

Considering a future for our children

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 31 December 2017

Contemporary Reflections by Ms Robyn Floyd, Ms Helen Boerma
and Ms Vivien Langford

Christmas 1B

Isaiah 61: 10 - 62: 3; Luke 2: 22-40;

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

When Jesus is still a baby, his parents bring him (for dedication) to the Temple, where the Elders Simeon and Anna recognize his life as a fulfillment of the hopes of their people and the wider world. They name Jesus as being for everyone, and also how his life will unsettle many. Simeon foretells that a sword will pierce Mary's own soul.

ROBYN

I read this passage from Luke as I thought about today's liturgy. It added to other things that I felt were important for this Sunday.

We are of course at the end of the calendar year 2017, and the beginning of a new year. How will we observe or note 2017? How will we put it to rest? As we turn our faces to the new year what will we keep in mind? What messages will we attend to so our hearts are filled with love?

We have moved through the seasons of Advent and Christmas noticing the themes, hearing the stories, lighting the candles, opening the windows....

Are those words and actions of use to us as the calendar and church seasons roll on? How's our understanding of the 'big picture' in all the little bits of decoration, of angels and guiding stars and babies?

We have reminded ourselves of the characters who the Bible stories record as witnesses, inviting us to consider God's desires and purposes for God's world.

Here we are at Christmas 1; Jesus, an 8 day old baby, is to be presented at the temple because he is the first born son, and a sacrifice is to be made as was the custom.

There are 3 phrases or ideas that I noticed as I was reading this passage from Luke.

1 Recognition:

Simeon and Anna both recognised Jesus as the child they had been waiting for. This story reminds me that in the narrative about Jesus' birth, the shepherds are the first to recognise the baby Jesus. They come at the angels call to recognise this child of love, this miracle, the promise.

The wise men also follow that star to find what the heavens had foretold. They recognised this special birth. And... They took another way after seeing the baby.

Now it is Anna and Simeon's turn. Two elderly members of the Jewish community who are drawn to this little family at the temple.

Simeon has waited for decades for this child. When he sees Jesus and holds him, he recognises God's promise for the salvation of the world. Anna too... she speaks about this child to all who were *'looking for the redemption of Jerusalem'*. Pillars of the Jewish faith, prophets from the temple recognised and announced this baby as God's promise not only to the Jews, but the whole world.

That's the second idea and phrase that I noticed reading this passage:

Simeon says *"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."*

This child is God's promise to the world.

The third phrase that stood out for me is the phrase: 'falling and rising'.

"This child is destined for the falling and rising of many". This is a reversal of the phrase we have heard in media and book titles. "The rise and fall..." of someone, or some regime.

As I read the commentary in *"Feasting on the word"* I was interested in the ideas that theologians put forward about falling and rising. Some of the images we are familiar with – a seed falls to the earth and dies to bring forth and bear new fruit. The old rose wilts away, as the new bud emerges. Falling and rising.

The commentators also say: *"This child provokes a crisis, a decision for Anna and Simeon, a decision for all people of every generation. How we respond to this child, this one person, decides everything."* The old ideas fall away, and the new will rise.

Simeon says to Mary *"In the life of this baby as he grows into adulthood, the world will be turned upside down."*

I am left with a couple of questions.

1. As I live my life when is it that I have recognised something profoundly important- that has been life giving, a light shone on a situation that has helped me understand or made meaning for me?
2. Have there been times in my life when the old has had to fall away, so new understanding can emerge?

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## HELEN

The Gospel reading for today, brings to mind an encounter, in which I recognized something - a way of seeing God that was new to me.

At the time, I was in my 20's. I had become part of a tradition, which understood the Gospel as being something that would be taught or shown to people. However, I was relieved and happy to witness something more.

At the time, I was newly in a relationship with my partner Bernard. Bernard, at the time, was living in an unusual household with a nun and 6 middle aged women, who had moved out of an institution for people with intellectual disabilities. Bernard invited me to come to this large shared household, where he lived.

The members of the household hosted a weekly Mass, followed by dinner. They welcomed a gathering of local people, many of whom lived in nearby boarding houses and worked in a nearby sheltered workshop. I later learned that Father Peter, who conducted the weekly Mass in this home, had himself moved into the boarding house a few doors up, like any other resident there.

When I came to the house for the first time on a Wednesday evening, it was Anna who greeted me. (Coincidentally the name Anna features in the Gospel reading.) Anna met me at the door. She had no speech as such but was able to make me feel welcome. Also, I found that it was not uncommon for Anna to share her prayers, in which she vocalized without words, an incredible depth of feeling. Anna sometimes took the role serving the bread or wine.

Father Peter would share the Gospel reading for the day, then expand on its meaning by inviting those in the room to share some of their day-to-day experiences. In light of the Gospel reading, and in the process of allowing people to share their stories, the Gospel was revealed. The Gospel was found to be the story of what God is doing in us.

