

Visions of what is to come

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 November, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Ben Gilmour

Pentecost 23 C

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDRdkXMa-R0>

Sometimes I have real questions about why the Lectionary Committee puts certain texts together. You may have discovered that with our two readings today. They are almost paradoxically opposed to each other. One is a grand vision of a new creation, a restoration of long life and prosperity and no more violence. The other is the destruction of the temple and persecution and fear and – how do you make sense of both of them? And in the season of “ordinary”! Now I would have expected these texts would make sense in Lent, and maybe even in Advent. But in the ordinary time! What’s going on, Lectionary Committee?

Yet, both of these texts, while quite divergent in contrast, tap into an apocalyptic hope, a vision, a dream of God of some kind that is to come. While divergent in nature, both look forward to the possibilities that are about to, hopefully – the word is hopefully – may bring some comfort and restoration, peace and comfort.

As a congregational Minister of almost 19 years, in two different traditions, I remember one particular Sunday where there was one person who would arrive just after the service began and exited the building just before everything concluded. And I thought it might be part of my pastoral and our shared pastoral responsibilities to make some form of connection, just to say hello and the like. Lo and behold, a couple of weeks later, she attended a couple of times and I noticed her down the street and I said: *Oh hi. It was good to see you the other day. I'm available if you'd like to explore anything further. We're here to assist in any way. Let us know.* She looked at me and said: *Oh, thank you for that. I'll let you know.* And kept on her merry way.

Sometimes I feel that being hospitable and open is a discipline that you’ve just got to keep pressing at and you really don’t know how things will really roll out!

A couple of weeks later, she came to church again and she stayed a little bit longer. So I had a little bit more of a conversation with her and she said to me that she’s really worried about her husband. I said: *“well, what’s going on?”* *“Oh, I think he needs a bit of religion”,* she said. Bit of religion? *“Okay, what do you mean by that?”* *“Well, I don’t know. Look, I think it’d be really helpful if you and he had a conversation.”* I said: *If you want to encourage that kind of a conversation, I’d be more than happy to be part of that”.*

I didn't see her at church for about three or four months after that. But then, one particular Sunday, she came in with the man who I assumed (but you never know) was her husband – and after the service we greeted and had a chat around the coffee table. He said: *“well, you know, I'm not really into all this religious stuff. It's all a bit – you know what I mean – I don't know – it's not my cup of tea – you know?”* I said *“well, would you like to have coffee sometime and just kind of chew the fat about things.”* And he said: *Well, yes, sure, why not.*

So, the three of us sat down and had coffee about two weeks later and, he goes: *Look, I need to say that I'm not into this God business, and I'm not really into religion. But I am actually really struggling a little bit.* (Actually, no he didn't say that, he said that later). He started the whole litany of all the successes in his life and how he was very good at this and this and this and this. And how he wanted to be the best employee at work and he wanted to be the best husband to his wife and the best person in all these different arenas.

At the end of the litany of him really sharing his meaning-making frame of how he orientates his life, I asked the question: *you've got this great desire to do all of this, how is it actually going for you?* He said: *Oh, it's going really well”.* At that moment, his wife looked at him with that look that only a wife can look at her husband. He looked at her and she looked at him and then looked at me and said: *Actually it isn't going as well as I would like it. It isn't going as well as I would like.*

These two texts today reflect great contrasting visions, as Isaiah said:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create a new Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. Isaiah 65:17-18

In contrast, when some of them were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said: *“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”* (Luke 21:5-6)

All will be thrown down! Two deep contrasting images. I'm glad that couple didn't come to church the day these two texts were read!

For the Isaiah text, the Hebrew people had in their deep memory and in their storytelling what oppression and subordination and slavery were all about. They knew what it was like to have their young ones cut down, their families ripped apart, to see trauma and the very sacred places of meaning-making being ripped to shreds.

And this is the dream of Yahweh, the dream of their God that would see life – and life to the full. An abundance of life! A really extreme vision where lions and lambs lie down with each other. (Although I was interested in the snake that eats dust like, I guess, it doesn't need to hurt anyone any more, it'll just eat the dust and it'll be fine.)

