

Seven Circles of Suffering

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Friday 2 April, 2021

Shared Reflections by Rev Dr Josephine Inkipin and Rev Penny Jones

Good Friday B

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

The First Circle of suffering – in the personal

Luke 22:41-44; Psalm 22

Rev Dr Josephine

Sometimes our own personal suffering can threaten to overwhelm us. Of course that's partly because, as human beings, we've helpfully evolved in order to recognize pain, whether it's physical emotional or spiritual. And so we are able to perceive, often, the danger to act, to address the source. And that's a good thing. But we can be also, therefore, forced into suffering. And in terms of prayer, or attending to the divine, the presence of pain can make it very difficult, can't it, to redirect our focus anywhere else - and we may experience only in that pain, what feels like God's absence.

But as our readings put it, when our bones are out of joint, when we can find no rest, then actually we may be closest of all to whatever or whomever we name as God - even if it doesn't feel like it. It's at such times that the only prayer that's possible is not our own, I think, but the prayer of God in us.

For even when we feel ourselves to be forsaken, as that great psalm proclaims, God continues to breathe in us. For from the days of our birth, our very breath has carried on. With every in-breath and every out breath, with the syllables of what the ancient Hebrews called God – Yahweh. Not just a name but an expression of that deepest experience of life in us even in pain and destruction.

Yahweh.

Yahweh!

Can we hear it and in our own selves? Yahweh. Breathe with me. Yah on the in-breath weh on the out breath. Yah-weh. A reminder of God's presence with us in pain.

So, during a few moments now of silence, let's simply continue to breathe in and out, allowing the divine to be prayed in and through us.

The Second Circle of Suffering – in the family

John 19.25 & 28; *The Mother* - by Sylvia Sands

Rev Penny

All those Marys gathered at the foot of the cross – their very name meaning ‘bitterness’! And indeed, this was a bitter time. A time for families to ask themselves, as families in such circumstances always will, ‘*where did we go wrong?* What did we do, that this should happen to the one we love?’ And his mother, remembering the early days and nights, the baby safe and secure at her breast, asking ‘why am I no longer able to protect the one I love?’ In her helplessness we recognise our own – our own inability to change things, to fix things, simply sometimes to help a bit. Her child is thirsty, and she cannot give them drink.

Thirst is such a primal need. Every living creature longs for water in order to live. Here the one described as ‘living water’, cannot quench their own thirst. All they can do is continue to pour out their love, and in so doing bring refreshment to others. Sometimes this is all we can do for those whom we love most – continue to love when all other avenues of help are closed to us.

So, during these next few moments of silence you might like to ponder, ‘what are you thirsty for’, and ‘where can your love bring refreshment?’ ‘What are you thirsty for’, and ‘where can your love bring refreshment?’

The Third Circle of Suffering – in our close relationships

Mark 14:18; Mark 14:44- 45; *the Place of Prayer* - by Mary Crowther

Rev Dr Josephine

The poets express things quite beautifully taking us to a greater depth don't they? ‘*This is the place of prayer, where the inward pointing of nails converge.*’ Betrayal by those we trust is just such an inner convergence of nails. For of all the many pains that can keep us from trust in God, perhaps betrayal is the sharpest – or one of them. Maybe this is why every version of the Passion story has a place for Judas.

Jesus could have been picked up by the authorities at any point. There was no real need for inside help. So why has this tale of betrayal with a kiss resonated down the centuries? Is it not because we all recognise that at different times and in different degrees, we are both betrayer and betrayed, and always out of the best of motives on someone's part? Judas was probably not a bad person. Jesus chose him. He must have seen things in him. Despite all the later attempts to paint him as such (and there's many reflections we could explore about that) maybe Judas just saw things differently. He wanted to protect the ‘revolution’ – perhaps indeed to bring on the revolution that Jesus seemed to be beginning. He had his own version of ‘*it is better that one person die for the people.*’ Judas clearly did not mean, from the agony that followed in his own life, for things to turn out the way they did - and his remorse was terrible

In these next few moments of silence, let's reflect on the betrayals we have, perhaps unknowingly, inflicted and the ones we have received, and seek to let them go ‘to the mystery at the place of prayer.’

The Fourth Circle of Suffering – in our wider communities

Luke 23.32-43; *The Thief* - by Sylvia Sands

Rev Penny

Hope, faith, love – these are the things that sustain community. Like the thief in our poem today, we do not expect to find them in places of violence and hurt and suffering. Yet over these last months of COVID it has become very clear, if it was not clear before, that it is exactly in these places that they are to be found. Even living, as we do, in one of the world's COVID luckiest countries, we know that the past year has taken its toll on mental health, economic prosperity and overall well-being. We have been sharply reminded of just how interconnected we all are, and of how damaging it can be when we are obliged to isolate from one another.

What then becomes critically important is our perspective.

