

Born of water, born of spirit

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 March 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 2A

Genesis 12: 1-4a; John 3: 1-17; Sung Psalm 121: TiS 76

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

Two Sundays ago, we began a new after church discussion series called *The Jesus Fatwa: Love you Muslim Neighbour*. In a multi faith world, it is crucial to understand other faiths, and to work out what loving our neighbours, who are of a different faith, looks like in practice.

A fatwah is a ruling, a definitive declaration by a religious leader. The series reminds us that Jesus's key fatwah was that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus did not qualify this. Not: *love our neighbours with some exceptions*. Not: *love our neighbours except those whose faith is foreign to our own*.

As well as understanding other faiths, we also need to look at our own faith, especially the aspects of Christian belief that are an obstacle to relationships with other faiths.

This story that we heard about Nicodemus can be read on many levels but today I want to examine how the teaching about being born from above, or born again as it is often translated, has become a Christian text of terror for people of other faiths, and even for people within the Christian faith.

When I was a girl, I had a little cardboard plaque with the King James Version of this text on it.

"For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I learned it off by heart.

It was white with embossed silver script, and it had a little pale blue ribbon. I was given it by my grandmother and I treasured it.

It spoke to me of God's love and the assurance that because I knew Jesus, I would not be separated from that love. It fitted with my experience and my understanding, having been brought up with a fair degree of social privilege in a loving family; and I believed that the world and God were good, and would be good to me.

A few years later, I began to think more deeply about this text, when I read it in the context of the rest of chapter three of John's gospel, understanding then, that implicit in that verse that meant so much to me, is what comes in the next two verses. It's a good news/bad news story.

In John 3:17, there is the good news: *“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved ...”*

In John 3:18 (which is not included in the lectionary reading) comes the bad news: *“Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*

At that point, I began to worry about the God whom I understood as love. How could a God whose name is love, condemn in advance, those who did not know or believe in Jesus? As a young adult, I met Christians who were not like the comfortable, caring congregation that I grew up in. Christians who seemed to delight that they were on the inside with God and seemed pleased that these verses meant that other people would be damned, excluded from God’s love for eternity.

I realised that the verse that I had loved as a child was often used as a weapon against people of other faiths - or people of no faith. Or even against other Christians who didn’t believe exactly the same as they did. The ones they considered were not true Christians.

I also began to worry about God’s attitude to Jesus. I had concerns about God’s parenting style. I was told that God sent Jesus to die as a sacrifice for our sins. I remember as a teenager, hoping that because Jesus was God too, it didn’t really hurt when they nailed him to a cross (such were the convolutions of my teenage theological mind).

When I left home to go to university I took the cardboard plaque off the wall and put it away in a box of things that had been part of my childhood.

I would never hang it again because the text that had assured me of God’s love for the world was also used as a weapon against the world God loved. It had been used for Christian exclusivism, and to support the idea that God requires violence for salvation.

Now when it appears in the lectionary, my heart sinks rather than sings.

While we no longer hold to Calvinism’s teaching about the elect, it is still a key Christian assumption that while God’s gracious love extends to all, people can choose to accept this gift through faith, or not. People can put their faith in Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, or not. And if they refuse, then it’s really their fault that they are not among the redeemed.

So today, as we move through the season of Lent, as we approach Easter deeply embedded in a tradition that still glorifies sacrifice and violence, how do we understand redemption or salvation?

Where, in our tradition, can we find the streams of living water that we seek in the desert this Lent?

The most potent religion in Western culture is not Christianity, but a belief in the redemptive power of violence. Although Jesus inaugurated a new order based on partnership, equality, compassion and non-violence, his example and his teachings have been eclipsed by an emphasis on a human unworthiness; an emphasis that demands and defends the need for Jesus’ violent, suffering, and atoning death.

As contemporary Christians, we need to know that this interpretation is not our only option. It has never been the only way of understanding the life and death of Jesus.

Rita Nakashima Brock, a Japanese-American Christian feminist (who I have spoken about before), has written about the shape of walkways to traditional Japanese homes. She tells us that the walkways are curved because ghosts can only follow straight paths into a house. In the book *Proverbs and Ashes* she writes a passage that I find very thought-provoking when I think about the meaning ascribed to the death of Jesus, the Jesus who tradition tells us died for the sins of humanity, past, present and future.