The cultural memories preserved in their biblical tradition were of enslavement and in the shadow of the Babylonian empire. These narratives become forming narratives for a new reality. A new way of being. A new creation, and they are powerful and full of hope in the midst of great suffering and despair.

Luke/Acts has an apocalyptic edge to it as well. Mainline churches like the Uniting Church tread carefully when we come to apocalyptic traditions, because we don't want to feed into a paranoia about things. But we also know that these traditions have emerged again in the context of fear and suffering and oppression – and trying to make sense of that in the dream of God that is reconciling and renewing all creation. Reconciling and renewing all things.

Instead of Jerusalem being the joy and the delight, it is the temple of God being destroyed. Now feeding that text is probably the ransacking of the temple in 70 AD by the Roman Empire. So this memory connects with the text. And also with the persecution that this fledgling Jesus movement was experiencing – from not only part of their own Jewish heritage, but also the Empire that killed their leader, their Rabbi, their teacher. So great fear is fed into this text. Yet, also, there is the image of hope. This salvation of Saul's peace at the end of the text: *not a hair of your head will perish*. Quite interesting pieces really! But very realistic, if you like, in terms of the fear that was embodied in that time and that context.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have seen this happen in my family and in my context – that when tragedy hits, we can't help but want to make sense of it. In a vacuum, we can't help but start to put things together that may not necessarily always be that helpful. Sometimes our fear drives us to think things and our hope moves to despair. There is some of that dynamic that takes place in the Biblical text. Looking forward to the possibility of what heals is a dialogue of both the possibilities of the good and the fear of what can be taken away and destroyed.

So, when we hear these texts, we hear and see that these tensions are also present in our own unknowing. I've been attentive to this. The dream of the possibility of the divine is recorded for us in the Biblical witness for our reflection. Not to give certitude, but to orientate us within a broader witness of challenge, oppression and hope.

Now, when I think about these texts and how on earth they relate to our time today, there is a tendency to internalise and look at them from a psychological point of view – the great injustices of our time – climate change, asylum seekers, and I think that these are important. But one line of thinking that I've been engaging with, which I think has been quite helpful, has come from Jeremy Rifkin, who's written a book called *The Third Industrial Revolution*. It's a New York Times bestseller. He has his critics, he has his supporters like most people. But, this kind of thinking sets us in a particular framework in a particular time in a particular context that I think might be helpful to see what is the hope or the dream of God in our context and in our time

The first Industrial Revolution, if you like, was – there were kind of two drivers. One is the technology of communication and the other is around power, as in what is the energy source and how is that energy source used. So, communication and energy.

In the first Industrial Revolution, (of course there are the Bronze Ages and steel, there's some simplicity in this thinking that I must admit to) but in his argument, in the first Industrial Revolution, the printing press really became a huge piece in terms of the change to the art of communication. And the steam engine, powered by wood and coal, became two of the key pieces that drove this Industrial Revolution.

Part of the tradition of the Uniting Church, the Methodists was an attempt to contextually adapt to these new industrial cities that have been merged with this Good News of Christ, this Gospel of Christ - how to do this outside of the parochial lockdown system that Methodism was constrained by in terms of its Anglican heritage. Although John Wesley would always say he remained an Anglican until he died, not to create a whole new tradition.

The printing press fundamentally changed the trajectory of the expression of the Christian faith in ways that have contributed to us sitting here today. And you may or may not be aware that the Reformed tradition, the Protestant tradition, the Presbyterian tradition – the printing of the Bible, the printing of the hymn books, the printing of prayer books – making accessible to wider communities rather than being centralised in a person who was generally the cleric or the priest has fundamentally changed the tradition that we fit in or are a part of. To have the ideas of the Reformers being printed and sent and distributed was quite powerful and shifted religion and political life significantly, with the rise of nation states and so on.

The second industrial revolution is driven by oil and electronic communication, from the telegraph to the radio; the television. And oil and mass production is part of that second wave. The first, if you like, was centralised as part of connecting with the British Empire, the second is much more located in the US with oil and cars. Today we have just about everything made out of plastic. Pharmaceuticals, Tupperware, even airliners are made of carbon fibre.

