

# What is Good News in a time of polarisation?

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A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Epiphany 5B

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

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

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The Cambridge Business English Dictionary (something you read every day, I'm sure) defines Polarisation as *the fact of people or opinions being divided into two opposing groups*. There are other definitions, to do with light and refractions, but we won't go there. The example given in the business section is: *"There is now more polarization and less co-operation between the political parties."* - meaning, each party stands apart, far apart, to the point they are not working together. So I'm not telling you anything you don't already know! There is no surprise in the example given.

For some, it could seem almost reasonable that two differing parties might stand apart. But standing apart is quite different to not co-operating. And one has no need to look too far to find plenty of examples, serious examples of polarisation in the world of politics, in the world of business and even within some families. (I'm sure, never yours!)

There's nothing wrong with having different points of view. We need to have those. Or different beliefs, different dreams or ideas of how things will best work or what systems and processes will suit a particular situation. We all come with different facets. Indeed we need them in order to be creative, to explore and find new and appropriate ways of doing and being and living together in the world; of working with the land so as not to destroy it.

We can be creative. In developing tools and equipment that do not exploit and exhaust it. We need to be visionary in developing ways of working and living together that allow freedom, to live in safety, and systems that allow communities to flourish, its members respected, purposeful and happy.

What I see, however, is rather than companies living in an atmosphere of healthy competition they seek to undercut, undermine and over exploit at every turn. (You can disagree with me if you like). Farming methods that exhaust the soil. Food distribution methods that are highly efficient - and yet leaving whole nations elsewhere to starve. A mind-set to get a quick and high return with little effort at almost no cost or personal risk seems to permeate every aspect of life.

The whole concept of investing in the long-term, seems to have all but disappeared. The reason for being in business at all, even for governing a country, is about quick, short-term fixes that look good - not the long term benefits of providing care and service. I'm just trying to remember what my social studies classes were about. I don't think "quick fix" was in there.

The whole system of two parties of government (government and opposition) and indeed two houses of parliament (House of Representatives and Senate) is designed to be a system that challenges and grapples with issues from different perspectives in order to refine and improve the final outcomes. The need to work on it!

Oh, if only that were true! If only it worked that way. If only, after challenging and grappling with an issue by two opposing parties, and through two houses, one whose role is to challenge and test the decision of the other, for the best outcomes for the benefit of the people, good decisions for the welfare of the people, for the greater good were indeed made. If only!

Oh, there are some good decisions made, but I'm pretty sure we could easily come up with quite a list of issues, pressing issues of grave importance and needing timely decisions, that to date have not found satisfactory outcomes. (I'm sure you could all list at least fifty. But, in reality, there's probably a handful of those that are significant world-wide.

So, what gets in the way? Is it more than differing opinions. It's more than seeing things differently. It's more than just having a role to play to oppose and challenge. Which is a good thing. Ultimately, it is about true intent. What is the intent of the party in power? Is it to make a difference for the people, to improve their lives, to care for the earth, to make for a better life?

And what of the opposition party - whatever colour they wear? Well, it should be the same! It is, after all, even in opposition, still there as an elected body with a role to play as opposition and the purpose of that role is to bring different approaches, different ideas, different ways to test and challenge, question and refine decisions made, bills passed, laws made, life lived in the land so that it is for the good of the people and the nation. It's not meant to be about them. It is meant to be about the people they serve.

My reading of recent events, locally and overseas, suggests being in power is more about doing all one can to stay in power. (That's a pretty good life, I guess. I don't know. I haven't been there.) Which translates to doing all one can to keep the opposition out - and it would seem doing anything to suggest that one's opposite is corrupt, inept, lacks experience, is unaware, irrelevant or just plain wrong and often presented in such a way that are not easily proven or dismissed. (Parliamentary privilege is an interesting concept.)

Hmm. A couple of examples. Like tampering with the costs of air travel of a city Lord Mayor and thinking one could get away with it. That story was close to us here in Sydney, taking unnecessary time and effort to call a person into disrepute just to get some points - all based on a lie. That one backfired big time but consequences don't seem to have been much, do they?

Or as in the USA recently, revving up an already pre-disposed crowd to riot and raid the government's chambers to aim to prevent an election being upheld. A second impeachment is now being tested and regardless of its outcome the damage caused will be long and hard-felt, I'm afraid, sending opposing parties further into their corners of polarisation while holding caucus meetings to see how they can better the others next time. And there are more examples - military coups are rife and even in so-called democracies opposing voices are silenced.

We could be forgiven for treating these incidents and the many stories of which we hear every day as just that - incidents along the way. They are, for many of us, stories at arm's length. We know of them, we are angered by them, we are hurt by them! We might even join others to voice our concern over them, and when we have we move on with our day, our life and our activities, hoping for change but in truth not sure it will come, not today, maybe not in our lifetime, not while everyone's concerned about the quick, short-term fix and gains to be made in the process - while they stay in charge.

