shepherd who would call them out of the common enclosure where they spent the night with the sheep that belonged to other shepherds.

In sheep season, the progressive preacher sighs and looks to the other readings assigned for the day. But the story of Peter raising Tabitha, or Dorcas, as she was called in Greek, from the dead also presents us with problems. This story is even more untamed and anachronous.

Where on earth can these stories touch our life stories?

Our other resource for reflection this morning is Les Murray’s poem “*An absolutely ordinary rainbow*.” As a transplanted New Zealander, I knew little of Les Murray’s poetry. When I heard of his death ten days or so ago, on ABC morning radio, the report seemed to suggest he was a poet of the bush, concerned with the real rural Australia. But at our Worship Team meeting, Patricia Curthoys drew our attention to “*An absolutely ordinary rainbow*” – that was read so beautifully this morning.

It needs some explanation to make sense of the references to Sydney’s CBD 50 years ago: Repins, apparently a coffee shop near Martin Place, Lorenzini’s, a well-known wine bar, Tattersalls and the Greek Club, gathering places for businessmen.

But now, just as then, a man crying uncontrollably in Martin Place, would be disturbing. Then, as now, I suspect that if he was a homeless man, his tears would probably have been invisible, ignored.

But in Les Murray's poem you get the sense that the man who weeps with dignity and with sorrow is not an outsider. He is 'one of us'; one of us who is tearing open the fabric of functional existence, of business and commerce, of emotionally constrained masculinity, to expose humanity and fragility, to insist on the place of raw emotion in a city that, so often, dictates separation and distance.

And as there is no explanation for his weeping, there is no explanation for its ceasing. *"Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street."*

Murray's enigmatic conclusion invites us to consider beliefs and believers among whom the weeping man stands out. He is not a believer... he refuses to believe that the private pain of human existence cannot be expressed in public life. He denies the belief that we are cogs in a machine of superficial social and business interactions, barely skimming the surface of meaning with little reflection. He weeps - for himself, for the city which despite its physical beauty too often presses its citizens into unconnected isolation. Surely he would weep now for Australia...for Martin Place where homeless folk lie close to the ground while business, law and government carries on above and around them.

Murray invites his hearers to ask ourselves, *"What do we hold as sacred? What is beyond the material, capitalist present?"* Christian faith asks us: *"beyond what we say we believe, what do our lives proclaim about our beliefs?"*

Broede Carrmody, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald this week, about Murray's poetry, said, *"Good poetry takes you beyond yourself. Not just to a club where everyone thinks the same as you. When you read poetry, you're made to read something that goes beyond your own belief system."*

As I read that, I thought about the Bible stories that we heard today – about how we engage in Biblical interpretation. Surely our engagement with the sacred texts would be richer if we regarded them in the same spirit that we are encouraged by Murray to regard poetry. The Bible is not there to tell us what to do or think in every situation. It is surely not sacred because it gives us some kind of license to tell some people that they are damned to hell. Its sacredness lies in the invitation to go deeper than conventional wisdom and the routines of everyday life, to think differently about ourselves, about other people, and about our planet Earth.

In the gospel story, in which Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd, he makes the connection between belief and following. Between belief and action. Belief isn't intellectual assent to doctrines about Jesus. It is about following the Way of Jesus, in faith and in community.

In the Acts story about the raising of Tabitha, Peter is living out that call that Jesus made on the lives of the disciples after Jesus' death. And he does this by doing what Jesus did. In Sara Miles' book *"Jesus Freak"* which is subtitled: *feeding, healing, raising the dead*, she dramatically enlarges the idea of following Jesus in sheep-like fashion.

She says we are to "be Jesus." That we are to "be Jesus." That we are called to do the work of feeding, healing and raising the dead.

I completely understand what she means about feeding people, ensuring that the poor do indeed have enough to eat, that we vote for political leaders who care about equality and economic justice. Sara Miles lives that out in the work of the amazing food pantry at St Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, which I've spoken about before. The whole church there is turned into a fresh food market every Friday and food is given away to the hungry and homeless, not in the basement or hall but from the sanctuary, around the communion table. Musicians play as people gather the food they need from an abundance of healthy, locally sourced produce.

And healing. Healing is not about some miraculous cure. Healing is about touching bodies and spirits and restoring to community those who have not been loved or welcomed by the community. Healing isn't able to stop suffering, but healing is the commitment to be present with another through suffering.