This mass production, in some ways, liberated labour. Women were no longer just the labour bearers. There were labour-saving devices and with technology, no longer were women seen as just the place where men put their seed in earth for babies to grow. A combination of genetics and life and individual movement became a big piece in that. It could be said that the Evangelical and Charismatic movements began to get significant currency around an individual relationship with God that empowers you to be blessed and so on.

In the Progressive traditions, individual rights becomes really more important. In this particular era, that mobilising becomes a big piece. In the first Industrial Revolution, God was seen more like the architect of the universe who ordered the laws. And even in psychology, you noticed it. If people were angry, they just needed to let off a bit of steam – like pressure was building like in a steam engine. These things frame the thinking. In this second Industrial Revolution, it was about being empowered to be individuals – and to consume and to engage.

The third revolution, that we are actually a part of now, the power generation and the communication has hit another milestone. Renewables – no longer coal and oil, but renewables are changing the landscape. The internet is also changing how we communicate. Network thinking – hard for millennials and even harder for my generation. It's changed from the mass communication that we've been accustomed to.

I remember, as a Christian who also accepted that my sexuality (took me a while) was a gift of God, discovering that the internet provided me with a network of people globally that I could connect with and develop friends all over the world - where my own community could not support that. And even my own family could not support that! I'm very privileged to be in a time where that kind of global communication has become available, and that kind of network thinking and access is quite prevalent.

Today, Facebook and (as I've been told by one of my millennial friends) and Instagram and snapchat (I'm still scared about Snapchat, where you just speak little bits to each other) and the like, have really changed how we communicate. We've seen this in the Trump election, where Facebook analytics deliberately used the limbic responses to get alignment in this space.

So, what does the Gospel, or the dream of God, look like in this particular context? One of the things that we've noticed with Millennials is a shift away from the individual thinking to that there is a sense of belonging to the biosphere. That the environment and the climate is linked to our future and our possibilities and dreams. Not just about individual empowerment. In fact, that's almost seen as a self-indulgent trajectory! I'm painting it black and white just for illustrative examples. But we are connected to each other and to the environment. For the Christian tradition, I wonder if it is also helpful to say that we are connected to God.

It changes the image of God from the architect to the individual - to empower us and bless us - to the one who is holding us all in a connection of life. That we are all creatures of creation, and that the Creator is the network of relationships. The space between the 'I' and the 'you' in complexity, where creation emerges time and time again. Another image that is beginning to emerge. Unsettling for some. Challenging for others.

That young chap who I started off with, started to attend church and to explore what Christianity might have to offer. About two years down the track, he came to me and said: *I want to be baptised again.* I said: *Oh! That's news. That's good. Tell me, what does that mean for you?*

He said to me: *I have been living a life that is all about my personal fulfilment and betterment. But something caught me. And it is a vision of what it means to be human that says that I am part of some great creative flow. A mysterious flow. But I am a creature of a creation and I'm called to a kinship with all of creation. In this there is a flourishing of life - and life to the full and I want to follow this Jesus way.*

Well, that's a good witness, isn't it? That's a good testimony to having a bath (which baptism symbolises) - a washing clean and walking into a new way - this way that we see in the Good News of Christ for all creation.

We are in a place where, I think, we are encouraged to dream more boldly. The Yahwist is abundant in the dream of the possibilities. We can take inspiration from the destruction of the Temple as a symbol - or the flourish in the restoration. We could say the destruction of earth, or the flourishing of the place where we dwell.

The dream of God - manifesting hope. It's part of the story that continually informs us about what it means to be human and to live into the possibility of divine life with each other.

Renewable energy actually calls for distributive sensibilities. Fortunately, our governments sold the electricity grid off to big multinationals. But in other places, they share the wind and the solar - and it's much more local energy production. There's a localisation and closer relationships with the environment allowing us to live sustainably, which is actually a really beautiful thing.

And, technology means that we can resource thinking globally. We can ask questions and find that globally. Now I do have some challenges with Google as the great gatekeeper. But I do think there will come a day when, politically, that will need to be regulated for the common good - or other emergencies will happen.

But, salvation, healing and wholeness is beginning to look different again in this age. We are encouraged to dream. So, let us dream the dreams of God.