

New Beginnings

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 April 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 3C

Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-19

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In a couple of weeks, the Australian Christian Lobby is having its annual conference, down the street at Wesley Mission. Their keynote speakers are American culture warriors, one of whom believes that social acceptance of same sex relationships is a sign of the rise of Nazism in the US as he believes it was in Germany in the 1930s.

Not surprisingly, community activists are planning a rally outside of Wesley to protest the ACL's opposition to marriage equality and its part in dismantling the Safe Schools programme.

Being involved in difficult conversations about the conference, on behalf of the Uniting Network during the week, reminded me of an experience I had in New Zealand during the marriage equality campaign there. An experience of hearing some awful things and an experience of witnessing conversion.

Today's biblical stories of the conversion of Paul and the re-conversion of Peter, also reminded me of that experience. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times now affirming his love for Jesus three times, and Jesus redeeming Peter's denials by directing him to love and care for the hungry and the poor.

And the Damascus Road experience... The story of Saul/Paul's encounter, blindness, and recovery is well known, used as a metaphor for an experience that changes people dramatically. An experience that melted a hard heart, even one that breathed threats and murder, and changed a stubborn mind. It changed his identity so totally that his name was changed from Saul to Paul. It is a powerful story - the facts of it don't matter so much - but it sheds light on the human condition.

Saul was furious about the success of the disciples' mission after Jesus' death, particularly that of Philip north of Jerusalem. On his way to destroy the disciples, Saul encountered in some mystical way, the risen Christ, that aspect of Jesus that had been joined to the sacred after his death. And Saul became a disciple, an apostle to the Gentiles. And he became known as Paul.

Like Jesus, Paul was Jewish. However, he grew up not in a tiny town in Galilee but in Tarsus a major city in what is now Turkey. We first hear of him at the stoning of the disciple Stephen a few years after Jesus' crucifixion. Acts tells us that he approved of the killing. Scholars think he would have been in his late twenties at the time.

The next reference to Paul is the transformation story that we heard today. For about twenty-five years after that, over land and by sea, Paul traversed the Roman Empire, finally ending up in Rome where he was executed.

During his lifetime the written gospels and the book of Acts did not exist, but the stories that shaped the gospels and Acts were circulating in oral tradition. Paul's genuine letters (not all of the letters attributed to Paul were written by him) are the earliest writings in the New Testament. What we know of genuine Paul is that he was what Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have called a *Jewish Christian mystic*.

The goal of mysticism is deep, close, intimate connection with the holy. Paul talked about this as "*being in Christ*."

In the campaign for marriage equality, both here and in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have often thought about what has brought about the upsurge in public support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, about what it is that changes our minds – not just on this issue, but on many. And without doubt it is relationship that has transformed people's views. As it became safer to be out to friends and family and work colleagues, many people realised that they knew, or even loved, someone who is LGBTI.

And while the transformations may not have come with a blinding light on the road to Damascus, they have come.

I believe that God is still speaking. That through relationships and friendships, through the courage of those who have risked coming out when they did not know how they would be received, the world has changed and is changing.

I am also interested in how change can happen amongst those whose minds are closed tight, who are fearful and rigid and who believe that persecution of queer people is what God wants.

Three years ago now, during the passage of legislation for marriage equality in NZ a conservative Christian group, many of whom were Catholic, planned a prayer vigil outside parliament house in Wellington (which was two minutes' walk from my church, St Andrew's on The Terrace).

In response, a Facebook event was set up inviting supporters of marriage equality to hold a counter demonstration. Originally it was entitled "*Let's overwhelm the haters*." Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and it was retitled "*Support Love at the Anti-LGBT Marriage Vigil*."

My initial response was that a counter vigil was a bad idea. I worried that it would end up as a slanging match, that the views of Christian conservatives would only be reinforced, and that they would now be able to claim they were being persecuted for their faith. However, it was a grass roots event and it was clearly going to happen, just as the protest against the ACL is going to happen on Saturday week.

So I went along, wearing this rainbow stole, to witness as much to the queer community as to the conservative Christians, that there are religious people who supported the bill. I held a sign that read "*Marriage Equality is Sacred.*" A feisty 88 year old member of my congregation joined me. Frances's son had died of AIDS at a time when gay people were blamed for AIDS and gay relationships and identities were hidden from family and society. And now, quite a few years later, she was a passionate supporter of marriage equality.

On my other side I met a young woman, who I found out was married to a Baptist minister - who she said would have been here but had a church meeting - held a sign that read "I want the church to change."

