

# Care - Love's endeavour. Love's expense?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 March, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkin

Lent 5B

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

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

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May I speak in the name of divine love, creating, redeeming and sanctifying. Amen.

What does the word 'care' mean to you? And what does it mean to us as a community? Well, today I think, it means probably keeping dry and not driving through floods and such like. The practical things.

In the area where I was born, up in the north east of England, this particular Sunday in the year is traditionally known as Carlin(g), or Care, Sunday. It includes a centuries old custom of eating meals made of Carlin peas. Now I tried to find some in Sydney, but it's a bit of a struggle. Its hard to find them these days, but there are some symbols as you'll see at the front of the table here, reminding us of the new heart that we're given in God.

These are black beans actually, rather than black peas. Because the peas are known as black peas, maple, or pigeon peas – and they're actually quite ordinary things, but mixed as it were in love - become warm and nourishing fare for poor communities. That's what they've been down the ages. Now today, in the north east of England and In Scotland, where these traditions have grown up, they're slowly dying out. But you can get the peas if you go to the markets in Durham. Not so easy in Sydney!

Now where did this custom come from, you might ask? Well it depends who you ask, sort of like one of these folk legends. But probably this tradition goes back to the British Civil Wars in the seventeenth century, when the great city of Newcastle upon Tyne was besieged, only to be saved by ships which came to relieve the hunger, bringing these ordinary black peas. Now who knows which ship it came from? Some said it came from France, some from Norway – take your pick.

The point is that this was about being saved from one sort of cares - distressing cares, you know anxieties about how we're actually just going to survive, what the future is and such like. But also sharing care by those who brought those gifts, those two types of care are met in this meal. So to share this ordinary poor people's meal of peas, is to share a kind of communion, of salvation, and care. Whenever we share something which relieves others cares or extends our own care to others.

So where, I wonder then, not necessarily in peace do we find the sources of our care. What are the symbols of our care? How do we share our communion with the poor?

Now of course the word care in English has a much longer history, being derived from the old Germanic word it goes back way back in northern Europe to the word 'karu', which is linked to grieving and lament. That's that distressing almost destructive forms of care. But it's also associated with words derived from the Latin word 'cura' from which we have wonderful words such as curator, secure, accurate, manicure and pedicure. Lovely, aren't they? Delightful. You don't normally go with grief and lament for a pedicure.

Together these two linguistic strands, you can see, express a deep ambiguity of meaning when we talk about care. And maybe this is expressed most wonderfully in a great story / ancient myth of origins. And in some ways you can see just a few resonances with bits in the Bible too, of care or cura which has been deeply influential through the modern thinking of people like Goethe, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. But you don't have to be trained in modern philosophy or anything like that to understand and be enlivened by the story.

Well the story goes that there was a Goddess called Cura (Care) who was crossing a river and she thoughtfully picked up some mud - you know like the second story in Genesis of creation - picked up some mud and began out of it to fashion a human being; what the Bible calls Adam. And then the great God Jupiter in this story came along and Care asked Jupiter to give the spirit of life to this creature and Jupiter agreed.

Now Care, having done a lot of the hard work, you have to agree, wanted to name the human being after herself. But Jupiter insisted that his name should be given to the human instead. So Care and Jupiter were arguing. And then along came another figure, Terra, which is a Latin word for earth. And Earth said: *hang on a minute you two. The human being should be named after me because after all I've given my own body the mud the earth to form this life.* Finally after a lot of arguments the three disputants agreed that Saturn would judge. So what did he decide? Who should the human being be named after?

It's quite revealing if you make a particular choice. The answer is that Saturn decided - and you might not agree with this - that Jupiter, who'd given the spirit to the human, would take back its soul after death. And since Terra had offered her body to the human being, she should receive back its body after death. But said Saturn (and I think this is the crucial bit) since Care first fashioned the human being, let her have it and hold it as long as it lives. The human being is the embodiment, or should be, the embodiment of care. And Jupiter said: well let it be called Homo, Latin for human being, since it seems to be made from hummus - from the earth, Latin for the earth.

It's a great story and expresses again this tension in the nature of care. Warren T. Reich put it, in a classic essay: *in this myth of origins, care of the human being involves at least two aspects: there's an earthly, bodily, element and a spirit/air element.* Traditionally, the earth/body element has been associated with carers' worry - you know dragged down by the things of this world and the spirit/air element with care and striving with the divine - being lifted from it.

Maybe there's still something in that but I'd suggest we might turn that round helpfully and maybe see healthy connection with the earth and the body as grounding and sustaining. An unnecessary worry arising from one worrying about things that are in the air and detached from us.

Whatever the case, the point is, as you can see, our care and our cares - care itself - are of different kinds, aren't they in our lives. And they're often quite complex. On the one hand true care is what makes us genuinely human, whether you believe in the Latin stories or whether you believe in the Biblical ways of looking at it, that we are called as human beings to be children of care. That's what these stories are saying and I think that's what the Bible is saying too. And that's what Jeremiah is saying when he's saying put a new heart into the body of the human being so they will be truly, in the best sense, a child of care. And so it is in any community which takes divine care seriously.

So that brings me back to this question: if we are to be children of divine care, what does it mean to us? As I begin my Sunday morning ministry in this place, I ask this question for three reasons - and we have to keep revisiting it don't we?

