

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 February 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
Epiphany 5C
Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5: 1-11; Contemporary Reading (see page 4)

This last week, in the last week of the Season of Epiphany, before Lent begins on Wednesday, has been a significant for the church.

This week an Epiphany has happened in the Australian conversation about asylum seekers and off-shore detention. Peter Catt, Dean of the Brisbane Indocin Cathedral, and the ten Anglican and Uniting churches that stood with him and declared that we would offer sanctuary to the 230 people in danger of being sent back to Nauru and the 37 babies born in Australia who are to be sent there, have created what the Canberra Times declared to be a “game changer.” I desperately hope that they are right.

What happened this week was an epiphany, as the light of God’s love and hope shone for the human community - shone upon the darkness that is being contemplated in our name. By speaking of the centuries old tradition of sanctuary the churches have given hope to secular and religious people, to the asylum seekers themselves, to all who value compassion and justice. The newspaper articles and editorials have been overwhelmingly positive. Dozens more churches have offered to be places of sanctuary. Public support has been amazing. We’ve had phone calls and emails from local people offering donations and help, should we become a place of shelter.

There have, of course been critics too. One comment on our Facebook page, said “*stick to preaching (with a big thumbs down) and let the government govern.*”

In response, I wrote that *our faith tradition calls us into public life because we are called to love the world God loves. We are called to care for the marginalized and the oppressed and to recognize the image of God in all people. Sometimes this call takes us into conflict with the “powers that be”. Christians involved in the US civil rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid movement engaged in such civil disobedience to be true to their allegiance to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which was itself shaped by the Jewish traditions of loving foreigners, aliens, others.*

However, we must try to exercise this calling in ways that do not demonise those who are exercising unjust power, because we also believe that, as Walter Wink wrote, “*the powers are good, the powers are fallen, the powers can be redeemed*” ... the powers can be redeemed.

Our objective in offering Sanctuary is to protect the vulnerable; but it is also to change the hearts and minds of the majority of Australians who are not currently offended by the collective punishment of hundreds of people in off-shore detention. In the absence of laws that protect human rights, a change in public opinion is crucial. We are working, in harmony with divine energy, to redeem the powers.

After morning tea today, the Church Council will hold an extraordinary meeting to discuss how we will go about supporting asylum seekers should they seek sanctuary here and how we will respond if “Border Force” agents try to remove them.

There are practical challenges. There are spiritual challenges. We would be stupid if we weren't a bit worried about what we have offered to do. Like the Psalmist we now ask: *from whence cometh our help?*

The readings from Isaiah and Luke share the theme of call and the recognition of human fear and failure to respond to that call. At first glance, Isaiah's weird and wonderful encounter seems irrelevant to the contemporary experience, but if we just see the story about the fishing disciples, without paying attention to Isaiah's encounter with the holy, we would miss the place of mystery and mysticism in human vocation.

Without sensing the mystery, we become disciples who burn out too soon. And we risk vilifying the government and the populace instead of working to transform the powers.

The prayer that we prayed at the beginning of the service referred to God's glory. The prayer was written by Scottish liturgist Philip Newell, whom I first met when I attended a course at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico in 2006. He was leading worship outdoors in one of earth's mystical "thin" places. I realised, listening to him pray with an awareness of God's glory, that glory is one of those words that I've mostly given up on, when talking about God. A word a bit like "Almighty" which I never use to address God because of the negative associations it has for me of military and oppressive power. I'm still not hot on almighty, but I'm ready to reconsider glory. Today's scripture speaks of the glory of God embodied in the human and non-human worlds.

God's glory is often ignored by progressive and mainstream Christians. Yet, perhaps images of divine glory and majesty can be recovered in healing and life-transforming ways. Is not God's glory more about wonder and beauty than about power and coercion? Is not God's glory about the divine depths that are reflected in every moment of experience, great or small?

Isaiah Chapter 6 describes a mystical experience. When Isaiah enters the temple in a time of national upheaval, he has no idea that he will encounter the living God. Isaiah came to participate in religious services, and perhaps he alone - in the crowd of hundreds of temple worshippers - experienced the fullness of God appearing in the finitude of human experience.

Mystical experiences, in which the divine becomes present in human life, can happen anywhere and everywhere.

In the second century, Irenaeus, wrote

"The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God."

In the 20th century, Thomas Merton, wrote:

"We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time."

We cannot control when and where mystical experiences occur, and often we run away from them, but when we open to the mystical, our lives may be transformed.

