

When Showing Up Isn't Enough

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 October, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Bronwyn Murphy

Pentecost 19A

Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

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

Good morning, Pitt Street. We send all the love and greetings from Pitt Street Office to Pitt Street Congregation, hoping that you're well and looking forward to some warmer weather. Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen.

I think it's highly unlikely that any of us are going to get an invitation to a royal wedding, or even an event at the Governor General's residence. I think it's unlikely that we would then be dressed in designer labels ready to turn up! Even more unlikely would be our RSVP of: *"I can't make it, I've got groceries to buy and weeds to pull"*.

"Unlikely" is a pretty good description of today's reading. Jesus tells the story of a king's son who is getting married. The king knows this is the event of the decade and sends out the invitations.

But the invited guests come up with excuses equally as lame as gardening and grocery shopping. The invitation is deemed an inconvenience – and they can't be bothered.

Now this is where 'extremely unlikely' turns into 'truly bizarre'.

When the King sends more messengers out, they get beaten up to the point of some dying! The invitations are off the table now. The king is angry. The mood quickly shifts from invitation and celebration to violent retribution. The original guests of honour are now the late lamented.

But the king still has a banquet hall filled with good things ready to welcome people in. So he sends out more servants. This time they head to the back streets, the alleyways, the bars and nightclubs. They find the restaurants and the theatres and the flop houses and homeless shelters, and they invite the unlikely and the least. The old and the young, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad. All are called to come and feast and be welcome.

I wonder if we could pause for a moment and just think about where you were when God found you. Where were you when whichever 'Messenger of God' issued your invitation – and you heard it for that first time? How old were you? What things in your life have shifted and changed as a result of saying "yes"? Or, perhaps, *no!*

No doubt, some have been moralistic upstanding citizens. The “good”, perhaps, that this reading refers to. If that’s you – how wonderful!

But, perhaps, others might be in that other category. Lost in the back streets and alleys of life, perhaps God found you battling an addiction, or in a violent damaging relationship; perhaps we thought that we were lost in our hopelessness and loneliness? Maybe we were searching for something more than we could find on our own.

Here – I think here - we encounter the beauty of the Good News. Wherever God may have found us – palace, church, alleyway or bar, it makes no difference to the honour God offers us in naming us “beloved”. It doesn’t matter how we got here! Doesn’t matter where we came from, for at God’s table all are equally welcomed, valued and loved.

So, all is well in the story... until the king notices that one man has come ready to enjoy the party, but hasn’t bothered to put on the wedding dress that he was asked to wear. This man is thrown outside, where he is to gnash his teeth in darkness.

It’s pretty clear that this is more than a story about a man throwing a party. It isn’t just about responding to a party invite to ‘*come in and be welcome*’. Something more is required than simply turning up.

This is the story of salvation history in which God sent prophets to Israel; and still sends preachers and proclaimers of the Gospel, teachers and prophets to us. And some of us accept it; some of us reject it and some of us distort it. And some of us turn up on a Sunday ready to spend a lovely couple of hours, but have not done the hard but joyful work of re-shaping our lives and our choices around the call of God.

Where are you in the parable? Where would you like to be? Who is someone you could talk to who could help you get there?

Where are you? Where would you like to be? Who might help you?

Let’s change gear and look at the Exodus reading, also bizarre. The golden calf!

Moses is missing in action – and it’s been 40 days. Not all that long, but for them it seemed a long time, I guess. Despite having freedom, food, water and each other, the promise of land, the people kept looking back to Egypt, and the slavery that they had known was still comforting somehow. They knew it. They knew what to expect. They knew the feel of it and that seemed safer than risking this unknown future.

Once again, we can see that this is our story. How many times have we have said: ‘*Remember when...*’ Insert your loved memory of church here. Remember when there were 300 hundred in the Sunday school. Remember when everyone went to church on a Sunday. When the shops were closed because church was so important. Remember when we sang the good old hymns of John Wesley and the Alexanders hymn book.

Or perhaps we’ve said: ‘*that’s not how it used to be. Church should be more like when we were young!*’ How often is it that we, in our serving and leading, look to the past instead of allowing God’s future to unfold?

You see, we need to learn the same lessons as did the people of old, as do all of God's people.

Faith involves change.

Change involves risk.

It isn't about being comfortable. It isn't about getting what you want when you want it. It isn't about personal preference. It's about being fully engaged with the present so that the world and all her people have a future worth having.

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If we, in our congregations, are not actively moving towards this future, we will end up as caretakers of empty religious museums. By letting go of what once was, our lives and our churches are open, ready to be filled with justice and love and hope and hospitality and peace.

Now, we know that people are people – and we all get caught up in our own agendas. We all get caught up in ... it might be a gold calf, it might be a church building, or a religious ideal... but it's what we want!

These stories are trying to teach us that only in God can we be more than the mistakes of our past. Only in God can we begin again, afresh, anew. Only in God can we make room for welcoming and build up.

Because only in God can we be the people God calls us to be. The people our world needs us to be.

So, in today's two unlikely and bizarre readings, we're invited to move into the future, aligning our lives and our choices to God's - seeking reconciliation and renewal for all creation.

You may be unsure of what that invitation means. And, if that is you, I pray that you will find someone who could guide you and walk with you. You may have said yes to this invitation a hundred times and given your all in serving and responding. And if that's you – we celebrate faithful service. Thank you.

Whatever our response is, wherever we are, whoever we are – may you as a congregation, the congregation of Pitt Street Uniting Church, continue to throw open your doors in wide welcome. May you each feel affirmed and blessed as you affirm and bless others – and may we all give thanks to the God who has invited us in and then called us to go back out filled with invitations for others, that they might too come to the table of faith.

Glory be to God – Creator Redeemer and Sustainer of all life.

And may God bless you.

Amen