

Deepening the Dialogue

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 September 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Jolyon Bromley

Pentecost 16A

Matthew 20:12-17;

Interfaith Reading: *Teachings on Non-Violence* from Mahatma Gandhi;
Contemporary Reading: “*The opening of eyes*” by David Whyte

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

It was my privilege, at the beginning of September, to introduce the Interfaith theme for the month. In essence that reflection was about what we could learn from other faiths in terms of understandings and spiritual practices. We could call that – a breathing in.

Today I have the opportunity to round off this theme with – Deepening the Dialogue. We could call this today a kind of breathing out.

As always I'm interested in spirituality – which I see as connecting - to what Gandhi describes as the Highest Source, which is within each one of us. So it's connecting with our inner life and the inner life of others. But it's also about Presence, sensing something more, something transcendent.

It seems to me that this is what David Whyte's poem “*The Opening of Eyes*” is about; seeing, sensing the transcendent in the “*passing light over water*”, in the heart, in the fire of the burning bush and in the earth itself felt through bare feet.

A thought came to me after my last reflection, an image really, that I was just paddling around the edge of very deep waters. So to begin with today I want to do something quite different; I want to build an imaginative picture with you; a kind of parable.

I want you to imagine looking out over a vast sea with a beach at the edge stretching into the distance in both directions. This is the Sea of Faith or Spirituality! And, like the beaches in Europe where hotels own that part of the beach in front of them and restrict access to the sea for anyone who isn't one of their guests, our beach is divided up between the various religions – Hindus have a section, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and their multitudinous subgroups – all offering access from their own patch to the Sea of Faith.

Way down the far end of the beach we can just make out groups of indigenous peoples who have a special relationship to the sea, in fact they see no difference between being in the sea of spirituality and on the dry land of the physical. It's all one! The land, the sea, their body. One day, we may be able to regain that sense of integrated wholeness, but with self-awareness and conscious individuality.

In the past, for countless thousands of years, they could roam the full length of the beach without restriction.

Then Hindus appeared on the beach and they felt such a special relationship with the sea, such a deep immersion in spirituality that they regarded the land as “maya”, illusion. Any time they spent on the land they kept yearning to return to the sea.

A group broke away from them and claimed their own part of the beach and called themselves Buddhists. They retained a close connection to the sea but were quite at home on the beach.

Then a new group of people appeared. They were called Jews and they felt a special inner call to the Sea of Faith. And they built a magnificent Pavilion (even greater than the one at Bondi) where you could change clothes and shower and buy all sorts of things. But you could only gain access to the sea by going through their Pavilion and they had lots of rules and regulations about who could get in.

After a time a group of people got jack of all these restrictions and decided to claim a large chunk of the beach for themselves and anyone else who wanted to join them. They called themselves Christians and started claiming more and more of the beach. Then something absolutely terrible happened!

A marauding band of barbarians from way inland arrived and totally trashed the Pavilion and essentially scattered the Jews to wherever they could find a bit of beach. Even though the Christians had been quite close to them in the past they were reluctant to give up any of their beach and in many places they were actually hostile.

Then a new crowd of people arrived called Muslims and they were very welcoming to anybody who wanted to join them on the part of the beach they claimed - but they were very strict with their rules and made sure that men and women didn't go into the water in the same place. Lots of them still paddle in the shallows or fully immerse and some of them called Sufis even swim way out into the depths.

Just recently, much further up the beach a growing number of people gather, a real mix, who come from all over. Some of them call themselves New Age. They don't have any life guards or flags to swim between. There don't seem to be any rules. Everybody just hangs out and does their own thing. In fact there are reports that some of these people don't even wear bathers!

These days, up and down the beach, things are changing. Lots of people just play around on the sand and don't even dip their toes in the water. They are so caught up playing beach volleyball and building their own sandcastles they take no interest in the Sea of Faith at all.

This is particularly true in the Christian section. But some of them are great swimmers and go way out beyond the others just bobbing up and down in the shallows.

The point is the further you swim out in the Sea of Faith the less important are the activities going on on the beach . There's a kind of fellowship in the deeper waters for swimmers who meet out there. There's a sense of oneness with the sea and all the others out there which is very fulfilling.