Our rally was generally happy and positive, with laughter and singing, as we listened to speaker after speaker from the vigil telling the world that there was something wrong with us and our relationships. There was some isolated verbal abuse from our side, mostly from a young woman who was standing a little behind me. I remember saying to Frances, next to me, "*this isn't going to help.*"

But later that night I got a face book message from that young woman. She told me of the terrible hurt that the church had caused her in her coming out and how cathartic it felt to scream at those who represented that pain. I didn't agree with her method but I could understand her motivation. I didn't agree because I didn't think that yelling abuse helps melt hearts and change minds. In fact, the opposite is true. But I understood.

The other encounter, that same week, was much more disturbing. I attended a meeting at an inner city church, where Family Life International, a very conservative Catholic group, was hosting an extreme anti-gay speaker from Canada. Those present were mostly older people, and those who were younger were Pasifika and Asian.

I went to listen to try to understand what keeps people in a state of fear and hate and anger. The speaker was very attractive and very slick. He said some appalling things about queer people:

- That gay men have an average 500 partners in a life time.
- That gay sex causes irreparable harm to the human mind and body.
- That homosexuality causes disease and death.
- He invoked the slippery slope arguments making casual references to incest, bestiality and polygamy.

I had never heard so many lies and such insidious feeding of hatred spoken with such charm. He claimed that to oppose marriage equality was to show LGBTI people that God loved them.

It was torrid. I was the only supporter of marriage equality present and the person doing the introductions made it very clear that opposing opinions would not be welcome.

I decided to talk to the speaker during supper. We had a long conversation in which I told him that his statistics were lies - and he told me that he loved me! It felt really hopeless. But standing with us was a local man - who I guess would have been in his late sixties or early seventies. He said that he recognised me from the vigil and that he was upset that the crowd had spent the evening interrupting his prayers with abuse.

I told him about my encounter, my Facebook message, with the young woman who had been so hurt by the church - which had taught her family to reject and exclude her.

The man looked surprised and said he was sorry to hear that and that there was no justification for people to treat other people like this. I pointed out to him that what we had sat through all evening, the complete absence of the real lives of queer people, fed the anger and the rejection that queer people experience at the hands of the church.

So after that terrible evening of lies, of the speaker skilfully feeding a crowd with false information that would make it possible to justify hate, I felt that in that brief encounter, in that snippet of conversation, there was a thread of hope.

That maybe seeing me not as a one of a crowd but as a person who could speak of my experience and that of others, a seed of change may have been planted in the man's heart. I simply don't know.

What I do know is that I saw his crowd a bit differently. As people trapped in an echo chamber of homophobic rhetoric which could be broken, if only for a moment, by face to face conversation.

It reminded me that this is how God comes to most of us. Not in a flash of light, but in the slow dawning of new understandings brought to us through surprising people ordinary events. That it happens in community.

The biblical story isn't just about Saul's blindness. It's also about Ananias and the others being asked to see Saul as an instrument of God before the conversion had happened. To see his redeemed self before it was obvious to other human eyes.

We can't explain by science what happened to Paul when he saw the great light and heard the voice of the post-Easter Jesus challenging him to end persecution. When his sight recovered after the care and attention of Ananias, we know that Paul saw differently. That Paul saw everything differently.

The light had brought enlightenment. The experience was his call, his commissioning to his vocation as one who would no longer breathe hatred and seek death, but as one who would bring the light and the love of the gospel to as many people as he could possibly reach in his lifetime.

Paul's experience carried with it the conviction that God had vindicated Jesus. That the powers that had killed Jesus: Roman imperial authority in collaboration with Jewish high-priestly authority; were wrong. That Jesus, not Caesar, is the one to whom we owe our allegiance.

Paul's mystical experience of Jesus as Lord led to resistance to the imperial vision of domination, and it led, too, to the advocacy of a different vision of the way the world can be.

Transformations happen all the time and need to happen all the time. We too remain caught in patterns of thought and behaviour. We also walk down the Damascus road breathing threats and destruction. We may not be planning to act on our threats but our self-talk can often be just as angry.

Paul's failure represented an uncritical way of thinking that condemned all Christians as a threat to his spiritual status quo.

So, today, we are invited to ask - what biases in our own thinking are causing us to "*breathe threats and destruction?*"

Where is the light coming from in our lives?

In which places do we need to open our eyes and see the light?

Where do we stand in need of transformation?

For our God is calling us - not to breathe hard hearted threats and destruction,

but to breathe life and invitation,

with melting hearts and open minds,

and as we work for justice and for love in our world.