

# TRUST (Come and See)

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 January, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Liz Watson

Epiphany 2A

Isaiah 49: 1-7; John 1: 29-42;

Contemporary Reading: *Working Together*, by David Whyte

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ4jMyVZgMA>

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Looking around me, I'm prepared to take a punt that, if I was to claim that, in our city, our country, our world, there is a deficit of trust, no one is going to spring to their feet to argue that I am mistaken. Further, I'd be prepared to bet that there would be no great shaking of heads and tut-tutting breaking out among you, if I was to propose that much of what we've trusted in the past has, in large measure been breached or betrayed, whether in relation to institutions, organisations or people.

Now you've taken that on board, you are, perhaps wondering what this rather depressing observation has to do with today's readings. Bear with me! I'm seeking your indulgence because from my first reading of the passage from John's gospel which is set for this Sunday, a passage about the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the disciples' decision to follow him, I found myself reflecting on the concept of 'trust', and, inevitably, on the deficit of trust we face in our own country and more widely.

At the same time, on how, for all that marked decline, how absolutely fundamental our need of trust is. How absolutely fundamental. More than that, I was being reminded of how our defining of ourselves as people of faith, as members of a community of faith, is to define ourselves in terms of trust and what and whom we trust and why.

Big questions! Weighty concepts! Having fixed my sights upon this powerful notion, I began to hear, see, read references to the idea of trust, and the lack thereof, everywhere.

But first, before I reflect further on this theme, I need to provide a context and perhaps an explanation for this focus. So, to our gospel reading...

We start with John the Baptist. Yes, we are back in John's uncomfortable company once more. This is his fourth appearance in our readings for this lectionary year. Our first encounter takes us back to December and the second Sunday in Advent. Remember how John crashed into our Advent reflections. As we attempted, perhaps, to cultivate an oasis of calm amid the frenetic pace of our world's commercialised Christmas, to be contemplative and reflective, to value that time of quietly awaiting Jesus' birth. And there we were confronted with a startling, provoking, almost wild creature, a man who rebukes the Sadducees and Pharisees who have come to "suss him out", so to speak - indeed, he yells at them, "*You brood of vipers... Bear fruit worthy of repentance*". And so on...

Interesting isn't it to have this confronting figure featuring in our Advent readings as he always does. As the commentator, Debi Thomas, reminds us, "*John's gaunt austerity is the only gateway we have to the swaddling clothes, angels' wings and fleecy lambs we hold dear each December*". John grounds us. He reminds us that we cannot come to the manger expecting that all will be sweetness and light, that there is nothing to trouble us too greatly here, that, for all the angels' songs of peace on earth and goodwill to all humanity, somehow there will not be anything too unsettling – something that will not be too unsettling to come to terms with.

That Advent reading is from Matthew's account. So was as our reading last Sunday, the first Sunday in Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus.

But, in between, we have Christmas 2, and our second encounter with John the Baptist. That Sunday we were taken into the Gospel of John for the first time, and the wonderful and memorable prologue – *In the beginning was the Word*.

The Gospel of John, the fourth gospel, a very different gospel from the other three, has the Baptist appearing especially early in the account of the life of Jesus. And in this gospel, his significance as harbinger is, if anything, even more pronounced. He is a messenger from God, sent to bear witness to the light that shines in the darkness, to the Word, the abiding divine presence from the beginning of time.

John the Baptist is a remarkable character, a notable actor in the story; people flock to hear him; he has his own disciples who surround him and heed his words. Yet it is clear from the beginning that John knows where he fits in God's plan, and humbly accepts that lesser role. His role is to point to the One to come, the true Light that is coming into the world. In this gospel, we observe him answering, clearly and calmly, those who have been sent by the Pharisees to question him about his status, about who he was. Here is a man who will play his role with humility and integrity. Ah, humility and integrity – further values, virtues, in short supply in our world! Especially humility!

And so to today's reading. It follows on from the reading of two weeks ago. We are back in the Gospel of John. When the man, Jesus, finally appears in this narrative, we have already heard the Baptist's testimony, Jesus has already been identified by John with a string of exalted Christological titles – he has been named as Messiah, the promised coming One, the Lord, the Lamb of God, as the One who baptises with the Spirit, and as the Son of God.

In this account, it is the day after Jesus's baptism and he again makes an appearance by the Jordan. John tells his disciples, "*Look, here is the Lamb of God!*" He directs his disciples to leave him so that they may follow Jesus. Because they trust John and the claims he makes, his disciples trust his directive. They do as he prompts them to.