In my life since then, including my experience as a member of the Pitt Street community, this revelation continues to enrich and guide my life.

Today's reading also leads me to recall how some years later, I was privileged to experience the birth of a child. And two years later another.

The first experience was a revelation to me. As the Christ-child, Jesus, was for Simeon and Anna, our child was also a sign of fulfillment and peace, for members of our older generations, and of course to us.

So much love for one small person. A concern for her, and a trust in a future which would allow her to flourish. It was love at a personal level, but it seemed to be part of something greater. It seemed to change the world for us. The world appeared differently.

Right at the start, our child needed help from the medical profession. We drove from Armidale, where we then lived, to Sydney, to see specialists and then to take her to the Children's Hospital for a series of operations, during her first year.

At the Children's Hospital, we met other parents with their children in all sorts of circumstances, and we sensed the love of so many parents, all hopeful about a future for their children.

I thought about a world of parents just like us, each vulnerable with concern for their children, each holding so much love.

For many it was as if their souls would be pierced, as Simeon had foretold to Mary.

And we also experienced the Children's Hospital itself, a community of people, invested in the well-being of many children and families, working together, expressing this great, accumulated love of all of our children.

I have also been privileged to witness this collective love in action in school communities, both from the perspective of a parent, and later as someone who works in schools. At their best, schools are a safe place for children, and a great hub of community around them.

I have also seen this love in action here in our community at Pitt Street, where our children benefitted as they grew, from connecting with people who valued them, respectfully listened to them, and continue to this day to hold a love for them and an interest in their lives.

I also want to reflect upon how often those who care for children are themselves living in distress – and how that works.

I'm sure that over the years, we have all known families in challenging circumstances.

Working in social work, I have met parents who have come to Australia as refugees.

Some of their children had been born during a time of war, or in its aftermath. I cannot imagine giving birth, and caring for children under such distressing circumstances.

I am touched by the hope expressed when I hear how these parents gave their children names, such as Joy, or Blessing.

Through work, or personally, I have met parents who have experienced the death of a partner or another family member, or been faced with serious illness, or disability.

Similarly, parents, who have been shattered by the experience of relationship separation, with intense emotional and practical challenges flowing from that separation.

While potentially overwhelmed by their own grief, and other issues, I have seen how so many of these parents have somehow, shifted gears. Despite everything, they focus on their children. They express the love and wisdom, to say what needs to be said, and to do what needs to be done, for the sake of their children.

When I witness the love of these parents in action, I feel that I walk on holy ground.

These people and their actions have pointed me towards the life or light of God.



## VIVIEN

There is pain in this story of the baby. That's what I picked up from the reading.

Its destiny is to cause a sword to pierce souls – and the thoughts of many will be revealed.

First I have to ask you a question. Is it OK with you that what I have to say will make you uncomfortable. I wouldn't dare say it on radio – yet - because it is a message that no one wants to hear. It might be a Jeremiad.

Tomorrow the first baby born in 2018 will be announced in the news and my reflection is on what it might want to tell us. The baby, I think, is saying to us:

*This is your finest hour. You are the frequent flyers, the red meat eaters the carbon burners, but you are sacrificing all of that for me. You are living as if there was no tomorrow but a sword has pierced your soul. First you stopped Adani and then you closed down the gas and oil industries. But now you have turned the spotlight around on yourself.*

*Just as all the telephone boxes disappeared in your day, you have made all the petrol bowsers and the new airports disappear in my time. There are now new forests and biodiversity corridors, kelp forests, big as the Amazon, drawing carbon down to the depths in every ocean.*

The reason I know what the baby is saying is because my experience each week is talking to climate experts. Off air they often say to me that they feel despair. But I'm not broadcasting despair. I don't think there's any place for us to go there. We have to be resolute and they are well informed and people don't want to hear what they have to say.

One of them is a professor at Manchester and Uppsala Universities. He never flies. He goes back and forth to Sweden by train. The radio team gets more comments about the fact that Kevin Anderson never flies than about his former career engineering North Sea oil wells or what he has to say about the future.

He says that by not flying he is emblematic of how we can cut down. It's not a solution, but we in the rich 10% should set this example. But, you say: *What about my son's wedding in Alaska? Or flying to that climate conference in Europe? What about my bucket list?*

It's painful to think about, but not as painful as condemning that baby to six degrees of warming – which is the path we are now on. Unliveable!

Anderson says we have a 95% chance of failing to keep the global warming below 2 degrees as we promised in Paris, not because it's technically impossible but because we do not care. It is urgent that we change gear. When we get on a plane, are we saying *"I know my carbon footprint is terrible but I hope someone can work out a solution ... maybe biofuels".....* or are we saying *"I don't care?"*

Australians have a carbon footprint of 25 tonnes of carbon each year - compared to an average Chinese person who has 8 tonnes. I get Christmas cards saying:

*"Dear Viv,*

*Well ....we ticked off a few more items on the bucket list this year. Flights here and there, cruises, home renovations using lots of carbon intensive cement."*

It's all incompatible with that baby arriving to 2050 in good shape.

