

Hope embodied, liberation promised

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 December 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 4B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; *A blessing of hope*, by Jan Richardson in
Circle of Grace; Luke 1: 46b-55 (the Magnificat)

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

Three weeks ago, I stood here and lamented that because Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday this year, Advent would be only just three short weeks. Three weeks ago, I did not imagine that I would be spending two of those three weeks in New Zealand for the last days of my mother, Isobel's, life and the time of preparation for farewell at the services that took place on Monday and Tuesday.

I want to say heartfelt thanks to this community for your support over the past eight months since it became clear that my mother's cancer was not able to be cured. For making it possible for me to visit several times during those months. Thank you also for kind messages and cards – and for the beautiful flowers that were delivered to our house.

On the Thursday after the first Sunday in Advent, I worked distractedly on liturgies while watching the final marriage equality debate in parliament. The vote finally took place at 5:30 pm. That evening while we were joyously celebrating with friends, I got a call from my brother to say that my mother's condition had changed significantly and that I should come home. I was on the plane at 8 o'clock the next morning and Clare joined me the following day.

The next few days were spent with my father, my siblings and our partners, sharing the care and companionship, with amazing support from district nurses, care-workers who taught us how to physically care for a totally dependent, bed-ridden person, and our GP who visited each morning and evening and ensuring that the morphine pump was effectively controlling pain.

The afternoon before my mother died we sang Christmas carols to her. "*Sleep in heavenly peace*" became a prayer on my lips as I sang and tried to suppress tears. Though she could no longer speak or move, my mother's eyes lit up, and she smiled in beautiful recognition, as we sang.

That night, before we went to bed, Clare and I sang her the Aaronic blessing, the same words that would have been sung to her at her baptism 86 years ago, the same words that have been used for Jewish and Christian blessings for thousands of years. From 4:30 am the next morning, we were all awake and with Isobel for the last two hours of her life before her body finally let go.

The funeral director came mid-morning, took her body for preparation, returning her to us in the late afternoon. She was laid out on her bed in one of her most glamorous evening dresses and again we sat with her.

Even my son, Andrew, who can be quite stressed about death, talked to her and touched her hand. He spoke of praying to her spirit (which is probably more ancestor worship, than Christianity), but nevertheless a sign of how death shapes life and our awareness of 'something more' that is at the heart of the universe.

It is from this precious experience of being with my mother in her dying, from spending time with her body, and from a beautiful memorial service led by Clare, that I have now re-entered Advent at Pitt Street. From a blessed death to the anticipation of birth that would bless the world.

The theme that Pitt Street's worship team had chosen as a focus for Advent was attentiveness to where, how, and with whom God is revealed.

On the first Sunday, we dwelt in darkness, seeking night vision that would reveal the holy, calling us and our world to a Christmas that is not about artificial trees and lights and mass consumption, but is rather wakefulness that sees radical possibilities in our personal, political and planetary lives.

After the marriage equality celebrations and before my flight, I wrote the second Advent liturgy. In New Zealand, while my mother slept, I wrote the liturgies for last Sunday, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

On the second Sunday, we named 'making a space' as an Advent task. The play "Maria Panov's Christmas" told of how being open to God in the ordinary and unexpected, reveals the presence of the Christ and the meaning of this season in our lives.

The Advent calendar symbol of a map and compass and other things needed for the journey, charted our path to the space we prepare for the birth of the Christ-child, Jesus, and the space that Divine Presence makes for the coming birth within our own selves.

Last week's liturgy evoked our deep desiring, not for more stuff, but personal and political desiring for healing for self and justice for people and the planet. The God who invited Mary into partnership, the God with whom Mary's 'yes' initiated a revolution, assures us that we are desired, and therefore empowered to name and claim our visions of a world reborn.

The Advent calendar symbol of a crocheted blanket represents our desire for sanctuary and comfort, and our commitment to walk with kindness honouring the justice, love, and healing of God.