Rita wrote:

“Christianity...does not understand the power of ghosts. Christianity is haunted by the ghost of Jesus. His death was an unjust act of violence that needed resolution.

Such deaths haunt us. Rather than address the horror and anguish of his death, Christianity has tried to make it a triumph. Rather than understand and face directly into the pain of his death so his spirit can be released, we keep claiming he is alive. We try to use him for our personal well-being, to release us from our own burdens. We keep calling to his ghost to take care of us, instead of letting him go. This haunting has erupted into violence in the name of Jesus, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, the need for punishment, for judgment of the unredeemed, as if the infliction of more pain on others could cure our own. We have not found the curved path that frees us, that will let us heal from and relinquish the trauma of [his] violent death.”¹

Moving through this Lent, here at Pitt St Uniting Church, I hope that we will engage the stories of the past, and find in the things that have been life-denying, new ways of seeing that are life-affirming.

Always before us in Lent is the crucifixion of Jesus, death in agony on the cross. How do we transform the way the story is told that we might find life and freedom instead of death and guilt? How can we reimagine redemption?

The premise of the book, *Proverbs and Ashes* is a simple one: Rita Brock and her co-author Rebecca Parker argue that the Doctrine of Atonement put forward by St. Anselm (which is that God sent Jesus to die to pay the price for our sins) is theologically wrong. It has created a culture of abuse against women, men and children in the Western Christian tradition for nearly 1,500 years. It has glorified suffering and violence and taught passivity to the victims of violence.

It is dangerous theology. It hardens our hearts when we interpret violence as God's will. We turn away from the suffering of others: from the survivors of intimate violence; from people facing the death penalty; abused asylum seekers of other races and religions - out of sight out of mind; indigenous people torn from the land that is sacred to them and essential for the survival of their souls, subject to mass incarceration when they cannot cope with the rupture.

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*. Beacon Press, Boston MA: 2001, p. 60.

Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock insist that God is not a wrathful or judging God. The Presence of God is, they claim “*quiet moments of mutual discovery by friends sharing coffee on a sunlit afternoon/a community meeting that resolves to resist violence/a dark ocean shimmering like diamonds...*” just to name a few.²

They suggest that God isn't a sentient being so much as a state of being, in and beyond each of our hearts and minds. Its presence is a fire that burns high and lights our way through the dark night. God is Love, and is that part of us that can survive and transcend all suffering that comes to us through the random tragedies of life. God, they say, is “*the recollection of steady love*”; the steady love that remains with us through storm and through night.

What would be our relationship to Jesus if his death was purely an act of terrible violence by an empire that was determined to crush all opposition? If Jesus' death was simply that and not a mythic sacrifice for our failings, how do we consider his life?

Perhaps the best that we can do is to return to Jesus the human, the teacher, the subversive sage, the social prophet, and the healer and ask ourselves whether his teachings hold true for us today. To find in Jesus' life, as much as we have ascribed to his death. To see in him the one who reveals the nature of God and the purpose of creation, including the place of humanity within creation.

Who taught us that God's love for the world is not only for those who look and believe and think like us, but even for our enemies and for those who persecute us. It was such love that stirred the early church to open its doors to Gentiles and to people whose very existence was troubling: the blind, the lame, the eunuchs.

This Jesus, to whom Nicodemus came in the night. This Jesus, who invites us to redemption that is liberation and to creative transformation, in water and in spirit.

In this we see the way of Jesus that leads to life and God, as the Way of openness and inclusivity. Jesus is the way because his way is welcoming and honouring of the diversity of peoples and paths. It is the way of justice and peace. It frees rather than limits. It gives us the possibility of forgiving ourselves and others, of living hopefully instead of in despair and regret. It gives us a theory for appreciating the diversity of other religious stories, like Islam, through which spiritual experience and wisdom are expressed.

This lent, I invite us to recall and remember, that over time, divine compassion for the oppressed, and divine passion for justice, have always called forth prophets to declare that God's love includes all, regardless of age or race, nationality or religious creed, gender identity or sexual orientation. Prophets who imagine a world in which God's love is still at work among the oppressed and the outsiders – and those who stand in solidarity with them.

This lent, we are called to be friends of God and prophets. To join in - reclaiming the essential truth at the heart of this Gospel: that God so loves the world...

and this love is available to us all.

So may it be for us, on our path, this lent

² Nakashima Brock and Parker, *op cit*, p. 252.