The story is briefly constructed and almost abrupt, but it is very telling. Jesus sees the men (the former followers of John the Baptist) following him and asks a question of them: "*What are you looking for?*"

It's the perennial question, is it not – "*What are you looking for?*" What are we looking for? What are we seeking for? Comfort and consolation? Surely there is nothing wrong with wanting such things? Affirmation and belonging? How human is that desire, that need? We all have a very real need to belong. Am I after certainty, after answers that don't ask too much of me? Do I want to pin everything down – in contemporary parlance, am I 'risk averse' in this regard as is so much else - or "can I consent to trust? Am I looking to arrive, or to journey"?

But it seems the disciples simply dodge the question and ask Jesus a question of their own, “*Where are you staying?*” Debie Thomas, the online commentator, speculates that this might well be taken to mean something like, “*Where are you headed, Rabbi? Where and how and with whom are you aligned? What will home look like if we hang out with you? What’s our final destination as your potential followers?*” In other words, tell us up front what we need to know so that we can pin you down, locate you, understand you. And how does Jesus answer? “*Come and see*”.

And, thus, we return to the concept of trust with which I began this reflection. It is a troubling and demanding concept. How do we know whom or what to trust? As I’ve already argued, it is becoming more perplexing than ever. Where do we stand in the business of trusting people and institutions? Where in particular do we see evidence of a lack of trust, where trust has been undermined?

I am going to list some examples that occurred to me pretty readily. I am certainly not claiming it’s an exhaustive list, just some of the more obvious examples. You can think of the examples that occur to you as we go.

- Politicians and the political system – at all levels of government.
- The Church or, more generally, organised religion.
- The Media – all forms of the media - with some notable exceptions, perhaps.
- The profession of journalism – also with some notable exceptions.
- The Banks and entire financial sector.
- Law enforcement – the police.

And because of this general erosion of trust and the growth of mistrust, I add two further significant areas of public life that have suffered and been thrown into the same grab-bag.

- The Public Service. Surely not!
- Experts, even scientists and science itself. Better to hang out in the enticing land of social media.

The backdrop for any consideration of trust is a mounting distrust of much that we have held dear and relied upon and ‘set our clocks by’. And while there have always been those who searched for certainties with great fervour, and have followed gurus and cult leaders who demanded total loyalty, it is hardly surprising that in the current era, worldwide, we see a rise in the numbers of followers of certain brands of Christianity that promise material success and provide a sense of security with glib answers to complex issues that shut the door on questioning or debate or even exploration.

At the same time, many people simply respond to this general mistrust by pursuing happiness, pleasure or, on the other hand, tantalising excitement. Then there’s the seductive nature of our consumerist culture – how utterly diverting it is. There are both cynics, and the desperate seeking assurance. It is all about me. Narcissism, both individual and cultural, is rife. And none of us escape unscathed.

A cheery message on Sunday morning!

Trust is not one uniform phenomenon, or value, of course. For example, we can instance what we might call everyday trust. It is trust on the basis of which the well-oiled wheels of our society run; that taken for granted assumption that we can depend on others to perform their jobs properly, carefully, professionally. We cheerfully place our lives in the hands of train and bus drivers most days, and airline pilots every now and then, and so on. We trust people to do their jobs.

I could continue for hours outlining the ways in which we utterly depend on one another just to get by, day by day. This is no small thing, and, in our atomised society, the message of how interdependent we are, is one of the most important things that Christians must proclaim. We must shout it from our metaphorical rooftops. We need one another, we depend on one another, all of us, all of the time. This may be about trust, but it is also about gratitude and care for others and taking care in all our interactions with others. In a sense it is the Golden Rule, the Great Compassion, in its everyday guise.

In the recent (and, indeed, ongoing) bushfire tragedy we've seen it come to prominence so that we can see it for what it is and recognise its glory. That has been one of the few, but one of the most profound blessings in this horrific tragedy. The world has taken note, both of this tragedy and the community response to it.

And what then of the areas of our communal life where trust has been eroded, where that interdependence has been denied - my list of institutions, organisations and people. Those institutions, those organisations are still there, of course, and indeed carrying on much as usual. We can't avoid them. We find ourselves having to make use of their services or cope with the results of their actions. It's pretty taxing at times. Yet we can become numbed to what it represents.

Let me be explicit for a moment. We should be able to expect of our politicians that they do not lie to us. That they do not place staying in power or appealing to our lowest impulses, or pork-barrelling, or grandstanding and needing to be centre stage all the time, as though that is simply what the business of politics is about. A little humility along with honesty, would not go astray. We call for leadership but are irritated or, indeed, enraged, at what is then delivered.

It is not a 'big ask' that we might expect our doctors, trained at public expense, to not charge exorbitant fees simply because they can.

