

The generosity of God ... more than we can imagine

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 August 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Robyn Floyd

Pentecost 11A

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: 21-28

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

Giving a reflection in this congregation is a new task for me.

It has been very reassuring to have a mentor as I have been thinking about the readings. Shirley Maddox has provided cups of tea and biscuits, searching questions and helpful feedback as we have explored these readings together. It is good to have company on the road.

The Gospel story we heard today is recorded three times. It is obviously an important story.

In Matthew's Gospel and in Mark, the story is set in the Jewish landscape and community. The Pharisees questioning Jesus' authority, and Jesus arguing back - all about scriptural interpretation.

Jesus is harking back to neglected strands of Judaism in the Hebrew Bible. The argument is familiar territory with familiar protagonists and familiar language.

It takes an outsider to push Jesus' thinking to challenge him to understand, to take on board, the full breadth of those teachings.

This reading raised these questions for me:

- Who would be loved by God? Could even traditional enemies be welcomed into God's Kingdom?
- Who was Jesus called to minister to?
- We might say: "*Who is in, and who is out?*"?

In the Gospel reading, I imagine the scenes that make up this story.

In the first scene, I see two groups of Jewish people – the Pharisees, and Jesus and his disciples. In amongst the crowd, these two groups are in strong discussion about '*who is in and who is out*' of the community.

The Pharisees cannot agree with Jesus, nor he with them. They part - the disciples observing that the Pharisees had been offended.

Then the next scene, this time, Jesus and his followers, and an outsider.

Again a bold /strong interchange about '*who is in and who is out*'. Who could receive God's love, who was Jesus called to serve?

This scene is sharper for me; I see her and him closer up. It's like a repeated pattern for me. The Pharisees could not hear what Jesus was saying, bound by their own mindset thinking, and in the next telling, it seems to me that Jesus could not hear what the Canaanite woman was saying – bound by his own mindset thinking.

This got me thinking about how we respond to points of discussion as teachers and as learners.

I work in a Primary school at Bankstown. At our school we use the model called '*Growth mindset*'. It is basically the idea that learning comes from hard, persistent work, rather than just being lucky or clever, or being good. That we can all grow in our understanding.

Part of the language of this way of responding to students is to use the notion of 'YET'.

"You might have made a mistake, this means you haven't learned how to do this - YET.

I hope you don't think me too frivolous if I tell you that I think the Canaanite woman is an intuitive proponent of Growth mindset theory.

She says: *"Have mercy on me....."* She thinks: *"He hasn't answered YET"...*

She says *"My daughter needs your help"*. She thinks, *"He hasn't looked at me YET! "He hasn't sent me away YET"*

"Lord Help me....." *"He hasn't helped me YET"*

She was feisty, and determined and desperate and sure. And maybe she had been rejected so many times that she was not shocked into silence.

Jesus says, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."* She says *"Lord Help me,"*

Jesus says, *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs....."*

In my mind she thinks: ***"This conversation isn't finished YET!"***

She says, *"Yes Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table...."*

In my imagination I see all of Jesus' habits of thinking about life and faith; I see all of that in a bubble, and in this scene, I see that bubble burst.

I imagine a gasp, a startle. Fancy that!

This outsider, the Canaanite woman changes Jesus' thinking. She was, in my mind, a point of learning in his ministry.

I imagine him reflecting... *"I didn't understand, but because of you I get it now. Oh my goodness! You, and all like you are included in God's love."*

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

The call to people of faith to include all who ask to not limit the love of God, this call is not new.

In the Isaiah reading we heard the call to the Jewish people to look again at who shall be gathered into the great love of God. Who is in and who is out.

This part of Isaiah was written some hundreds of years before Jesus' time. It was a call to the Jewish people after their time of exile. They had returned to Jerusalem in small numbers, and they were determinedly hanging on to their culture and religious ideas.

They needed to change their thinking. This was the shocking message from this prophet Isaiah to them.

“.....and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, to love the name of the Lord and hold fast my covenant.....these I will bring to my holy mountain.....their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

In Isaiah I hear the call to include. Look outward, open your arms to welcome. Think 'bigger' about faith and faithfulness, because God is thinking bigger than you or I can ever imagine.

The Canaanite woman challenged Jesus to understand the full breadth of the teachings.

Are we open to the possibility that our future thinking might be influenced by some outsider inviting us to engage, to think bigger than we thought possible?

If we were making a line graph of our learning as adults in a complex world, what might it look like? Mine! Mine – straight up like that; a lovely straight diagonal. Steady upward growth. Well, if I look closer, I see some points along my graph that are a bit wildly spikey; big changes in trajectory that indicate a big change in my understanding.

I would like to tell you a story that might illustrate one of those dramatic spikes in my professional life.

I love being a teacher and this story takes place 2 years ago when one of my responsibilities was to field opportunities for visiting performers at school. I took a phone call, out of the blue from the Bell Shakespeare Company. Yes that iconic Sydney based one.

Would we like to see a performance at our school, of a version of a Mid Summer's Night's Dream? For FREE!

Well - it was late in the afternoon – late to be thinking about anything, let alone something out of the blue. And it was a very busy time; in my head I was trying to nut out programs for the remediation of reading and I did think: *“I just don't know that the kids; - 6 year olds to 12 year olds - 95 % non-English Speaking background - well is this going to be where they're at?”*

As Wallace from 'Wallace and Grommit' would say *“I prevaricated about the bush”*.

