

# A call for the remains of the day

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 14 January 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 2B

**1 Samuel 3: 1-10; ‘Reluctance’ by Peter J. Gomes, in The Good Book: Reading the bible with Mind and Heart; John 1: 43-51**  
**Song: Rachel Collis, “The Remains of the Day” written by Stephen Collis. From the album Remains of the Day.**

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

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Two weeks into the New Year. One week back at work for me. And already I’m feeling guilty that there are things on my to-do list that should have been done last week and haven’t been done. Some left over from last year, and some new ones from last week...

Feelings of guilt bring to mind a traditional Anglican prayer of confession that I prayed weekly at communion during my years at an Anglican girl’s high school.

*“Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.”*

Especially, for me at this stage in my life *“by what we have left undone...”*

I tend not to include prayers of confession in our liturgy every week, but this week I felt comfortable to do that. I don’t include them each week because I think that repentance has been over-personalised and over-emphasised in Christian liturgy. And that it can become a rote practice that does not lead to transformed lives or to a transformed world.

The guilt that confession draws attention to can sometimes limit life, rather than re-orienting and transforming life.

This morning, I thought about guilt in the context of the call to discipleship that is the focus of the reading from John’s gospel - and the much older story of the call to the young Samuel.

In our flawed humanity, in our lives with things done that should not have been done, and things left undone that should have been done, how can we follow Jesus?

Could we, perhaps, hear the discipleship call not as individuals who have sinned, not with a focus on Jesus as a perfect human and ourselves as imperfect individuals, but could we hear it in terms of the revealing of the divine in each of us.

This season of the church's year is called Epiphany. The usual theological definition of epiphany, which I mentioned last Sunday, is "*showing forth*." It is the time of year when we focus on the revelation of Jesus. The child in the manger, whose birth is full of mystery and wonder, is now revealed. The meaning of his birth can be understood in the context of his adult ministry.

There are other possible definitions of the word epiphany that are less conventionally theological. When it is used in every day English, epiphany refers to an immediate and meaningful understanding of something. An understanding that is surprising, sudden and profound.

We tend to expect that Church Epiphany IS about the revelation of Jesus. About finding Jesus, seeing Jesus in various epiphany moments. It's not usually about being found ourselves.

But John's Gospel invites us to imagine that it can be about both, finding Jesus and finding ourselves. That is, finding Jesus in those revelatory moments, those unexpected moments, is also when you find yourself -- when you find who you are and who you are called to be.

These are moments when you realise your identity as a follower, a disciple, part of the beloved community, and get a glimpse of something you have not seen before. Something about your own faith journey, your own discipleship, and your own concept of what it means to be a disciple.

Commentator Karoline Lewis points out that the gospel reading from John helps us maintain a connection between Christmas and Epiphany, between incarnation and revelation. If we don't hold on to the manger message of incarnation, of the divine embodied in human life and in human relationships, Jesus's humanity runs the risk of fading into the background in favour of his divinity.

What is revealed in Epiphany is what it means that God became human: what it means to say that God entered into our world, no longer satisfied just to be with us but to be one of us.

If we understand epiphany and the call to discipleship as unfolding the meaning of incarnation, we might change too. Our humanity might change. Suddenly, we can see that we are no longer the same - because we have seen God in who we are. If we think about it like that, our perception of ourselves changes.

Peter and Andrew and Philip and the sceptical Nathanael, and the mostly unnamed women who were also friends of Jesus, heard the call to follow in ways that changed their lives. They found Jesus and they allowed themselves to be found by Jesus and by the Divine Presence that had become one of us.

Sometimes, maybe a lot of the time, we don't want to be found. Being found is not always a comfortable thing. Nor, if we are honest, are epiphanies.

What about you do you not want found?

Or, what about Jesus do you not want to find out?

Maybe this epiphany season might take on a mirror effect. That is, when we hear these texts, when we look for Jesus, when we experience the revelatory moments of Jesus, when we simultaneously see something about ourselves.

Epiphany cannot be one-sided. It cannot be us looking at Jesus and thinking, wow, what an amazing human. We then have to ask, so what? So what, for the implications of who we are as people answering the call, “follow me.”

In this season of Epiphany, we expect to discover many things about Jesus. But in the process, let us also anticipate learning something about ourselves. To be epiphany shaped people means being changed by what we witness.

Sometimes the change is monumental. Sometimes it's incremental. Either way, something will happen. Some understanding that is meaningful, surprising, sudden and profound.

When it is accompanied by a willingness to be found, finding yourself doesn't have to be a new-age individualistic kind of thing. Being found by the divine is scary because of the demands it places on our lives, but it can also give us a profound sense of peace as we experience in the call to follow a deep awareness that we are not alone.

I believe that epiphany reveals to us that our lives matter, that each day of our lives matters, no matter what has been done or what has been left undone.

As I reflected on Epiphany and New Year during the week, the title song of Rachel Collis's latest album “*Remains of the day*” came to mind.

Last year during her reflection in a service at Pitt Street last year, Rachel spoke about this song which was written by her husband Steve, when he was quite young. He wrote it after seeing the movie based on Kazuo Ishiguro's novel “*The Remains of The Day*”. The themes of the fragility and the brevity of life, and the importance of living each day while it lasts, shaped the song.

Rachel pointed out that there are many things that can stop us being the people we want to be. Things that prevent us from being able to give. Fear, insecurity, past hurt. She noted particularly, that when there are large chunks of life that have been lost to hard times, it can be difficult remain positive about yourself and what you can give.

In a New Year, in response to the call to discipleship the song, which we will listen to soon, reminds us that what matters is what remains.

The chorus of the song says:

*The remains of the day  
Are calling me to be what I can  
The remains of the day  
Recalling all that leads to I am  
The remains of the day  
I embrace thee*

I am not sure that Steve intended the line “*recalling all that leads to I am*” to have the double meaning that I saw in it this week: “I am” in the sense of myself, and “I am” in the sense of the ancient Hebrew naming of God – *I am who I am. I will become who I will become.*

What leads to my personal I am, also leads me to the Divine I am.

God has chosen to be found, to be known, in the most intimate way possible. If God truly became human then God, the Divine Presence, experiences the same vulnerabilities that we do. When God chooses to reveal God’s self in Jesus, we can trust that God knows the same fears and realities that we live with: fear of rejection, fear of not being enough, of questioning, of being exposed, of being fully known – fully known.

In the times that I am quick to judge myself and others, I hope that in this season of epiphany, I will recall the heart of Jesus’ teaching about discipleship. “*Be compassionate as God is compassionate*”. This is a defining mark of being a follower of Jesus. Discipleship leads us to companionship with God who is in us and around us. It is not primarily about what we believe, or not primarily about being good, or not primarily about getting done the things that need to be done. It is about relationship with the God to whom Jesus points. The God Jesus embodies.

Believing in Jesus is not about “*believing things about Jesus*”. Marcus Borg has pointed out that the root of the word ‘believe’ means “*to give one’s heart to*.” Believing in Jesus does not mean believing the doctrines about him, but rather it means giving one’s heart, at the deepest level, to the God who is shown to us in Jesus and his people.

And God believes in us. And God gives God’s heart to us, and trusts us to be God’s people – in this place, in this year.

In the remains of the day...