But back on the beach it's important to break down the barriers and speak to each other!

In my time on the *Relations with Other Faiths* committee we've had a number of inspiring encounters with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Buddhists and Zoroastrians.

Without doubt the longest and most productive has been our dialogue with leading members of the Jewish community, which has been going on for about 3 years. This brings us close to the heart of this reflection today – Deepening the Dialogue.

It's hard for me to share something meaningful about this process without getting lost in the detail of facts and figures, arguments, discussions and experiences. Members of our committee were passionate about justice for Palestinian people and the Jewish representatives were passionate about defending Israel.

We were able to create a safe space to honestly share our perspectives - political, theological and spiritual. At first it was tense but as we learnt to respect and trust each other, strong bonds of friendship developed and we planned our study tour to Israel/Palestine to explore together the reality on the ground. That was a transformative experience for us all. We've resolved to give practical support to Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups working cooperatively, at a grassroots level to lay the foundation for peace among the people.

Let me share two quick glimpses into how this dialoguing process has been mutually enriching.

Last Thursday was International Day of Peace and also Rosh Hashana, Jewish New Year the beginning of the year 5,778. This is a festival of prayer and reflection on the past year initiating the 10 Days of Awe leading up to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement which involves prayer and 26 hours of fasting. The High Holy Days continue for another 5 days till Sukkot, the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. People create little shelters with palm fronds and eat all their meals there, and for the really observant even sleep there for the next 7 days. This is to remind them of what it was like for their ancestors who endured forty years wandering in the wilderness.

Our Jewish friends shared with great enthusiasm how they experienced the rigours of these festivals, what they did, what it meant and how it affected their inner life.

The dialogue has been helpful to me in another way. I'm often sent Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations online. The introductory description reads – *“Drawing on his own Franciscan heritage and other wisdom traditions Richard Rohr reframes misunderstood teachings to reveal the foundation of contemplative Christianity: God as loving relationship.”* We could add - relationship that embraces all people.

His focus for this particular meditation was Substitutionary Atonement. This is a concept I abandoned many years ago. I do not believe that Jesus died so that God could forgive me for my sins or that a loving God would require a blood sacrifice in order to forgive. As Rohr says, *“Why would God need a blood sacrifice before God could love what God had created.”*

He goes on to add a dimension I had not previously understood – he writes that we have misunderstood the nature of animal sacrifice in the Judaic temple. He quotes Marcus Borg (a significant voice in Progressive Christianity and a strong voice against the theory of substitutionary atonement) who says:

These sacrifices were “not about payment for sin” but “making something holy by giving it as a gift to God”; sacrifices were about “thanksgiving, petition, purification and reconciliation”, not substitution. (Borg, The Real Meaning of the Cross.) “Paying the price” and atonement with the scapegoat - are metaphors of transformation. Theologians have mistakenly understood them in a transactional way instead of in a transformational way.

In the dialogue group, I was able to run these interpretations of what went on in the temple, past an orthodox and a progressive rabbi, both of whom confirmed Borg's understandings, adding that there were different kinds of sacrifice, one which was consumed and one which was fully burnt, representing a change of heart. One of the group offered to research the notion of “scapegoat” further and share it with us next time.

Another question - *if there was a holy temple today would sacrifices still need to be offered?* The answer – *now specific prayers are offered instead of sacrifices.*

If Jesus didn't die for our sins, what then was his mission? One understanding of the mission of the Cosmic Christ, as Matthew Fox calls him, is to transform the universe based on wisdom, into a universe based on love. Christ's teaching about love calls us to do something incredibly hard, to expand our capacity to love, beyond family and friends to include neighbours who are different, strangers, people we don't like and even enemies. More than teaching, he acted out this profound love through the way he lived his life, his actions and behaviour. (The turning over of the tables in today's gospel reading is a powerful demonstration of his support for the poor and exploited.)

That kind of love is not sentimental! It's challenging, compassionate and caring. One step in that direction is engaging with those around us who are different. This is what impels our dialogue. We have moved through confrontation to understanding, respect and now genuine friendship.

So to conclude – let us open our eyes, our hearts and our minds to the transcendent moment, to explore the deep waters at the source, to awaken love in the human heart.