Bell Shakespeare rang me 3 times, and in the end I did say 'yes'. And I know you are all sitting there thinking: *Were you MAD? What was stopping you? You were over thinking!*

And I was!

6 year olds to 12 year olds all experienced a whole new raft of learning. They loved it, they got it and they talked about it.

The next time I saw Year Ones in the library, 6 year olds Youseff and Amira stood with their hands on their hips proudly sneering at one other – and they were speaking lines they'd voluntarily learned off by heart:

"Ill met by moonlight Proud Titania!"

"What Jealous Oberon, is it you?"

And 2 days later a young teacher, teaching 7 year olds, reported to me that there had been a small difference of opinion on the Basketball court, and a girl student had flounced off because of an umpire's decision. A boy, Aiden, had watched all this develop, and he called out to the girl, from some distance: *"There's no need to be such a Queen Titania about it!"*

The teacher and I both felt that our 'work here was done!'

The point of the story is that, in that moment of performance and activities, I had that gasp of recognition, and a shift in my focus as a teacher.

It took an outsider to ask the question, to make the invitation to engage, which allowed me to think broader.

My neat line graph about my development as a teacher took a wild and wonderful and a very untidy leap off the diagonal and made a new path.

I think in his encounter with the Canaanite woman, the graph associated with Jesus would have a wild, generous, spike.

Let me encourage you to think about the 'spikes' and times in your life when your understanding changed. Are we open to the possibility that our future thinking might be influenced by some outsider inviting us to engage, to think bigger and broader than we thought possible.

All things are not known in us - YET.

These last 3 weeks I have been very aware of the many news reports which to my mind focus on, 'who is in and who is out' of our Australian Society. Don't you find that once you start thinking about a theme, everything seems to fit into the message?

- The call for the people of Sydney to not exclude those living in the homeless camp in Martin Place.
- The Marriage equality postal plebiscite and the many debates and commentary.

- Our Country's policy about how we will treat refugees, and the process for becoming an Australian citizen.
- Burqas in the Senate chamber, and the whole background to that action.

So much to think about.

But for this time I want to reflect on the Australian Indigenous meetings that have taken place this year.

I was listening to the TV and radio reports of the big meeting at Uluru in May and then, this month, of the Garma festival in East Arnhem Land.

The Indigenous people of Australia have had to keep on talking, asking, communicating, participating in conferences and meetings - for generations.

The persistence is just astounding and speaks of great need. The level of exhaustion in doing it all again with a different group of politicians must be high.

The meeting in May said *"we call for a treaty to be established, and that a permanent place for First Australians be constitutionally enshrined"*.

And on TV and radio reports, we heard the responses: *"Impossible!" "Ridiculous!" "Completely unnecessary!"*

In August at the GARMA festival, Galarrwuy Yunupingu implored politicians to take action on Constitutional change:

"You will know at Uluru we started a fire. A fire, we hope burns bright for Australia...."

I hear in this situation, the call for a change in mindset, a demand for inclusion, recognition. There is no universal *"Gasp of recognition"* in this situation YET.

I also hear in some responses: a clinging onto what is known. The old boundaries and definitions. Who is in and who is out? A fear of change.

The immediate response to deny importance, to deny rights, resources, and need, is a familiar first response by those who have power, and often by those who are bystanders. Sometimes there is a second response - an accusation of emotional blackmail, of diverting Governments and institutions away from "more important work."

And then, of course, there is the slow grinding of time and conferring.

Are we open to the possibility that our future thinking might be influenced by the 'other', inviting us to change, to think bigger than we thought possible?

I believe that I am called to try to understand complex situations through a mindset of love.

To watch, to be in relationship, to see what is life giving, to bear witness to what I see and feel - as best I can.

So – back to the two readings. The people in Isaiah were in danger of becoming solidified in their rituals and their ways of thinking; of becoming more narrow, and rigid.

Jesus chastises the keepers of Jewish tradition for doing the same thing.

And what about us?

The Uniting Church recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. We could cling on to the Basis of Union and solidify our thinking around that document.

At Assembly, Synod and Presbytery meetings of the Uniting Church, our representatives report on the vibrant multicultural nature of our church. On the dynamic, energetic nature of theological discussion bedded in diverse cultural tradition, and of new relationships built through being the faithful community.

The stories today remind us that we can be too easily tempted to define “who can be in and who can be out” and too easily tempted to constrict God’s love and invitation to belong.

To be solidified in the tradition.

Paul in his letter to the Romans reminds the early Christian communities that new people coming in, and new ideas, do not mean that the old has no value, or indeed that God has changed God’s allegiance. The call is to move on in the tradition, into the new space.

“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

And we also know this:-

The logical result of opening up and welcoming and including people who we felt could not be included, is that we will grow and change. We move on in the tradition, into the new space.

Jesus’ understanding of the community of faith, of his ministry, grew and changed.

The migrant community of Isaiah’s time had to grow and change, and we too are called to be the church, to grow in our understanding of the breadth of God’s love and change to embrace all.

God’s generosity is bigger than you or I can ever imagine.

The Canaanite woman was just asking for the crumbs. She got a whole banquet.

And I am reminded that in another story we heard at the beginning of August, 5000 families were fed and 12 baskets of leftover crumbs were gathered up.

Commentator Janet Williams notes that: *“Whenever we are tempted to make our faith something small and anxious, we need reminding that even God’s crumbs can satisfy us completely.”*ⁱ

ⁱ From Jane Williams, “Lectionary Reflections” 2011 SPCK (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge) P101