

# Trouble and fears

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 May 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 4A

**Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Contemporary Reading: "I worried" by Mary Oliver from *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*; Gospel: John 14: 1-14**

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

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In John chapter 14 we return, in this time after Easter, to Jesus' farewell to his wavering disciples leading up to the time of his death. John's gospel is theology not history, not a record of Jesus's speech, but a sophisticated articulation of the way that one of the early church communities was coming to understand the meaning of Jesus.

Within it are words of comfort around which I've shaped the liturgy for today. "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me.*" As the song we sang re-tells it: "*be not afraid.*"

This comforting commandment – to be not afraid - has been part of my journey as a gay Christian for many years. I first heard the song titled "Be Not Afraid" on a video called "Maybe we're talking about a different God". The video told the story of the ecclesiastical trial of US Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Janie Spahr. In 1991, Janie was called to serve as one of four Co-Pastors at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York. In 1992, because she was a lesbian, Janie was denied that call by the denomination's highest court. Though they couldn't call her as their minister, in March of 1993 the Downtown United Presbyterian Church invited Janie to become their evangelist; to spread the good news by "personing the issue" and challenging exclusive church policies. With their funding and support, Janie travelled throughout the US, educating and informing Presbyterians and others working on behalf of greater inclusiveness for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

I first saw the video at a time when the Presbyterian of Aotearoa New Zealand was debating about whether gay and lesbian people could be ordained ministers. From 1995 to 2013, I was both participating in those debates, and the subject of them. Several Assemblies sought to remove gay and lesbian clergy from ministry, and they did, eventually, pass legislation that would prevent us from taking up new calls, legislation which I had to challenge to take up my call to St Andrew's on The Terrace in 2002.

The trauma of those years of religious heterosexism and homophobia is part of who I am. And so, when I go this week, as one of the people invited to a Uniting Church conversation on marriage that will take place in Queensland from Wednesday to Friday, I need to hear again those gospel words: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me*" and I need to sing again, "Be Not Afraid." I am fearful, not just because of my past experiences, but because of the way this conversation has been set up.

While we all know the issue of contention is marriage between partners of the same sex, the conversation is being framed as a general discussion about marriage, a so-called “space for grace”, where we are to come with no expectation of a particular outcome. LGBTI people are seen to have no more stake in the conversation than anyone else and so the Assembly Guidelines for the conversation did not ask Synod General Secretaries to ensure that LGBTI people would be present. When Uniting Network questioned this, we were told that no special interest groups were being particularly invited.

It is distressing to think that the only group who are currently excluded from the rite of marriage in the Uniting Church are viewed as a *special interest group*, whose views matter no matter more than anyone else.

I have a tightness in my chest, and a sickness in my stomach, as I think about once again being in the space where the lives and relationships of LGBTI people are not afforded equal dignity.

But before I explore, whether or not it even makes sense to not be afraid, there is some theological baggage in John 14 that must be addressed.

Verse 6 is crucial. Often it’s the only verse we actually hear when those passages are read: “*I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to God but by me*”.

The problem we have with this statement is that it is filtered through zealots who have used scripture as a proof text against people who do not share their view of Jesus.

For progressive Christians, who value other faith traditions as paths to the Sacred, this interpretation presents a serious problem. It has a terrible history, having been invoked to justify discrimination and violence against non-Christians. We cannot just ignore it – even as much as we want to focus on not being afraid.

So as always in biblical interpretation, it is important to understand context. The writer of the Gospel, probably a disciple of John’s, is writing during the time of the Roman emperor Diocletian, near the end of the first century when persecution against Christians had become vicious and was being encouraged through most of the Roman Empire. The writer wants to remind his readers of the promises of Jesus. And the message that comes through loud and clear is that we are not abandoned, that we are not alone, and that the God of Jesus is like the Jesus the disciples had known and loved: filled with love, forgiveness, and passionate for justice.

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These words: *I am the way, the truth and the life* were spoken to Jesus’ closest disciples. “No-one” in this context means “not any of you.” The disciples were adherents of a minority faith in a world filled with people of other faiths.

Jesus was not speaking these words to Hindus, Muslims, or even to those Jews who did not believe in him. This text is not claiming that Jesus is the only way to God.

This text states that faithfully taking the way of Jesus is done by following him, not by worrying about where the edges of the path might be.

Faithful following of the way of Jesus will not make us hostile to people of other faiths or no faith, but it will make us distinctly different from them, part of the rich fabric of human religiosity.

