

# Believing and belonging

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 March 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 3C

Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13: 1-9

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf\\_Ux4uy2PY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf_Ux4uy2PY)

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When terrible things happen, unimaginable, unfathomable things, like the attacks on the mosques in Christchurch that killed fifty people last week, human beings inevitably seek meaning, answers, reasons. Questioning, attempting to make sense of the senseless is only natural.

For the privileged, such horrors do not fit with our view of the world. I know how deeply I felt that last weekend, even though it is seventeen years now since I lived in Christchurch, the peaceful garden city – as it was then - before it was rocked by so many earthquakes. Hearing, on the internet and television, Maori songs of aroha, of love, sung by school students in the park across the road from the Maajid Al Noor mosque, and singing in Maori at the vigil at Town Hall Square on Friday evening brought me to tears and connected me in spirit and in solidarity and in grief.

Some ways of making sense of tragedy bring life and connection. Others, especially the voices that blamed immigration of Muslim people for their slaughter, amplified hate and entrenched division.

I had another incidence of violence to respond to this week too. One that was much closer to home.

My son, Andrew, who is a young person with autism, was travelling home from his program on the train south of Auckland. A man was playing music loudly on his iPhone and Andrew asked him to turn it down. He responded by punching Andrew hard in the face and attempting to steal his bag! Andrew has a massive bruise and a black eye and a yellow face – and I've talked to him lots of times in the days since that happened. His Dad took him to the police – which though probably isn't going to lead to any conclusion – did help Andrew feel like something was done – and he has a powerful way of thinking about things. He is convinced that the guy has been banned from the train for life. So that's hopefully helpful.

But one thing that he said to me in every one of these conversations, over and over again, is: *why did that guy punch me?* We seek meaning in the midst of violence and I have found it hard to think of anything that can explain it!

In Jesus' time, people also tried to make sense of appalling violence. In the passage from Luke's gospel people are speaking to Jesus about horrors inflicted on some Galileans by Herod, who had not only had them killed but had mixed their blood with sacrifices.

Jesus spoke the question that he sensed was on the lips of the crowd: *for such an atrocity to have befallen them, should we believe that they suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans.* In an attempt control a world in which they had no power, they sought an explanation that would separate them from the suffering of others. If it was the fault of those Galileans, the people that spoke with Jesus would not have to face the precarious nature of their existence under Roman occupation.

I remember listening, many years ago now, to a young woman who was a survivor of sexual abuse perpetrated by her father. She had terrible Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that would cause her to dissociate as the memories of abuse took over her conscious mind. She blamed herself for the abuse, which made no rational sense. She even suggested to me, that when her father came to her bedroom at night to abuse her, he might have been sleep walking and thought he was in the bathroom rather than her bedroom.

Human beings go to extraordinary lengths to establish meaning, to exert some control, in situations where they are powerless.

Jesus, though, went on to talk about everyone being a sinner and the need for all people to repent, or perish as the unfortunate Galileans did, as the eighteen people crushed by the random collapse of a tower at Siloam did.

To tell the truth, Jesus' response doesn't seem very illuminating to me - for us - as we face tragedy. In fact, it is just the kind of language that causes people to withdraw from engagement with traditional Christian teaching. But I think we must engage, as progressive people of faith, to find what is life-giving here and to reject that which is not. Even with the words of Jesus.

I remember a few years ago participating in a discussion about an article on declining church membership, (there are volumes written on this) but in this particular article, the author talked about people leaving churches, but there were people who continued to believe the things that the church had traditionally taught them about Jesus, about God, and about salvation.

The author talked about these people as "*believing without belonging*". When I heard and took part in that conversation, I remember thinking if people in churches like ours, were in fact another type of post-modern Christians, people who, rather than "*believing without belonging*," were people who were interested in "*belonging without particularly believing*."

As I wrote in my contribution to the Annual Report, Pitt Street seems to me to be a community marked by belonging, by relationship, by connection and care.

Traditional believing, on the other hand, seems like something that we are less invested in. Belonging without believing. That's not to say that belief is unimportant. Just that our beliefs are expressed now in quite different ways than the traditional doctrines of faith.

