

# Remembering and Reclaiming our Common Humanity

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 November 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 25B

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Mark 12: 38-44; Contemporary Reading: “A Widow’s Wisdom” by Rachel A Keefe, in *Negotiating the Shadows: Daily Meditations for Lent*.

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

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Many of us love the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, the story that concludes with the birth of Obed, great-grandfather of King David, and ancestor of Jesus. However, we don’t often think about it as a story about overcoming racism and xenophobia.

On Thursday evening this week, Clare and I attended the commemoration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, at the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street. It was a very moving event, with powerful speeches, a video documentary, and stirring singing by cantors.

In that beautiful Synagogue, filled with Jewish people; representatives of other faiths, including the Uniting Church Moderator Simon Hansford; and people from dozens of different political and community groups, we recalled the events of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, when mobs attacked Jews in Germany and in neighbouring states. They did so freely; without restraint; with impunity. Ninety-one Jews were killed (on a conservative estimate), many more were injured, and many more than that were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Jewish businesses were destroyed; schools and cemeteries vandalised. Over 1000 synagogues were destroyed. In town after town, Torah scrolls were desecrated. Stained glass from Synagogues, and clear glass from shop windows and homes, filled the streets.

In addition to brief reflections by the Chief Rabbi of the Great Synagogue, and by the Chair of the Jewish Board of Deputies, and the Premier of NSW, the keynote speeches were given by Eddie Jaku, a survivor of the holocaust who was a teenager when he was attacked in his parents’ home on Kristallnacht, and the other by Human Rights Commissioner Edward Santow.

On Kristallnacht, Nazi ideology moved from the abstract to physical violence. The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect tweeted on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, “*Genocide is a process. The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers. It started with hate speech.*”

Several of the speakers at the Great Synagogue made the same point. And also, that even before hate speech, there was casual racism; tracts written, cartoons distributed.

Eddie Jaku's speech was deeply moving. Now 98 years old, he was 18 on the night he returned from boarding school to visit his parents for their anniversary, on what would become Kristallnacht. Following the attack which he described obliquely but with reference to the profound shame he experienced as his dignity was destroyed and his humanity denied, he was deported to Buchenwald. He was incarcerated in camps in Belgium and France from 1939-1941 and eventually deported to Auschwitz in 1942.

Eddie Jaku did not speak about his experiences for 30 years. But he began to speak, and for the last fifty years he has borne witness to the Shoah and he now speaks about his survival and his attitude to life; about his refusal to hate, and his survival commitment; that he would smile every day for the rest of his life.

Edward Santow, the Human Rights Commissioner, made powerful connections between the Holocaust and other experiences of injustice and human rights violations. He said, "*When we look at contemporary human rights abuses in the shadow of the Holocaust, we need to be extremely careful. The Holocaust is unique – in scale, scope and effect. To pretend otherwise – to suggest equivalence between human rights abuses that are not the same – is wrong-headed and offensive to the survivors, and those who perished. But, equally, we cannot confine this history to a glass case and never look at it again.*"

He spoke about Nobel Peace Prize winner Eli Wiesel's commitment, both to resist anti-Semitism - alongside the connections that he made with apartheid and other forms of oppression based on racism and religious intolerance.

Like a number of other speakers, Ed Santow addressed the recent gun massacre in Pittsburgh where 11 people were killed at the Tree of Life Synagogue; and he talked about the disturbing rise of anti-Semitism in the US, the UK, France, Hungary, Poland and other places.

Earlier in the evening, Lesli Berger, NSW chair of the Jewish Board of Deputies had spoken about anti-Semitism in Australia and the dangers of the neo-Nazi Antipodean Resistance Group, which particularly targets Jews and LGBTI Australians.

The group's propaganda and recruiting activity mostly come through posters calling for the execution of Jews, demonising Jews as poisoning Australian society, blaming Jews for non-white immigration, vilifying sexual minorities, and inciting the killing of LGBTI people in Australia.

It is easy to dismiss such people and organisations as crazy fringe-dwellers who pose no serious risk. Kristallnacht and the rise of fascism remind us of the peril of such dismissals.

In June of this year, the NSW State parliament passed legislation which made incitement to violence, or threats of violence against people based on their race, religion or sexuality a crime, with penalties of up to three-years in prison. After the Marriage Postal Survey last year, and the hate speech that it legitimised toward LGBTI people, I found this reassuring. The legislation recognises the connection between casual racism or homophobia or Islamophobia and hate speech; and racist, or religiously motivated or homophobic violence.

The stories of Kristallnacht serve as a warning to us all, and a shocking reminder of why we should focus on our shared humanity, a reminder that we should be forever vigilant, that we should not be silent bystanders in the face of human rights abuses, anywhere.