The media is our primary source of information about so much of what goes on in the world. It is not unreasonable to expect that journalists and news organisations take responsibility for presenting that information dispassionately and fairmindedly, to make clear when it's an opinion piece rather than a so-called factual account.

And the banks! The horror stories of what has gone on in the name of making money to satisfy shareholders and pay bonuses. It took our collective breath away.

Let me leave the list or we'll be here until midnight!

But one positive observation might be made before we return to today's reading and the message it holds for us.

A week ago, the online activist network Avaaz distributed to its members worldwide a most unusual email. Rather than calling for a response to a particular human rights abuse, or act of environmental vandalism, it was instead a call to play a role in countering the eroding of the very culture, values and beliefs on which their campaigning rests. The email argued that what is going on in our society, our world, is something approaching '*a struggle for the soul of humanity*' (to use the words of the Avaaz email). It identified a struggle between...

“hope and despair,

truth and falsehood,

tribalism and unity,

wisdom and what would seem like wisdom,

between trust and distrust,

fear and love...”

It went on to suggest that, if that is accepted, then we must also accept that in some sense “*it’s going on in each of us and all of us*”. Very salutary.

Avaaz lists its own set of principles in its call for change, perennial change - societal and personal. It is interesting to see so large an international online activist network engaging in such a campaign.

A thorough discussion of those principles that I’ve outlined is for another occasion. What I want to do now, in drawing to a finish, is to return to our reading.

Jesus asks: “*What are you looking for?*”? It’s a challenge, of course. What we seek, what we live for, shapes us. As Thomas Merton notes, “*we’re made in the image of what we desire*”.

But Jesus’ newfound disciples, in dodging the question, are hedging their bets or maybe just detouring around it. In any case, rather than answer, they pose their own question – “*Where are you staying?*”

As Debie Thomas notes, Jesus’ responds to the disciples’ prevarication in a somewhat maddening way. Her description is it is both concrete and elusive. He issues the invitation: “*Come and see!*”

Come and see. It’s an invitation, as I say, but as an answer to a question it leaves so much open. It’s up to us. We must decide whether we’re going to take up the challenge or not. And, so, we’re back with ‘trust’.

It is worth remembering that John the Baptist was trusted by his disciples. When John said, follow that man, off they went. The first few invited others and did so by stating emphatically that they’d found the Messiah. Simon accepted his new name of Peter with which Jesus endowed him. It all seems as though the early followers, in accepting the call to come and see, were convinced they were where they should be, had found the answer and all was settled.

Except that it wasn’t - and it couldn’t be. If we read the whole account in John’s gospel (and the other gospel accounts as well) the picture we are left with is of loyal followers

certainly, who did stick around, but only until things became really too hot, too dangerous, and then they fled or, in Peter's case, denied that they were disciples of the man, Jesus.

But more importantly, there is evidence throughout these accounts of the disciples' struggle to understand who Jesus was and what he stood for. Bits of insight, a partial grasping of what was being asked of them. We may begin the fourth gospel with John the Baptist endowing Jesus with the full panoply of Christological titles, but it would seem that it remained a struggle for the disciples to grasp the meaning of those claims, and especially to understand what they implied about what was being asked of them, of what it meant to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

All the same, it is clear that, in their own way, they did trust Jesus and we should recognise that their following of him was a quite extraordinary act of trust. And it is important to note that being one of the immediate group around Jesus did involve dangers along the way, not just at the end, at the time of Jesus' arrest and immediately afterwards.

And, yes, there were miracles and healing to attest to Jesus's status as more than just another teacher. But they were also being invited to keep company with the ritually unclean, the mentally disturbed, with despised taxpayers, with women of dubious character. They were being asked to love every last one of them – no exceptions. This was very testing stuff!

The invitation "to come and see" is an invitation to trust. Faith is an act of trust. It will always involve risk taking. We will lose our way at times, lose focus and become too comfortable, or perhaps a little smug. Surely not.

The invitation is to trust, to commit to trusting this man, to accepting Jesus' revelation of God's abiding presence in this world, among us and within us, of unconditional love and forgiveness and grace, and the promise of abundant life. He reveals what it is he stands for. He points us to the way. Our act of faithfulness, is a trust that this way of living out our lives is what we are looking for and that in attempting to live out of that understanding, we will begin to grasp with greater clarity what the Way is all about.

At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, we will always come to accept that, in our attempts to live in this way, we will always be beginners. That is simply how it is. Nevertheless, we journey on, and we do so in company with fellow seekers. That is a grace if ever there was one.

I end with the words of Thomas Merton...

"MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."