Anderson's vision for 2018 would be a Marshall style Plan: massive electrification of the grid. The top efficiency standards that we now have for all our appliances would become the minimum standard and would be tightened each year. Norway, for example, would close down its oil industry; Australia would wind down its gas exports, no new airports.

It is a harsh message but as another one of my guests George Monbiot said:

*"We as a species are highly altruistic. Our innate tendency is to stand together against threats to our well-being, and to treat an attack on one as an attack on us all."*

And if we could only gaze into the eyes of that little baby and the unborn waiting in the wings wouldn't we say to the baby:

*"Don't worry. It is not the end of the world. We are going to get creative."*

Another radio guest was a Bangladeshi climate scientist, Dr Saleemul Huq. He impressed me by his compassion and "can do" attitude towards the 800,000 Rohingya refugees stumbling into his country from the east this August while the north of his country was two thirds under water. He could see a way of accommodating them.

He told me about the advanced preparations his country had to retreat from the coast and to retrain farmers and fishermen for the future. He said:

*"We have hardly scratched the surface of the sort of co-operation we need. I do not mean government to government co-operation, I mean people to people co-operation. Climate change is not a victimless crime you know."*

And then, after that show, another of my radio guests who had also been talking about Bangladesh floods and architecture and how to adapt – he was from Holland and he teaches up here at UTS - he contacted Dr Huq offering help in 2018. He has these plans of floating agriculture and reservoirs and elevated buildings as they're doing in Holland. So, I was delighted by that. It's a green shoot – the collaboration of two people who sort of met each other through radio!

All of these speakers tell me that it is more than technological change that we need. Dr Huq contributed to the Islamic Declaration on climate change, Professor Anderson quoted the Pope's encyclical *Laudato Si* about the change of heart that we need. We might stop acting as if there is no tomorrow and start behaving as if we really care.

George Monbiot said it very clearly, I think what he said is what the baby needs to hear. He said: we need a Restoration Narrative that humans are hard wired to respond to stories.

He said that Maynard Keynes had given us a story after World War 1 - a restoration story – and so we had the welfare state, we had spending our way out of crisis – and that worked for a long time in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But after the financial crisis in 2008, Monbiot says, that narrative ceases to work – because we cannot spend our way out any more. We can't solve the threats that are facing now to the whole biosphere with more growth. We need a new restoration narrative.

I asked Monbiot how it would work if rich societies, the frequent fliers, put themselves on carbon rations, so that no matter how rich you were, there would be a limit on how much fossil fuelled activity you could afford and the allowance would be reduced each year until we had all decarbonised. It would be an incentive to innovation.

But Monbiot said no. He had moved on from that idea. He said that carbon rations would be piecemeal if people were not ardently behind it. And we know they're not because people don't want to hear this story – yet!

Monbiot told me about the 1890's, a time of great reforms, before the Labor party existed, there were "Clarion Clubs", cultural clubs. They took people rambling, they took children from the slums to holiday in the farming lands; they built workers education associations.

Monbiot said our society needs that. We need a cultural regeneration in order to give us the strength to do what is needed. He said that our society has forgotten that we are the most altruistic species. Our media constantly tells us about selfishness, corruption and violence – and even here we focus on the bad things that are happening in the world sometimes. He said we forget what is common experience – the daily acts of kindness, the daily self-sacrifice that we can commonly see all around us. We need to remind ourselves and rebuild our belief in that.

He said that we need a Restoration Narrative about system change not climate change. And not just the activists rising up against fossil fuel, companies up against deforestation and injustice. He says the Restoration Narrative needs to be proposing something better – and a path towards a safe climate.

He describes all the green shoots – there's many initiatives going to get more participation in democracy, to build communities. I think we have a fine example of that at Pitt St – where we have this sort of solidarity and support on many levels and it makes us all stronger.

We saw it this year in Martin Place, I thought, with that tent city that sprang up and how that became a kind of negotiating place for homeless people to get some services towards them and to get that huge support from the community. I even saw, towards the end, the Department of Housing setting up a table there, talking to people in the street.

So, the restoration narrative might mean for you only flying once every 3 years - or never again. It might not matter if you fly all the time – as long as a lot of people don't. It might mean you don't buy new things really much, or eat red meat very often or you don't do those renovations with carbon intensive cement. It might mean that we turn off the air conditioner and go down by the seaside until it's cooler; it might mean that we stop living like kings as if there is no tomorrow. Because, unless we do everything from now on with those unborn children in mind, 2018 will just see us sleepwalking off a cliff.