So, why am I talking of government? It's such a great example and I have to say it's probably at this time true for just about any governing body you can name anywhere, here locally or abroad. More and more governments and even groups within them work as opposing forces not aiming to come together but, ultimately to win - and it would seem, at all costs. And of course the costs are usually borne by others not them. It's usually the people that suffer.

So, what has this to do, if anything, with today's readings? Well, before I move to the readings more specifically let me transfer the concept of polarisation to something more tangible in our lives, closer to home, if that is possible. Differences of opinion between people and how we deal with them.

I think it is fair to say that many of us like to live without conflict generally, so many of us try to avoid it. Sometimes to the point where we will not even engage in a conversation lest it lead to having to face difference. We do, ourselves, often keep to our own corners, polarising ourselves, not to strategise a win but to stay safe. Oh, I'm sure you can think of some people, as can I, who enjoy conflict. Indeed they revel in it and do all they can to make a fuss in order to get some. It gives them energy - and then they walk away while everyone else licks their wounds.

I have concerns about both counts. Keeping apart - and supposedly safe - and getting into demand. Firstly, to avoid conflict, to avoid dealing with difference is more likely to give in to ways that may not be the best but are simply the line of least trouble - in the short term. Here, one's intent moves from standing up for something they believe in - to allowing peace at any price to win the day ultimately paying a price for it.

Secondly, to promote conflict, to actually enjoy the idea of it, to get it happening - like an argument, like a battle - is not to present a case for an ideal or an idea, but to live out one's dreams of being a winner, of overcoming the opposition, of bombarding them with power. It's the way of the bully - and no-one wins there.

When Paul was addressing the people in Corinth he was trying to get across that all he does is for the greater purpose - that being the gospel of Christ. And to do so he is happy to meet people where they are. To relate to them in ways that they understand, to fit in with their cultures and practices in order to draw closer on a more level ground.

A simple example, drawn from last week's reading, might be that if he is relating to people who have chosen to be vegetarians because they are horrified at possibly of eating meat that had been dedicated to idols and which they therefore saw as wrong to eat, then in their presence he too would not eat meat lest they be offended. Or when relating to Jews he would not express non-Jewish cultural practices that were offensive to them. Rather, in each case he would show them respect for who they are (even though they may still come with different things to talk about).

But I really like another example that Paul gives, and that is if he is relating to the weak (we might today say the vulnerable) he too will become weak (that is vulnerable) with them so as not to be a force that further threatens their situation (someone coming in wanting to solve all your problems, or oppressing you) but rather, walking alongside as one with them may help them find strength of their own.

I like that. I like that a lot. Because it comes from a place of respect, as do the first two. But more so, it comes from a place that very clearly puts his true intent at the forefront, the greater good, the gospel of Christ - which is to help people find life in all its fullness, free from oppression, with respect and purpose, part of a community there to build up and strengthen people; all based on love. It can't come from another hand and it can't be bullied in. It has to be discovered and shared. It's found in love.

Some years ago I did some training with (and for a while belonged to) an organisation called The Conflict Resolution Network. You may be familiar with them. Its aims were to help people face and deal with conflict – not just people who worked with large organisations, corporations and Governments around the world - in ways that allowed all parties to be heard, respected and together to find a way through the problem before them.

It's principles were based on seeking to achieve a win-win outcome (remember that term that was a fashionable one) on developing creative responses to challenges (not just the same old ones – that worked last time, let's try it again), on empathy, actually understanding one another, trying to walk in their shoes a little, on appropriate assertiveness (not being a bully or being bullied) on developing strategies for co-operative power rather than power over, on managing emotions (not ignoring them and not letting them overwhelm the situation) on approaching a situation with a willingness to actually resolve it, not just fix it for the moment; on mapping the development- trying to work out how it is all working and how it got to this; and how we can work through it; and on developing a range of good, viable options, on truly negotiating not just offering a take it or leave it outcome, on working with mediation when needed and of course broadening perspectives.

This was no backyard network, it was world-wide and to be part of it you just needed to be trained, of course, and committed to the cause. Sound familiar?

Imagine for a moment what government would be like if each party, each house, addressed each issue with the same concern for the greater good, so the benefit would go to the people! They would bring their differences, they must, they should do so, it is their responsibility, their obligation to do so, but only for the purpose of it being part of the picture, part of the story that will help form and inform the outcome for the greater good.

Yes, some parts of what we might bring, some of the ideas and proposals on each side, might not be upheld, or at least some of the harsh, chunky bits need to be polished along the way – a bit sharp and hard - in order to form the ultimate best outcome, the greater good outcome to which each side, however different their perspectives, are dedicated.

Right now I might sound like a Pollyanna, someone who, in the thick of an unhappy situation that cannot easily be solved, is yet looking for the silver lining, the best that might come from it or might be worked from it, if only some new insights, some new innovations could be found and introduced.

Some might call this dreaming. I call it being creative, visioning what is possible given the current situation, or perhaps despite it, if only all involved were given a chance to work on it together - not in their polarised corners.