We sometimes talk about encountering the Holy by paying attention. I think that healing means paying attention, not just to glorious beaches and sunrises. It means paying attention to ghastly scenes: to violence, to illness that cannot be healed, to addiction, to systemic injustice, to refugees and people seeking asylum (in Australia and on Manus and Nauru).

I understand that too. But raising the dead? How can we follow Jesus, let alone "be Jesus," in raising the dead?

Maybe a clue comes in that part of the John's Gospel story where the storyteller has Jesus saying: *My sheep recognise my voice. I know them and they follow me, and I provide them with eternal life...*

While most translations do say 'eternal' life, the Jesus Seminar Scholars' Version, says 'real' life.

My sheep recognise my voice. I know them and they follow me, and I provide them with real life...

This translation challenges the traditional Christian assertion that earthly life is of less significance, but is rather a prelude to life after we die.

In contrast, the use of 'real' life paints a picture of life. Life of limitless new possibilities. The kind of life humanity has dreamed about. The dream that is in the heart of God. Not afterwards. But now. Not a life without pain. But a life that is real, like a man crying in Martin Place.

Traditional Christianity's concentration on 'eternal' life has encouraged a preoccupation with death and salvation which has worked against a sense of connectedness with the web of life.

Traditional Christianity's preoccupation with the hereafter, rather than the here and now, has obscured the presence of the sacred in life, and the connectedness of all life.

Real life is about awesome life unlimited life, unbounded life.

Yet it's also always recognising that life is set within the reality of death.

In the words of contemplative writer John O'Donohue: "*in the killing fields of political, ethnic and religious wars, through plagues and pandemics, and even [as it] takes up residence in schoolyards, the promise of present and future eternal life seems fragile.*"

I wonder - could the work of "raising from the dead" be a commitment to this life, to those who experience this life as a waking death?

The story of Peter raising Tabitha, rather than being a crazy story that we find it hard to relate to - that might instead become a parable of what it is to be fully alive (in contemporary jargon, of being "woke").

While we may not comprehend the raising of Tabitha, we can affirm that divine mystery and sacred healing often defy the limits we place on reality.

Are not our own personal healings enabled by surrounding ourselves with hopeful and empowering companions, rather than by people who place limits on our spiritual, emotional, or physical well-being?

This is part of what belonging to a community of faith means to me. It is what belonging to a community of faith has meant to me in the season after Easter this year. It is being with people who believe there are other ways of being than the dominant beliefs of consumerism, capitalism, militarism, and individualism.

People who believe in the world as it could be. The place of love, and justice, and peace.

Tabitha's healing arose from the community; from the compassion of the community of faith and the disciples. The widows of Joppa had benefited from Tabitha's good works. Luke names her as a disciple. She is the only woman explicitly so named in the New Testament.

As a seamstress Tabitha had given the socially vulnerable a way to survive materially in a society that rendered them marginal and invisible. And clearly, the widowed women loved her and she loved them. It was in tears, and with love, that they showed Peter the garments they she had made for them.

The Greek verb that's translated in our text as '*showing*' indicates that the women were actually wearing the clothes Tabitha had made for them, not showing off extra clothes they were keeping in store. She made the clothes on their backs. Tabitha clothed the naked.

She loved them in a very practical way. They loved her, as with tender care, they prepared her body for burial. Without love, there can be no healing. Without love, there can be no raising from the dead.

What are the limitations that we place on ourselves and on the Holy? Is it possible that our prayers here, and our prayers in our hearts and our homes; that our prayers, hopes and actions can transform the world in unexpected, surprising, and miraculous ways?

In the words of 17th century philosopher, William Temple, "*when I pray coincidences happen. When I don't, they don't.*" This makes sense when we pray together in ways that move us to hope and to action.

Tabitha's story challenges us to change our assumptions about how the world operates, to see instead how love heals; how love brings us back to life.

Jesus tells followers of the Way to love as he loves. To let our definitions of "love" not be found in abstract theories, nationalisms, philosophies, or feelings, but to let love be defined by what Jesus embodies.

So, it's up to us, now, to tell another story in public.

To cry in Martin Place.

To feed the hungry.

To heal the sick and the broken.

To raise the dead.

It's up to us to be Jesus.