

# A GOOD PRESENCE

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 June 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Kevin Dallas

Pentecost 4C

Galatians: 2:15-21; Luke: 7:36-8:3

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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If you have stayed on after Church on Sunday to enjoy lunch at one of the restaurants in the Queen Victoria Building, you may have encountered a rather animated gentleman standing outside the Queen Victoria Building just across from the Town Hall, on his small soap box, megaphone in hand to project his voice, reminding any who cares to hear that there will be a judgement day, and we all will be called to account and answerable to God for the life we have led!! And the sins committed!! An old-fashioned Heaven, Hell and Damnation message, using language long ago abandoned by mainstream and contemporary churches, no doubt spoiling the lunchtime digestion for any who would take such a message seriously. These days, mercifully, this is a rare occurrence and he did seem a naturally angry man, perhaps attempting to project that anger on innocent passers-by?

However his use of the "S" word, SIN in the name of Christianity brings me to the theme running through today's reflection: how, as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, are we to deal with language so loaded and multilayered in meaning? The same word however is central to our passage today because the words placed on the lips of Jesus addressing the '*sinful woman*' are "*your sins are forgiven*" (of course, thankfully, hopefully, there is a time and context attached to our understanding).

I have titled my reflection today "*A Good Presence*" because I believe we should all be seeking to discern those possible types of encounters for ourselves, just like the woman who was determined at all cost to encounter Jesus. Encounters that are affirming: they build us up, they sustain, we feel energised. Perhaps the reason most of us are gathered in this way today is all about seeking an encounter with a good presence. I would suggest our friend outside the Queen Victoria Building is not an example of a good presence, too heavily laden with judgement for me.

However we are left in no doubt that when the woman in today's passage encountered Jesus, '*The Good Presence*', she was taking a huge risk, behaving in such an outrageous way (in the context of the time and place) having to face the possibility of even more scorn and judgement for her action, the outcome was a life changing experience, something far more than she could have hoped for?

As we seek to draw insights into the human condition from such ancient myths and parables I am aware that over many centuries our understanding of the nature of the human mind (the human condition) has advanced dramatically.

## To Explain

Let me share with you a brief summary of the theories developed by a world renowned Australian psychologist called Dorothy Rowe, who is well into her eighties now, I believe. In no way am I endorsing her theories and neither am I an expert in this field. Dorothy was born in country Victoria, moving to the UK in the 1970's just as something called "*personal construct psychology*" was emerging. She helped revolutionise the thinking about the treatment of depression, rather than relying on "*bodily processes*", "*Chemical imbalance*" she was advancing the proposition that people's individual experiences were the key to understanding how we interpret what happens to us.

Her mantra has been the cure for much depression is "*wisdom not pills*"! For her, as a practising psychologist this means "*more talk less medication*". Not surprisingly Dorothy holds the view that the Church, and religion in general, has kept her in business. She remains extremely sceptical of the role of religion in people's lives and, for many, the damage it has done. Claiming that, from our earliest years, we are taught to work at being Good. As we grow, we never lose that ingrained habit. So, when something bad does happen to us, we blame ourselves and the slippery slope to depression commences.

In her view it is all about how we interpret what happens to us. If we interpret badly: "*It's my fault (this has happened) I have bought this upon myself, I am not good I am Bad (worse still evil or a sinner)*". All negative.

Dorothy's theory is offering hope by saying that, if we examine an individual's experience closely enough, there exists the possibility to revise that interpretation; we have the power to change that perception.

Now, what has all of this to do with today's scripture in Luke? This exceptional, unusual perhaps, even sensual parable concerning the so-called sinful woman washing, anointing and kissing the feet of Jesus.

Incidentally in his acclaimed book written in the 1960's "*Blood of the Lamb*" Peter De Fries has one of his characters ponder the fact that this account appears in 4 Gospels and varies considerably. The character says:

*'It stands in one gospel that it happened in the home of a Pharisee in the city called Nain and that the woman, who was a sinner, poured it on his feet. In another it was in Bethany in the home of Simon the leper and that the women poured it on his head. John says the woman was Mary and that Lazarus was at the table, which is pretty funny. The other writers didn't mention if it's true. One place you read Judas Iscariot objected to the waste, another that all the disciples did'.*

Perplexed by all this, the character in the book, a lapsed Calvinist, concluded that the Bible couldn't be infallible.

If Dorothy Rowe's theories on depression have only just emerged in the last 40 or 50 years and psychotherapy as a discipline within medical science only dates back to the early 1900s, what is that progress that has been made in advancing our understanding of the human condition, the human mind?

In this context how do 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians view the concept of sin?

Has the term Sin been a means by which Christians across the centuries have come to interpret what has happened to them?

Certainly for the woman in today's passage Dorothy Rowe's 21<sup>st</sup> century insights were not available.

Her 1<sup>st</sup> century understanding was clear, her gender as a woman, her bad experience, her individual circumstances and need for economic survival, resulted in her being cast out and labelled a sinner. This woman probably only knew one definition of Sin and she was it!

