

Recognising Presence

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 August, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Pentecost 12A

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

When Jesus asked Peter: “*who do they say the Son of Man is*”, Jesus was of course referring to himself. Peter said “*some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets*”.

But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter answered: *you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Matthew places this exchange in Caesarea Philippi, where the shadow of the imperial Roman power was evident in everyday life. Rome had extracted special taxes from the people to support Rome, together with a large share of food grown there to keep Rome’s soldiers and officials fed.

Money and food depleted, the people had less to live on and less to eat.

Caesar claimed the titles of Prince of Peace, Son of God, Emperor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father and more.

When Jesus was considered to be John the Baptist returned from the dead, it held revolutionary tones because Herod Antipas, who had John killed, was terrified that John would return and come after him.

When others said Jesus was Elijah or one of the prophets it reflected a traditional understanding of these great figures of history returning to be with and guide the people with wisdom and truth.

Adding Jeremiah to the list is an interesting further dimension, for Jeremiah was considered the suffering prophet. The meaning is not lost here. So in the eyes of the wider community Jesus is seen as one with a divine role, a presence that shows a close and special link to the living God.

Son of Man, although really just saying “human being”, does hold some special significance as a term suggesting one with a special relationship with the living God.

Well Son of God is a title belonging to royalty. Messiah, Son of the Living God takes it to another level - suggesting a unique relationship with God

Son of Man, Son of God, Child of God, Messiah, Christ, Saviour, Rabbi, Teacher, the Only Begotten, the One God Incarnate, Holy One, Friend, Intercessor, Mediator, Companion, Fellow Traveller. These and more are ways we might recognize and name Jesus today, some 2000 years later.

Each term will bring its own understanding, and each of us will have a preferred term, maybe a few depending on the circumstances, that will reflect the relationship we understand Jesus to have with us, and with the understanding that Jesus is closely linked to even part of God in a particular way.

To call Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God were dangerous words for Peter to say that in public. Even more so in the first century.

They were religious words. They could easily challenge the religious leaders and their teachings.

And they were political words which would challenge the political leaders of the day.

Indeed we know they did, leading to Jesus arrest, trial and crucifixion.

And of course that happened not only because Jesus was honoured with a few titles that challenged the destructive forces of the day, but because Jesus' ways, and the ways of those who followed him, had an impact and made change.

For the people of the first century, having this human link with the divine spirit that created and sustains all life was comforting, encouraging, inspiring and challenging.

We do not have the same physical presence with us today.

Nor did they in the first century for very long, for they too were encouraged - indeed it became necessary - for them, as it is for us, to relate directly with the source of life, the divine spirit who is present with us always, everywhere, no matter the situation.

Some of us will have developed patterns to do so. This service might be one, where we set aside time and sometimes a special place or practice to reflect on God's presence in our lives. On the movement of God's spirit in the world and so on.

Perhaps we go to these places and enter this space to start the day to get us going. To give us focus as we embark on the day's adventures and challenges.

Perhaps we go to these places at the end of the day to slow and reflect on how we dealt with the day's challenges. Maybe to celebrate the adventures and opportunities grasped.

Or perhaps to seek comfort or encouragement after what might have been considered failures, or times when we fell short of what we expected of ourselves.

Perhaps some of us, it's not so much a place or a time, but a habit of entering into a reflective or a meditative, celebrative space many times throughout the day, acknowledging and attending to the presence of the divine in the moment, any time any place.

How do you recognize and commune with the divine presence in the world around you, in you and others?

For the first century disciples and crowds it was the words and teachings that brought healing - and the promised freedom of a new life begun and made possible through this special one before them.

This at once brought comfort and danger, as it challenged the old ways.

In ancient stories of midwives, threatened by forces that would diminish each new generation, it was trust in the divine promise that their actions would make a difference - when they worked together to fulfill the mission, the vision they believed God had given them for the future of their people and for the world.

This too was comforting and dangerous. How do you recognize and relate to the divine presence - in the world around you, in you, in others?

Do you recognize the divine through thought and reason?

Through deeds and outcomes?

Through feelings and relationships?

Each has a place. No one is more valid than the other.

Over the next few minutes I would like to share with you some special places to which people in our community occasionally go to experience the divine.

Some might represent a moment when the divine was acknowledged, a thin place when the divine and humanity come so close that the moment could only be called sacred.

Some might be regular spaces to which they turn, knowing it to be a special place.

Shortly I'll share some of these with you together with an opportunity to breathe in the creative nurturing encouraging divine presence within you.

(Slideshow and sung chorus)

Don't be afraid! My love is stronger. My love is stronger than your face.

Don't be afraid. My love is stronger, my love is stronger than you.

Don't be afraid! My love is stronger. My love is stronger than your kids.

Don't be afraid! My love is to be yours.

We may not consider our daily times of quiet retreat as dangerous, or even life-transforming, or life-renewing times.

But they are - if not in the moment then in the hour.

If not in the hour, then in the day.

If not in the day, then in the week.

If not in the week, then in good time, the right time, when we are ready.

And during all this time the holy wonderful divine creative life-giving presence never leaves us, but instills us with hope and promise, with longing and need, with gifts for the journey that will help us find our way in life.

Even through a pandemic.

Even through changes that come.

Even as we grow and learn.

Even as we age and forget.

Even as we try and fail.

Even as we achieve and succeed.

Even as we take each moment and allow God's holy presence to fill it.

Amen