

Take Back the Faith

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 August 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 14C

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Luke 13:10-17;

Contemporary reading: *Physicians to Each Other* by Oliver Sachs

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

I wonder if sometimes Jesus thought that his faith had been stolen...the people of the covenant were being controlled by the people of the rule-book. That covenant that would be promised to Jeremiah, whose call we heard in the Hebrew Bible reading, that was to be written on people's hearts, that was to be about love and promise was reduced to rules. The gifts of God for the people of God were now being limited and rationed by religious leaders who were more interested in their own power and prosperity than they were in the well-being of the community; more interested in control than in healing.

The Sabbath, that gift of God for restoration and balance had become a burden that restricted healing and inclusion. So, Jesus broke the rules in light of the dream of the reign, the kingdom, the commonwealth of God.

53 years ago this week Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr's delivered his historic "*I have a dream*" speech at the March on Washington DC. King broke the rules: engaging in non-violent civil disobedience to bring about racial justice in Alabama; and being arrested and imprisoned when the non-violent marchers were met with the violence of water cannons and police dogs.

The March on Washington was planned from the jail in Birmingham, Alabama. King had every reason to hate.

But instead on August 28, 1963 he spoke for his nation of a dream. If he had only denounced the evils of racism and suggested some good policies to counter it, people would barely remember his speech more than half a century later.

The speech holds a special place in public memory because he concluded by confessing his dream. Daring to be a public dreamer ensured his legacy; ensured that it continues to this day.

King was shaped by Jesus's story, by Jesus's modeling of claiming tradition, and tapping its life-giving power. Like Jesus he stood in the public square and named the powers, unmasked the powers, and called for them to be transformed.

Dr Martin Luther King Jr exemplified how to weave faith into public life, not to impose one form of religious understanding on everyone but to call prophetically for society to be just.

At the March on Washington King shared his dream. And that dream came from the mind of a man gripped by a vision/story/myth that Christians have called the reign of God.

The work of political change is hard, long-term work. As people who work for liberation of asylum seekers from Nauru and Manus Island, we know this. As people who work for the full equality for LGBTI people, we know this. As people working for justice for incarcerated Indigenous people, we know this. As people working to promote awareness about climate change, we know this.

This work requires grindingly relentless engagement with the torrid realities of violence, oppression and control. It demands a naming the structures of evil and injustice, over and over again. It involves being on the receiving end of vitriol and in some cases even violence and death. Dr King stood uncompromisingly against racism but more than that, he stood for something. He stood for a dream.

Many of us know excerpts of the speech. The most well-known phrase is *“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.”* It was one of a dozen images from the Dr King’s broader vision. He also said:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all people are created equal.’”

“I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

And then, drawing on the faith that shaped and strengthened him he quoted from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40: *“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”*

The story of the people of God: the story of a people in exile struggling to hold on to their dream of freedom; the story of Jesus living in a society oppressed by political and religious leaders; Jesus claiming Isaiah's dream as his own—inspired and emboldened Martin Luther King. So he went on to link the civil rights movement to those ancient stories of liberation. He said:

“This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

The Christian gospel is for freedom. The Christian gospel is for liberation.

So, when Jesus saw a woman who was bent down by a physical or psychological burden, he sought her liberation. Jesus’ diagnosis was that Satan had bound her for eighteen long years. I don’t know exactly what that means. It could simply be a way of attributing a debilitating disease to the powers of evil in order to make clear that disease doesn’t come from God.

Maybe her body was demonstrating the status of women in a culture where women were regarded as property. As a physically disabled woman she resorted to lurking at the edges of the synagogue worship while men pondered the nature of God.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "*Woman, you are set free from your ailment.*" When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up and began praising God.

Walter Wink, in his book *Engaging the Powers*, suggests that Jesus' action represented "*a revolution happening in seven short verses.*" In this story, Jesus tries to wake people up to the kind of life God wants for them – just as Martin Luther King did in Washington DC. According to Wink, in the midst of a highly patriarchal culture Jesus breaks at least six strict cultural rules:

1. Jesus speaks to a woman. In civilized society, Jewish men did not speak to women in public. Remember the story in John 4 where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. She was shocked because a Jew would speak to a Samaritan. But when the disciples returned, the Scripture records, "*They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.*" In speaking to this woman, Jesus rejects the male constraints on women's freedom.
2. He calls her to the centre of the synagogue. By placing her in the geographic middle, he challenges the notion of a male monopoly on access to - and knowledge of - God.
3. He touches her, which revokes the holiness code. That is the code which protected men from women's uncleanness; from women's sinful seductiveness.
4. He calls her "a daughter of Abraham," a term not found anywhere in prior Jewish literature. This is revolutionary because it was believed that women were saved through their relationships to men. To call her a daughter of Abraham (and by implication, Sarah) is to make her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God.
5. He heals on the Sabbath, the holy day. In doing this he demonstrates God's compassion for people over ceremony, and reclaims the Sabbath for the celebration of God's creativity.
6. Last, and not least, he challenges the ancient belief that her illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. He asserts that she is ill, not because God willed it, but because there is evil in the world.

Jesus's work of liberation created enemies. The breaking of these six cultural rules did not go unnoticed by the religious authorities.

The leader of the synagogue was shocked by Jesus' behaviour and challenged him with the rule book. Just as King's opponents challenged him with the law. Jesus responded by revealing an understanding of God; God as the power of mutual relation.

Jesus saw God's will focused on people, not rules. The rules are there to help people, not to break the people. In Mark 2:27 Jesus says, "*The Sabbath was made for people; not people for the Sabbath.*"

The religious leader pictured God as a rule-maker, sinners as rule-breakers, and the upright as rule-keepers. He reflected the understanding that being "religious" was about obeying commandments. For him, God's rules had become ends in themselves. The rules were first, the needs of people were unimportant.

For Jesus, though, God's chief concern was not about being obeyed, but about fullness of life for people. God was not a rule-maker but a life-giver. When we understand Jesus' view of God, suddenly the focus moves from commands to love for people and for the world.

Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are subordinate to love.

The most powerful and life-giving action I believe Jesus took was to give the 'bent-over' woman a new sense of who she was. This is what Oliver Sacks understood as our being physicians to each other. It's not about the cure but about the relationship.

And that's where the Gospel is good news for all of us, for we are bent people too. Sometimes life beats us down, diminishing our enthusiasm, crushing our spirits. Little by little we find ourselves bent over from failures or disappointments or guilt. We are often like the bent woman lurking at the edges of the sanctuary wondering where we can go.

And so, I believe that this text gives us a vision of what the church can be – a community of healing and relationship. In this church, may we heal one another by our openness to the hurt we all experience because that is what it is to be human.

As we struggle in campaigns for justice, breaking the rules if necessary, taking risks for change, we do so not as super humans but as flawed humans, with our frailties and our fears. As we seek justice and liberation, so we also need compassion, for ourselves, for one another and for the earth.

May this be a place where questions may be asked and the cries of the heart heard.

May this be a place where tears are understood.

May this be a place where our spirits take wing.

Jesus' action in this text today speaks to us of what the church could be so that we too may respond with love, compassion, and with liberation.