OK, we'll now bring it closer to home. How would it be if, every time we had an opportunity to make a difference but realised it would mean facing difference, we did it with respect and grace, coming to meet the other party in ways that recognised their culture, their ethos, their strengths and their weaknesses, and bringing our own, culture, ethos, strengths and weaknesses, walking alongside one another to listen, to converse, to share, to discern, to adapt or refine our understanding along the way as we learn, in order to serve the greater good, which is our shared ultimate intent. Now I hear ringing in some ears the word compromise!

Ahh, compromise. Now that is a word that says '*my way is the right way*' and in order to get you out of my way so that I might have my way I make a couple of concessions - just enough to keep you quiet and me happy. That sounds like the kind of compromise I've seen trying to be done over the years. What is the greater good, the real intent here?

When attending my first Synod meeting I was quiet (I know, it's really impossible to believe) and not quite sure I would ever get up to say anything, let alone make a speech, or present a proposal. Let alone head up a task group and do some real research toward change. I remember one Synod meeting when, sitting next to a well-known and seasoned veteran who was quite a speaker, saw me squirming, and furiously making notes. He said "*Karyn why don't you get up and say something?*" I didn't think I could do that or it would be of any real value. After all it was just coming from me.

A Synod later, much more committee work under my belt, I had no hesitation in getting up. Certainly I was nervous, but I couldn't let some things left unsaid. It wasn't that I needed to 'win', I'm not even sure that winning was in my mind, but I did feel the whole story needed to be told, that different facets of the whole needed to be known for people to make up their own minds with as much information as possible before them to work with.

One time I got very riled up over something. The same person said to me, "*Karyn this one really gets you doesn't it?*" "Yes", I said. He said: "*You won't change their minds. They're already set. It's a good cause but nothing they hear today will change their minds. The timing is not right. You need to pick your battles. There'll be another time to address this one when things are better placed.*" Maybe it wasn't as urgent as I thought.

That was a good lesson. I continued to get riled up but I didn't always get up! Sometimes I just took my notes and wondered how in the longer term we might find a way of making a difference that wasn't so confrontational and more co-operative.

When Jesus healed people it was in many ways confrontational. It was also respectful and loving. When he healed he confronted the system that kept people separated and therefore considered unclean, unable to be part of society. What he did for them brought them back into society. It affected everyone there, not just the person being healed.

When he exorcised demons (we might call it helping people find peace in times of torment by any number of things that might oppress them) he was not only confronting the system but also challenging long-held religious practices and beliefs. It was confronting and freeing! It could not be ignored. The crowds, that is, the everyday people, were finding new life and its effects were being felt.

Did Jesus heal everyone? No, he didn't heal everyone. He healed people as he met them, where they were at, where he was at the time. And he could only ever be just like us in one place at a time. To heal everyone was not his role.

His role and purpose was to show there is another way, the way of addressing injustices, of showing respect, of accepting people and helping people to be healed and freed from all that would oppress them, inviting them to live in a society that was learning to be a community of love. It was left to those after him to continue with this greater good intent. To take it further, to let it grow. It is with us now – and that's why we gather today.

Where does this all leave us? It leaves us needing to be sure of our intent. The thing that drives us. The thing that's really behind us, careful that we have not polarised ourselves out of usefulness. (I read a comment recently that we can all live in an echo chamber.) Careful that our intent is the greater good, that is, will be of benefit to all involved and not just me personally. Aware that we are human and will, without a doubt, from time to time, have our own ego powered wants and drives that may get in the way. In the way of drawing close and walking alongside, of listening and conversing, of being prepared to adapt because that means change, of honing the outcome to be the best outcome for all involved, not just me and not just some.

We are, after all, human, and that is OK, that is more than OK. The beauty of being human is that we can learn, we can adjust, we can heal, we can mend ourselves and others and we can dream and create wonderful things and futures for us all – through our dreaming and mapping.

So, is the future to be a compromise as we bring our wants and needs closer together but still really act as a polarised people – all over the world? Current trends indicate it will be like that for a long time.

It need not be. Not in our private lives and certainly not at the corporate and national levels, but it will require an honest admission of intent – by governments, leaders, corporations, businesses, locations, people.

The future for us all - personally, corporately, nationally and internationally - can be a newly created, wonderfully polished thing of beauty, a combined effort to which we all commit by walking alongside, aware of the culture and ways of others and of ourselves, focused on the greater good intent where all benefit, as best we can, where we are, given the circumstances, here and now.

It's never going to be one for all forever. Everything changes all the time. Life is a constant time of movement.

So – imagine! Imagine a government that comes together in this way – and actually works together for the greater good! Imagine a world that works the same way as it seeks to address the Pandemic. In our case, governments are letting other people get the vaccine first, regardless of arrangements made.

About climate change. About poverty. About peace. That's my short list. It's a big enough short list! Imagine.

Now bring it closer to home. Imagine what we can do together, each of us. It's freeing, it's transformative, it's life-changing. And the more we do it, the more we grow towards coming together and working together. One day it might, just might, make a difference on the bigger matters as well. Of course, governments and companies and organisations are all made up of people.

It starts with us.