

Gifts and good news

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 January 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 3C

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

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

This is my first Sunday back at Pitt Street since Christmas Day, so I want to begin by wishing everyone a Happy New Year!

After four weeks away, a mixture of study leave and holiday, I am happy to return to this creative community centred on the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, enduring through many generations thanks to the Spirit gifts shared generously by countless people over one hundred and eighty six years... if my arithmetic is correct.

We are who we are, the body of Christ, the people of God at Pitt Street Uniting Church, because of the Good News and because of the gifts that have been shared.

The human body is an enormously complex system. Thanks to Google, I can tell you that it has 206 bones, approximately 640 muscles, our skin (which was a surprise to me) is our largest organ weighing about 2½ - 3½ kg; there are ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, elements such as water, carbon, calcium and phosphorous. We have our limbs and our senses... and on we could go.

No wonder the body is one of the most powerful and enduring images for the church that is offered to us in the scriptures! The Apostle Paul’s metaphor in the first letter to the Church in Corinth conveys both complexity and organic unity.

I imagine many of you can recall children’s talks, and Sunday School lessons involving some sort of craft activity where you had to put different parts of the body together, explaining this metaphor for the church.

But, when you hear this metaphor afresh today, I wonder how it speaks to you of your place within the church community?

Of course, some of you may only be hearing this metaphor for the first time – I wonder what you make of it? How might it help you to understand your place within the church community?

When we listen to this reading today, we are reminded that being part of church community, of the body of Christ, offers us a particular form and experience of community.

The founding document of the Uniting Church, *The Basis of Union*, highlights our collective foundation in this bodily image. In the *Basis of Union*, we find these words: *“The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.”*

When we choose to be part of the church, we choose a way of life that moves us into living as community, and for community – holding together this variety of gifts. We choose to be part of a body that seeks for a different way in the world – we seek a greater liberty and equality for all people: for those who have been excluded and marginalised; for those who aren't as strong as others; for those who are not able to be as productive.

We seek to make sense of how the gospel articulates hope and justice within our lives, and within the life of our planet Earth, even when hope and justice seem beyond us. And we seek to make a creative, imaginative and prophetic response together, for the Common Good.

Paul reminds us that life in the church, as in the universe, as in our very bodies, is essentially corporate. Everyone and everything is inter-related in an amazing intricacy of needs and hopes, gifts and graces.

Our interrelation with each other, with the whole of creation, with the earth that is our home, is a process of continuing, ongoing creativity.

As a congregation, we spend time together thinking about our collective identity, planning and engaging in the local and global community – engaging what Walter Brueggeman calls our prophetic imagination.

We collectively imagine a future for our world that is grounded in hope and justice.

We live a prophetic life whenever we seek to engage our gifts for the common good – work that is driven by our gospel faith that like Jesus we too are *‘anointed to bring good news.’*

In the tiny synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from the scripture of his people and proclaimed: *“The Spirit of our God is upon me, because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of our God's favour.”*

These words are for me the heart of the gospel. They tell us who Jesus is. How he understood himself. By implication they tell us who we are – who we are to be as Christians and as the church.

They tell us that compassionate justice is what we are called to - and they tell us that our church, is to be the beloved community that nurtures this way of being human and this task of transforming the world.

In these words, Jesus sings Isaiah's song of the good news for the poor, in the key of his mother Mary of Nazareth. The Magnificat, Mary's Advent song, from the Gospel's first chapter, still rings in our ears.

In choosing this passage from Isaiah, Jesus announces God's favour, the year of Jubilee! The all bets are off, all debts forgiven, slaves freed, land redeemed, year that is described in Leviticus 25.

Life totally different to the life we know, which is why scholars have their doubts about whether the jubilee was ever actually observed.

But then, scripture is more about hope than it is about history. Proclaiming peace where there is no peace, the inversion of unjust power hierarchies while they are firmly in place, singing freedom while we are in chains, is the beginning of imagining a new reality into being. The proclamation of liberty precedes its birth.

Every day, especially during the week, when I come into this church, I see the words written above the arch "*where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.*"

It reminds me that what is now is not what will be, and that together we, with all our gifts and graces, and all our flawed humanity, are called to be agents of liberation for all who are not yet free. For Aboriginal Australians whose suffering under colonisation is still not recognised, whose voices are suppressed in the shaping of the nation. For asylum seekers who languish yet another year on Manus and Nauru. For those in Australia still waiting for their cases to be heard and determined. For women battered, raped and abused in gender-based acts of violence in homes and on the streets. For victim-survivors of childhood trauma, including those whose injury was caused by religious leaders. For the earth itself, ravaged by the effects of human instigated climate change.

My comfort is daily disturbed by those words of liberty, knowing that I will do my day-to-day work for the congregation while injustice continues to be done in our name.

But without the hope that liberation will one day come, we would do nothing. There would be little reason to be the church.

It is also important to remember that all of this isn't just about grand acts of social justice and community contribution. Our pastoral work – expressed in hospitality, welcome and inclusion, compassion, kindness and care – is also a creative, prophetic task that contributes to liberty in community.

In all these things, as we use our collective and complementary gifts, we participate in divine creativity and imaginative possibility that offers the transformative hope and justice of God.

As the body of Christ, when we tap into our collective creativity, we can provoke our theological imagination – that is our imaginative response to the Divine Presence – which helps us when we feel powerless and do not know what to do, or how to respond.

Former Minister of Pitt Street Uniting Church, Dorothy McRae McMahon, has written about this kind of community when she wrote: "*the gospel invites us to believe that, as the Body of Christ, the gifts which lie here may surprise and enrich us and that the contribution of the Christ within our own life together is never to be underestimated and may surprise us with its power and diversity.*"

She went on to write: *“Our one-ness extends into the mystery of connectedness... The building together of human and universal community is about sharing all that we are and have and truly encouraging small and large gifts that lie in expected and unexpected places.”*

In the community of faith that is Pitt Street Uniting Church in 2019 there are a multitude of gifts we might identify and offer one another. And it is in doing this that we will live out our calling as the body of Christ and surprise ourselves with what we can do together.

As the interim time of January draws to a close, and the work of the world lies before us, perhaps it is timely to think about how we might identify gifts for ministry in each other, and then encourage and allow those gifts to be offered - here and in the wider community, in creative and prophetic ways.

Today, I invite you to think about the gifts within this community that you value; or the gifts that you have received here (or perhaps in other church or secular communities that you have belonged to).

And, bear in mind that whatever diminishes one member of the community eventually diminishes us all. In a relational universe, our joys and sorrows are one. We rejoice in the authentic achievements of those around us and mourn their pain and inability to live out their destiny.

Jesus affirms a good news ethic. God is liberating, healing, welcoming, and awakening. This is God's work in the world now, in our world, Jesus asserts, and we need to be part of this Shalom-affirming mission of God. God's Spirit is with us, bringing freedom, creativity, and beauty to the universe.

Telling out such good news, such peace, such liberating work of the Spirit, remains a core activity of the Christa community.

The Spirit of the Most High is upon us, and we too are anointed to bring good news to the world that God loves so much.

This is our call as "evangelists" who tell the good news, and speak the words of new life.

We have all we need for the task: the good news of the gospel and the gifts of the Spirit expressed in the body of Christ.

May God bless us on this journey of Spirit.