Ed Santow spent the last section of his speech addressing the plight of asylum seekers on Manus and Nauru. It is tremendously encouraging that children are finally being brought to Australia from Nauru. That this is happening tells of the power of ongoing resistance, of the perseverance of ordinary Australians who have not given up the hope that justice may prevail and that children, women and men seeking asylum may be free. I think back to the Palm Sunday rally just a few months ago, when all seemed hopeless, and remember Simon Hansford's words there about continuing to bear witness even when it seems that nothing will change.

There is positive change, but it is only because of campaigns like #KidsOffNauru, and the event that people in our congregation are involved in each Friday outside the QVB building. But, despite this positive change, families are still separated, even those who have been brought to Australia. Two teenage siblings have recently come here from Nauru; their mother and another sibling have already been living in Australia for some time. Yet they were not reunited with their family but are instead being held at in detention at Villawood. And nothing has been promised for the men on Manus and it is clear that resettlement in the US will not be possible for many of them.

Now is the time to be encouraged and to be even more vigilant and more relentless in keeping the pressure on this government. That should include calling out the hypocrisy of a Prime Minister who says that he *prays and weeps for the children on Nauru* at the same time as his government fights court orders to bring physically and mentally ill children to safety here.

As we left the gathering on Thursday night, Clare and I spoke about the human rights abuses that were not named: the oppression of Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza. Jewish liberation theologian, Marc Ellis, who taught at Maryknoll School of Theology in New York, when I was an adjunct ethics lecturer there in the 1980s, has spoken about what he calls the Ecumenical or Interfaith Deal; an unspoken agreement in Interfaith Dialogue that Jews will not require Christians to continually repent for the holocaust - as long as Christians keep silent about Palestine.

Later in his academic life, Marc experienced enormous pressure because of his criticism of the Israel's violations of the rights of Palestinians. He is a faithful observant 'Jew of conscience', and he has authored numerous books and articles and spoken across the US and around the world. But the book title that best sums up his work (for me, anyway) is *Beyond Innocence and redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power; Creating a Moral Future for the Jewish People*.

Because of Marc's challenge to Christians and Jews to unsettle and destabilise the ecumenical deal, I cannot speak about Kristallnacht without also naming the atrocities committed against Palestinians – not by every Jew, but by the State of Israel - powerfully enabled by American Christians and American Jews.

But what, you might be thinking, does all this have to do with the book of Ruth? The inspiring and beautiful story of friendship that we so often read at weddings.

You might recall Ruth's pledge to Naomi that was part of last week's reading:

*Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!*

*Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.*

It is a perfect expression of trust and inter-dependence. It demonstrates that with deep love comes a willingness to be transformed, to have our lives take a different course than they would have taken if we had remained on our own.

But something is often lost, something crucial, when it is read at weddings; and that is that this pledge is spoken by an outsider woman, Ruth the Moabite, and it is spoken to her Hebrew mother-in-law Naomi.

The Moabite people were often seen as the enemies of Israel, and there were laws against marrying foreign women, particularly in the book of Ezra (Ezra 9-10). The priestly tradition in the Hebrew Bible is very concerned with purity issues. But the Book of Ruth is part of the counter-narrative that weaves through these texts, for ironically, the greatest king, David, was not a purebred Israelite but had a Moabite great-grandmother of astonishing faith and love.

Ruth, a powerless widow, a racial outsider, breaks down barriers so that God can work. When she entered into an interracial marriage with Naomi's son, she defied the purity prohibitions of her culture - and the exhortation in Nehemiah that foreign wives should be deported; and when her husband died, and she made that vow to Naomi, she dismantled religious marriage laws.

This story is part of our sacred texts because within it we can hear God's voice, the voice of sacred power, the voice of divine presence, challenging the narrow view. It is as if God is refusing to work within the confines of legalistic, literal interpretations of the Scripture. Through Ruth, God tears down barriers and moves among God's people opening us to our shared humanity.

In Ruth, a pagan foreign widow, is the image of a not-to-be-deterred love and commitment that remind us of God's love and the sacred call to justice.

Through Ruth, a new lineage was created that would, in generations to come, bring us Jesus of Nazareth. In the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel only two women are mentioned, his mother Mary and Ruth. Jesus, who crossed barriers and reached out to notice and include outsiders - like the woman with her small offering - who reached out, crossed barriers and included outsiders to reveal the heart of God to humanity. This Jesus, descended from Obed, the son that the scriptures tell us was born to Ruth and Naomi; Obed, the child who was born because barriers were dismantled so that love and justice may flourish.

God, divine presence, sacred energy, is not a major player in the book of Ruth and yet it bears witness to the story of God, hidden yet active in human life; God who brings about reversals, who turns barrenness into fertility and death into rebirth. This providential, inclusive God acts through the enemy, through the one least likely to matter in the community. In doing this, God calls us back, again and again, to our common humanity and the practices of seeking justice and creating inclusive community.

As we remember, on this Remembrance Day, may we live into this hope to which we are called, to be the people of God at Pitt Street!