Following Jesus means seeking intimacy and communion with God, practising radical hospitality, and living out the belief that we are not alone, for we live in God's world.

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When pressed about his identity, Jesus always deflected the questions, pointing instead toward the central motifs of his teaching...

1. the presence of a compassionate God, and
2. the radical demands that are made on human living in response to God's love and compassion.

Our challenge is both to resist the use of these words for exclusion and violence and also to hear them differently in our own lives.

If these words can be read in terms of relationship with the Sacred rather than describing a dogma to be believed, they can be an invitation to us to be also on the journey that Jesus chartered.

Jesus is the pathway into the depths of the Sacred-self-neighbour relationship.

This is the way... into the mystery of our common existence.

Jesus helps us understand the truth about that common existence.

He uncovers what is hidden, and brings to light this deep dimension of human existence.

Jesus is life because he is the way and truth by which God, self, and neighbour, break their isolation and flow into each other.

John Dominic Crossan paraphrased Jesus' claim as "*I am the authentic vision of existence.*"

'I am the way, the truth the life...' "I am the authentic vision of existence."

As Jesus challenged the domination system of his day, so these words contend with the powers and principalities of our day.

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And so let me return to the words of promise and presence.

Fear not. Do not be afraid. Phrases from the post-Easter tradition of Jesus's community. What do they mean to us now? I don't think it means we never need to be anxious or afraid.

The early Christians for whom this passage was written had reason to be afraid.

Suffering continues today in our world. Misery in many parts of the globe makes us deeply troubled, not only for ourselves but for others who are undergoing the terrors of war, dislocation, genocide and natural disasters that destroy livelihoods and families. We watch the unhinged machinations of the US president on the global stage. So many people are dying in domestic violence situations in Australia. Young people, especially indigenous kids, kill themselves in epidemic proportions. We contend with unpredictable weather and a natural environment that can inspire in one moment and destroy life the next, and an economic and political system that operates with what seems like utter disregard for the poor and the powerless. It is sometimes very difficult to remember that we are in Eastertide. We are troubled. We are fearful. We are afraid.

Sometimes fear is appropriate, sensible and life-saving. When I first saw the image that is on the front cover of the order of service, I thought about the difference between appropriate fear and fear that limits our lives and our encounters with others. Between the fear of a disaster that moves us to be as safe as we can, and the fear that paralyses us and limits our ability to live full lives.

The symbol is a mock-up of a London Underground sign. The word underground was replaced with "we're not afraid". It was done following the terrorist bombings on July 7, 2005. Of course, the people of London were afraid, as were people in Sydney after the Martin Place siege, as people are now in the face of lone wolf terrorism in London and other European cities, as people are in Gaza and Israel, in Syria and Iraq. As are people who make their way to Australia from their homelands as refugees and asylum seekers.

Life, predictable and relatively safe, is no longer so after violence or environmental disaster. Of course, we are afraid.

And yet, the sign speaks of another human tendency, a resistance to letting fear limit our connection with one another.

When I first saw the "we're not afraid" sign, I wondered if it was bravado. A denial of our natural response. A failure to face the reality of danger. But as I've reflected on it, and on the words of Jesus in John's gospel, I think the assertion has a different quality.

It is an act of resistance, a refusal, not just of fear, but of a reaction that separates people from one another; of our tendency to be fearful of people who look, act and believe differently from us. In spite of the violence, the fear, the chronic anxiety, we are to keep taking the train. We are to hold to the way that trusts that love is stronger than hate, life is stronger than death.

We can accept the invitation to live untroubled and unafraid. Not because we deny the disasters, or the violence, or the exclusion, but because we sense that the Spirit of compassion can still ensure that there are many rooms, that hospitality makes welcome the stranger, in an earthly dwelling place that has room for us all.

Today these words, heard in the midst of the realities of injustice in our world, remind us, as Mary Oliver does, that we must also live fully, breathing the air, taking our old or young bodies out into the morning sun and singing.

Trust that God is the way Jesus spoke of and lived out. Trust in the God of compassion who assures us that there's a place for us, know that the meaning of life is to share that compassion in the world - that there's a place for all!

I will hold these words and this community as I go into this week.

May God bless our journey together as the community of Pitt Street Uniting Church and may we have the courage and strength to continue to create home for one another - and for the homeless people of our city – and for the people of our world.