- Firstly because we're people who need to care for ourselves.
- Secondly because we're people who have to be care-full of one another that's why we had that Covid announcement at the beginning and such like.
- And thirdly, because as people that's what's been trying to say through these myths, we're trying to learn more deeply from the ultimate example of care that we are given particularly God in Jesus at the heart of our gospel reading today and holy week to come...

So, let me look at those three things very briefly:

Firstly, what does care mean for ourselves? What does care mean for you? What does care mean for me, at this moment this week this year? There are dangers aren't there, I have to say, in some traditional uses of today's gospel and holy week to come.

When Jesus says in today's reading: *those who lose their life gain it and those who hate their life* (it's a very strong Semitic way of looking at it) *will keep it* - it can be read, can't it, as a recipe for sort of mere self-sacrifice. You know, just seeking to be a martyr rather than being martyred which is what happened to Jesus - by living another way.

And it can be reinforced by expressions about love expending everything - as in this beautiful hymn that I put between the two readings. Now this is one of my favourite hymns. It's a beautiful piece of poetry and I commend it to you. But even that can make us think we have to, you know, give all that we have and forget about ourselves completely. We have to remember I think, that Jesus never simply threw his life away but it was taken from him. So you live in a way and risk and yes, perhaps your life is, as it were, to be made a sacrifice. But you don't deliberately seek to throw it away. And also, we are told (and I think this is what this hymn is trying to say) is that we ourselves are not God.

*Loves endeavour, loves expense*,<sup>i</sup> is the heart of this love; and it's a story of ultimate divine love. Like Jesus' own life and death, it's here to inspire and encourage us. That's the great story of the scriptures. But Jesus' own story in the wider scriptures are not just blueprints for us. They're rather encouragements to engage with our own depths where that divine love may spring afresh.

When I was looking at this hymn the other day, I was struck by how it resonated in my own life. The opening stanza is absolutely wonderful. That first verse delights in creation, scholars, truths and so on. And I have to say I could imagine being back in Oxford when I was a young student. But the heart of the hymn is actually later, because like the heart of life, it's much deeper isn't it.

It's not just the out, the external the surface stuff. It's the profound wrestlings in our lives. When cares threaten to overwhelm us, or when care for others demands wrenching truths and changes to be faced.

And that is the true care that Jesus is asking us to address when we acknowledge our deepest needs and hurts and find both courage and tenderness to face them. Well at least, that's my story. I wouldn't be alive today if I hadn't found that deep love. The love of which that poem, that hymn speaks - and acknowledge this as the source of life. Not my cares or others cares. For true care isn't, as I say, about mere sacrifice but it's about responding to the depths of this ultimate love for ourselves as well as for the cares of others.

So, like Jesus, we have to die as it were, to the mere anxieties and cares and surface stuff. Even the concerns - good concerns - of others if we're to live out of love for all.

Secondly, I ask, what does care mean for us as a community in being care-full of one another. Again like W H Vanstone's great hymn, it's about going deeper isn't it, than our surface relationship, structures and policies.

Now I'm having a bit of a big learning curve in the Uniting Church as you can imagine - and particularly about Pitt Street, because I'm trying to learn - as I think quite a lot of us are at the moment as we come back to worship - and I don't think it's normal life, whatever it is we're called into. To learn you know, the ways in which we agree to operate together. And I pray for patience in that process from you. But even if we're all on the same page, when we've all got it all together again or as much as we can, we still need something more don't we? That's what I'm asking you to think about. Because however good they are, even our best policies and ways of doing things, can become mere cares, even burdens to us, if we don't wrestle with this depth of love.

Some of you might have noticed on the front of the service sheet (well, just inside the cover actually) I've added to our welcome statement, those wonderful generous words of hospitality to all, but I've added a little rider. And I want you to think about it.

I've added the words: *not just welcome but all we ask is mutual respect*. I think that's vital and I hope it might invite further reflection on what we mean by welcome. Because if we're to exercise true care, I wonder whether we've actually got some expectations of one another, not just a welcome for one another. And maybe there's even some boundaries we might need to insist upon.

Because as teachers of non-violence affirm, there are two hands of non-violence. One offers welcome, but the other says stop to behaviours and boundary crossings which are destructive to others. So maybe you might like to think about it, as in our personal care, are there some limits to some ways in which we welcome and even care for others if it risks the care and safety of other aspects of our lives together.

Thirdly, I ask, what does care mean in terms of God and our spiritual journeys. Well it's all tied up with the questions we've already asked but I was struck this week at a funeral of Des's brother John - in the attention that was drawn to the great writer J R R Tolkien - you know Lord of the Rings - the understanding he had of death as a gift. And he said that his work wasn't about power and all these journeys and all the battles and everything else in the Lord of the Rings. The heart of it is about the human understanding of death. This, said Tolkien, is at the heart of the Lord of the Rings. It's a struggle to be shaped by virtue, by the strength of care, the task which the reality of death calls us as human beings.

So in this sense, when we reflect on today's gospel and on that wonderful hymn, I believe that God isn't calling us simply to, as it were, just throw away ourselves just like that, in subjection to our immediate cares or the calls of others or ourselves.

But we're invited to ponder, to wrestle, to share together in this amazing work of divine love whose endeavour and expense is so much greater than we can ever achieve - yet by whose grace we are transformed.

In the name of Jesus the child of divine care who brings us new life even in death.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Love's endeavour, Love's expense' - Together in Song 174