The theme for this fourth Sunday is hope, symbolised by a rainbow. Hope's wide-flung rainbow, bending toward a justice we cannot yet see. Hope, restoring us to live 'as if' from advent to incarnation.

Jan Richardson writes of Advent hope: "*A seed in the ground. A flame in the darkness. A hand outstretched. Hope starts small and overtakes us, stretching the borders of what we have known.*"

One of the songs that we sang at my mother's funeral was Shirley Murray's wonderful hymn "Give thanks for life" (to the tune of 'for all the saints'). The last verse speaks of hope resurrected after loss and grief.

*"Give thanks for hope,
that like the wheat, the grain
lying in darkness does its life retain
in resurrection to grow green again.
Alleluia!"*

In sadness, in grief, in memory...hope returns and flourishes, so that we like Mary may sing with joy.

As her cousin Elizabeth blesses her, Mary sings her heart out in a song that echoes the song of Hannah, her foremother in faith.

'The powerful brought down from their thrones! The lowly raised up! The hungry filled with good things! The rich sent away empty!'

This may seem a far-off vision. Yet Mary sings about these things *'as if'* they have already happened. In the child in her womb, God is has transformed the world.

The hope that starts small becomes a radical hope for outrageous possibilities. In Mary's lack of social status, her vulnerability, and her bold *'yes'* we glimpse again that all things are possible.

A few weeks ago, Warren Talbot talked about faith as *'living as if'*. Jan Richardson says that *"Mary knows that some things are so outrageous that sometimes we have to talk about them as if they have already happened in order to believe that they could ever come about."*

If we believe that God in Christ has instituted a world reborn for justice, we live out that justice and join in partnership with others to make the world more just. If we believe that God has brought healing to the world, we live that healing, and share in working toward reconciliation and wholeness.

Jan Richardson says that hope feeds on outrageous possibilities. Hope is what moves us to take the first step. Hope sustains us to believe that the actions we undertake for peace and justice, for healing and love, will not only bear fruit in the future but are already making a difference in the world.

When the time came for me to think back about my mother's life, I understood that she had instilled in me this kind of faith and hope. When we were children she was a devoted mother. When we were young adults she became an extraordinary community volunteer and advocate. She also returned to her early career as a baby and child nurse. At the Family Centre, where she worked, she was known as the *'baby whisperer'* because of her ability to settle crying babies enabling their mothers to rest. She was a Girl Guide Commissioner, President of the South Canterbury branch of the National Council of Women, and a tireless advocate for the Women's Community Centre. She served on Ethics Committees and on the Child, Youth and Family Protection Panel, which she attended every week for eight years.

My mother's faith was not about assenting to creedal beliefs. It was grounded in hope and trust, and it was made manifest in living *'as if'* the promises of God were true.

She lived trusting that our lives have meaning and that our gifts and talents are to be used for the Common Good. She lived trusting that the good we do in life matters even when we may not live to see the results of our labours.

This is Mary faith; this is Magnificat hope.

In Luke's gospel telling, Mary becomes an articulate radical, an astonished prophet singing about a world in which the last have become first and the first, last. Sometimes promises do indeed sound too good to be true! And yet we learn, together, to trust in them, to live each day in their light.

On this last Advent Sunday, we linger, reflecting on the meaning of Mary's song. Scholars agree that this was not just a "*My god is stronger than your god*" song. It wasn't a call to violent uprising, either then or now, as we remind ourselves each Christmas morning. The overthrow of the powerful has not come about through the domination of the oppressed, but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child; and now I also see, in the life's work of an old woman who trusted that it was worthwhile living '*as if*'

Advent is a festival of dangerous ideas.

What will it mean when we sing tonight and tomorrow that the baby born on Christmas day "*rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of God's righteousness and wonders of God's love*"?

We are expected to hear a call in those words as we sing them, a call to do all we can to order all things in justice, and healing, and peace for all God's children, here and now.

Hope rarely comes from outside us. Usually it comes from within, emerging from the place where our deepest desires and yearnings meet our willingness to make them real.

So may it be this Christmas.