God's revelation to Isaiah is wild. The foundations shake, angels fly, and Isaiah is overwhelmed. "*The whole earth is filled with God's glory.*" All things are permeated by God, inspired by God, enlivened by God. Every moment is a holy moment; every place is a holy place, and every encounter a holy encounter: "*God in all things and all things in God.*"

In awe, Isaiah hears a majestic voice, "*Whom shall I send, and who will speak for us?*" This, I think, is crucial. God asks us! The majestic God is neither all-mighty, all-powerful nor all-controlling. God needs us to be God's partners in mending the world and in speaking a prophetic word of justice and healing to the community. Mysticism leads to justice-seeking and service to the world.

The divine impulse is always calling us to go deeper in our spiritual and vocational lives. Divine energy pushes us forward to new adventures and greater personal strength as individuals and congregations.

Luke's gospel describes a spiritual and vocational transformation in Peter. Worn out by an unproductive night of fishing, Peter initially turns away from Jesus' call to fish in deeper waters. When Peter is ready to give up, Jesus says "*go deeper*" – go deeper into the waters, go deeper in faith, go deeper in trusting my vision for your life and for the world.

Simon Peter is a useful model for discipleship precisely because he is a surprisingly ordinary person, an unlikely choice.

He's by the shore washing out nets. He works for a living.

He had a bad day (or a bad night, actually) at work, something we can all relate to.

He talks back to Jesus. Yes, he uses an honorific title ("rabbi"), but you can hear the resistance to Jesus' words in his response to the suggestion that he try fishing again.

And yet in that moment he recognises that Jesus embodies the power of God. No false modesty here, just the realization that, "*I am a sinner.*" Not that I am bad or evil, just human.

Sinner, like glory, is a word that makes some progressive Christians uncomfortable. But it simply means for Peter an awareness that he has stuffed up. Christians have over-emphasized sin, and the creation/fall/redemption paradigm, but it would be a loss if we didn't have some language to talk about our frailties and our failings. Most of us are painfully aware of them. The challenge is to be open with ourselves and others, and to hear the gospel message that we are loved and accepted for who we are.

The Holy could not love us any more than we are already loved.

There is an epiphany in the text. The word Epiphany means to behold the world, or one's life in a new way, with new eyes. It is when something becomes clear to us in a way that we have never seen or noticed before. New light can be shed on an old problem; a situation which has always been seen the same way suddenly becomes radiantly clear with new meaning. I think that's what is beginning to happen with the Asylum Seeker conversation. A pathway in the mind or spirit opens and we see things in a new light. An epiphany is a revelation – but it is also a challenge - because it forces us to change.

The epiphany in the text is not the great catch of fish, but rather Jesus' catch of Simon Peter and the implications of that catch for whomever else Jesus is calling into the beloved, prophetic community.

Jesus is not put off by Peter's initial resistance to the idea of putting the nets down again. Apparently we don't have to hide our true opinion of what we are called to do.

Jesus is not put off by Peter's brokenness or Peter's acknowledgement of his limitations. Neither do we have to hide our true opinion of ourselves from the holy.

By calling Peter, Jesus is doing more than just affirming Peter. The reason for the call is not to say to Peter, "You're ok," but rather, "Be not afraid. We have work to do."

So these texts of mystery and call ask us to go deeper.

There are questions for us personally and questions for us as a community of faith, especially as we contemplate sanctuary.

We are invited to respond to these texts personally and politically. We each need to ask ourselves: "Where do I need to grow? What deep waters call to me? Where do I need to take a risk in order to claim God's adventure in my life?"

We also need to ask ourselves, as the congregation of Pitt Street Uniting Church, "what new, and apparently impossible, adventure does God call us toward?"

Like Peter, we may feel "unworthy," unprepared, and we may not expect to grow in numbers and influence, but God's grace speaks through our experiences of unworthiness and limitation, inviting us to become more than we can ever imagine.

As persons and as community, we can be caught up in glory, and we can respond to the call to be agents of reconciliation and transformation, to be the partners that God needs to heal the world.

So may it be.

Contemporary Reading:

Hildegard of Bingen 1098-1179 - from *Meditations*

The soul is kissed by God in its innermost regions.
With interior yearning, grace and blessing are bestowed.
It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke,
it is a yearning to give one's self to God's way.
And so, humankind full of all creative possibilities is God's work.
Humankind, alone, is called to assist God
Humankind is called to co-create.