Marcus Borg, in his book "Speaking Christian" reminds us that the meaning of belief and believing has changed significantly over time. He says:

*"The modern meaning of 'believe' is very different from its meanings from Christian antiquity until the seventeenth century. In English, prior to about 1600, the verb believe always had a person as its direct object, not a statement. It did not mean believing that a statement is true... but more like what we mean when we say to somebody, "I believe in you." ... To believe in somebody is not the same as believing somebody. "I believe in you" means having confidence in a person, trusting that person. In a Christian context it meant having confidence in God –the sacred, the divine presence - and in Jesus; trusting God and Jesus."*

Borg goes on to say: "The meaning of believe prior to about 1600 includes more than this. It comes from the Old English *be loef*, which means "to hold dear." The similarity to the modern English word 'beloved' is obvious. To believe meant not only confidence and trust in a person, but to hold that person dear - to love that person. Believing and loving were synonyms.

We are called to love; to love. We are not required to believe literally that every word of the bible is factual. Rather we see the Bible as a collection of stories of people in a faith community, or a number of faith communities, making sense of life, of suffering and joy, of the Sacred and the search for meaning.

As Robin Meyers says: *We get to eavesdrop on these ancient conversations.* Their stories do shape our community. We tell the old stories, reflect on them, we are sometimes transformed by them. But we also transform the stories as we make sense of them in our lives and in our time in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia and in a globalizing world.

We do that with passages like today's gospel reading. Many of the Jews in Jesus' day believed in a God who punished the bad people and rewarded the good.

They believed that if you live in poverty or have an accident or disease, God is revealing you as the sinner you are; but if you are healthy and prosperous, you are revealed by God as a righteous person.

This kind of thinking is still at work in fundamentalist Christian communities where huge wealth held by leaders is justified by claims that it shows God's blessing on their ministry.

A theologically conservative US politician claimed that there are more children being born with disabilities these days because God is punishing their mothers for having an abortion earlier in their lives. Because (he says) the Bible says the first fruits are supposed to be offered to God and these women, when they were young, have killed the first fruits of their wombs. It's an utterly appalling view of disability and of the ethics of abortion.

If we are going to be truly faithful to the God made known to us in Jesus, we have to develop and proclaim different beliefs.

Happiness or misery cannot be simply equated with goodness or badness.

The old superstition is a lie.

The old gods of retribution and reward who lurk in the dark corners of our minds, are false gods.

Dismiss that superstition. We have Jesus' word on it.

But, we also have another Jesus' word on good and evil. This word is expressed in the language of sin and repentance - that may make it hard for us to access.

But I think that what he is telling his followers is:

*'Don't pretend that the good or evil that we do does not matter.'*

Yes, accidents, massacres, disease, are not God's punishments.

But if we do not pay attention to the way we live, we can end up with another kind of disaster; as Jesus says: *'you will likewise perish'*. Such perishing is not a punishment from God but an outworking of the consequences of the choices that we make every day. Not only as bodies, but as persons, we can decay and perish.

Surely casual acceptance of racism, tolerance of political motivated xenophobia, the ability to go on with our everyday lives as if hundreds of people are not unjustly imprisoned by our government on Manus and Nauru, are just the kind of evil that Jesus warned about. And the consequences of pretending they don't matter are in fact life-threatening.

Some years after that discussion about believing without belonging, I think I was wrong to characterise churches like ours as belonging without believing, because we do in fact hold some beliefs very strongly.

The beliefs that we hold today are not the beliefs of traditional doctrine; beliefs that determine who is in and who is out. They are beliefs about the value of creation, the blessing of community; they are beliefs about peace and about justice. They are beliefs that shape how we are in relation with one another, and how we choose to live in the wider community beyond this church.

In choosing to belong here, as well as to believe, we are claiming that we need one another, that we are all part of one another.

And it is in this community of shared beliefs and conviction that we will remember with gratitude the year that has been. The year that we have shared together, seeking meaning, seeking life, seeking the Sacred.

Blessed be.