However one encounter with a Good Presence resulted in release and forgiveness.

Marcus Borg in his wonderful book: *"The Heart of Christianity"* has some interesting things to say about SIN let me share a brief passage from his chapter on Sin.

*"Is Sin the most helpful way of naming what is wrong? I raise the question because the Bible has many rich images for naming our problem, one of which is Sin. It is a major image. In the Hebrew Bible, the three most common words translated "sin" appears almost one thousand times. But there are other images.*

*To list some but not all of them: we are blind, in exile, in bondage; we have closed hearts; we hunger and thirst; we are lost. Each of these images for our problem has a correlative image; that is, each implies a remedy, a solution. If we are blind, we need to see; if we are in exile, we need to return; if we are in bondage, we need liberation; if we have closed hearts, we need to have hearts that are opened; if we hunger and thirst, we need food and drink; if we are lost, we need a way, we need to be found.*

*So also 'sin' has a correlative image in the Bible and in the Christian imagination: "forgiveness". Thus, when sin is named as the issue, the logic of the image suggests that the solution is forgiveness. When sin becomes the one-size-fits-all designator of the human condition, then forgiveness becomes the one-size-fits-all remedy. And this as Marcus Borg puts it, is the problem. If the issue is blindness, what is needed is not forgiveness, but sight. If the issue is bondage, what we need is not forgiveness but liberation and so forth.*

Marcus Borg is trying to recast our understanding and interpretation of Sin.

As we wrestle with new ways of interpreting these ancient wisdom myths and parables, the struggle to apply our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds and language to a 1<sup>st</sup> century context remains an ongoing challenge.

However the transformative power of an encounter with a "good presence" should encourage us to continue to seek out and discern the very individual experience each of us needs to sustain our spirit. Unique to each of us that 'good presence' will come in many forms. Personal-corporate-experiential-relational.

It may help us to see; it may open our hearts; it may release us from bondage.

It will have a powerful element of positive transformation; we will be better for it. It will bring deep meaning to our lives.

Coincidentally I have recently been reading Hugh Mackay's new book *Beyond Belief*; this thoughtful book tackles many issues associated with Belief and Faith. In discussing how he tries to make sense of what people mean when they say GOD, (and I did think of titling my reflection: *A God Presence*; but that would place another emphasis altogether – which is why I've called it: *A Good Presence*).

'GOD' is a word like 'SIN', laden with meaning, he said. This eminent social psychologist outlines five primary meanings for what he calls that rather ubiquitous and ambiguous word; He draws his conclusions from researching people's individual experiences. They are:

*Number 1 God Means:*

*Something out there, too mysterious to define - possibly a life force, a 'presence' of some kind, bearing no similarity to human existence; immortal, invisible, unknowable, ineffable.*

*Number 2 God Means:*

*A supreme being with properties of creator, ruler and judge - to be worshipped and obeyed; omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.*

*Number 3 God Means:*

*A Heavenly Father - the supernatural version of a human father - characterised by unconditional parental love and care, though capable of stern discipline (tough love) accessible through prayer.*

*Number 4 God Means:*

*An imaginary friend we can talk to, bounce ideas off and share experiences with - an enchanting blend of human and divine.*

*Number 5 God Means:*

*A spirit within and among us whose 'divine' qualities emanate from us, rather than coming to us from an external being or power.*

Mackay makes the obvious point that there is considerable overlap in those understandings.

Helpful as this may be, it underscores just how our individual experiences and understanding shapes our own spiritual journeys. In fact one of the overriding conclusions from his research for the book is the rise of people who term themselves SBNR, spiritual but not religious. It struck me that many of Mackay's thoughts and conclusions seem not incompatible with liberal thinkers of today.

One, or some, of the above will no doubt resonate with you this morning.

Finally at the conclusion of his book Mackay uses a quote attributed to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius saying:

*“If you can find qualities in life better than justice, truth, self-control and courage, or anything finer than your own mind’s contentment in harmonising your actions to the rule of reason, and satisfaction with your own destiny, turn to it with all your heart, and enjoy the miracle you have found”.*

That for me captures what I believe motivated the woman in our ancient wisdom story today and her encounter with Jesus “The Good Presence”.

I would encourage each one of us to continue to seek out that Good Presence for ourselves in order to enrich our lives and those around us.

I have requested we sing the next Hymn “*This is my song*” because it appears at the end of Marcus Borg’s Heart of Christianity, it is his affirmation of why he remained within the Christian tradition when many, I know throughout his life would have said ‘*if that’s the way you see things why don’t you just leave*’. He suggests that, when we sing it, we need only substitute the word “religion” for Nations and Lands. He is saying Christianity is home for him and for many of us here this morning this is true, we can echo that. But he is also saying that it is not the only home, and it is certainly not a superior home to any other. For many of us Christianity has been a life journey in bringing understanding and meaning to our lives. With those thoughts in mind let us stand and join together in singing this affirmation.