The two thieves in the New Testament account saw their circumstances very differently from one another. Similarly, we can view our need for social distance as a loss to be mourned, or as an opportunity to show care for one another. Our simplest choices matter. We can choose instead of 'social distance', the language of 'spacious connection'. We can choose to empathise with those whose physical circumstances, whether similar or worse from our own, inspire us to acts of generosity and care.

In the next few moments of silence, let us pause to give thanks for all the co-operation there has been across our communities that has come as a result of COVID-19, and to open ourselves to the invitation of God to care for one another, to recognize spacious connection.

The Fifth Circle of suffering – in our nation

Mark 14:53ff; *The Coming* - by RS Thomas

Rev Dr Josephine

'Let me go there' he said. To that particular place. To that particular possibility. Theologically that is sometimes known as the "scandal of particularity" - which is nothing to do with the nonsense that has developed that Jesus, or the Christian story, is better than any other stories, But it's to focus us in our own particularity. This claim that Christ, while incarnate at all times and in all people, chooses to be known always in the particular - and in the case of Jesus as a first century Judean in an occupied territory undergoing all the privations of an occupied nation.

So what about us today and our particular nation our particular occupied nation - for we live in a land still stained by invasion, misappropriation and massacre. Sovereignty and treaty with first peoples are not yet realized. And there's a long way to go in the transformation of our colonial past. And our very building here is part of that colonial past, though the wood and other things within it come from the trees of a more ancient time. The grandmothers and great grandmothers of the stolen generations continue to weep at their empty tombs seeking the children taken from them.

Again and again as we continue to ransack and demolish their sacred sites, we ask them to echo the words of Jesus, *'forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'*. But we do know - and still we fail to honour the world's oldest human culture.

So, in the particularity of this place, this place that, as this poet puts it, is *'like ancient Palestine a scorched land of fierce colour'*, how can we be Christ's hands and feet and lips, to speak and act for justice for the first peoples of this land? On this day of 'sorry business', how can we attend to our part in righting the wrongs of our land.

As we rest for a few moments in silence, let us attend to the voices and spirits of this place; to the cries of the earth around us and below us, to the countless generations of life and people in this place. To the cries of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and open our hearts in sorrow for the past.

The Sixth Circle of Suffering – in our world

Matthew 27:24f; excerpt from *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi

Rev Penny

It is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act.

There are more than seven and a half billion humans on our planet, more than twice the number there were when I was born, each carrying their own mix of joy and pain. As today we lament and seek to share something of the human suffering of our globe, it seems overwhelming. War here, drought and starvation there; tyranny of so many kinds; deprivation and violence without seeming end.

So much need for the transforming work of love and grace. And every pain bearing its own particular face; its own particular name – the child without clean water; the refugee in prison with no home; the victim of violence or betrayal; the homeless person only inches from this building. And our own sense of apathy and powerlessness to change the decisions of the powerful, who themselves buckle under burdens too heavy to carry.

Take, for just a moment, a God's-eye view. You could take that view from inside the smallest atom. But perhaps for now, see across the little blue and green marble that we call home.

See the stains of suffering, thick in some places; here and there laced through with other tones, tones of hope and possibility. And see God's love constantly working, constantly moving to bring light in darkness, hope in despair. For this is the work of God, the work of the cross.

In these next moments of silence, focus on that work of love, seeking to align yourself with it, seeking to join with Christ in that work of self-giving love; joining in, in Vanstone's phrase in *'love's endeavour, love's expense'*.

The Seventh Circle of Suffering – in our earth

Matthew 27:45f; *The Anger of the Earth* – by Sylvia Sands

Rev Dr Josephine

The Earth has, surprisingly, often been left out of Christian spirituality in Holy Week. But particularly when you read Matthew's gospel and that amazing prayer, how strange it is that we've turned the cross and the passion story into a sort of relationship between Jesus and me and a sort of metaphysical transaction - when it's about everything.

As our Bible witnesses so powerfully, the sufferings of the Earth as a whole are intimately tied up with the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings of humanity as a whole. God, humanity and the whole of creation are bound up in one covenant. If one suffers, all suffer. As Indigenous peoples the world over teach us, what we do to the web, we do to ourselves. As St Paul puts it, *the Earth itself groans, awaiting the fullness of God's salvation...*

And we know this covenant has never been torn so badly as by human action and inaction. The devastation of land and water, the destruction of species, the deprivation of habitat is known to us all or should be – and the earth itself is torn apart, just like the tearing of the Earth in Matthew's account of the passion.

But there can be hope, as is made clear by that poem's evocative acknowledgement of divine solidarity – and human solidarity in Christ. For the body of our planet is also the body of God.

As we rest together in silence for a few more moments, let us therefore reflect on the crucifixion of the Earth today, and pray for healing and sustainability for all life on this beautiful but troubled planet.