

# Promise and presence in the fire of change

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 August, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 10 C

**Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12: 49-56; Contemporary Reading:  
excerpt from *Touching our Strength* by Carter Heyward**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1B9Biwf6S-w>

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When I read the lectionary readings in preparation for preaching, I am often tempted to skip those that jar with the sensibilities of 21<sup>st</sup> century people.

This morning we have heard Jesus' challenging words: "*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*"

And the words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, bemoaning the way false prophets mislead people and cater to their own self-interests. God's words in Jeremiah 23 verse 29 echo in the Gospel reading: "*Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*"

But reading these readings, in the light of the events of last week, reminded me that scripture surprises us; that it can still speak to the current situation with power and illumination.

There is so much that divides us. This week, in the midst of the public conversations about abortion law reform in NSW, the deep divisions among Christians and among our churches have again been on display.

In articles that have been published, and in appearances before the Inquiry into the Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill, our divisions have been very visible this week.

On one side, the Sydney Archbishops, Catholic and Anglican, and leaders from various Orthodox and Maronite churches, and on the other the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle, the Moderator of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT, and me.

One group maintaining that abortion is always wrong, that it is murder; believing that selfish women treat the decision to end a pregnancy as a trivial 'lifestyle' decision. Implying that women can't be trusted. Can't be trusted to reflect on the morality of this significant matter that will impact their bodies and their lives, the life of a potential child, the lives of their partner and other children they are already mothering.

Believing that women will only understand this if the process of moral deliberation is taken out of their hands, located in the criminal code, and the final say given to a doctor (which is what our law currently allows).

On the other side, represented in public by the Uniting Church and the Diocese of Newcastle is the belief that abortion is a complex moral decision that pregnant women do not take lightly, a decision that in the end can only rightly be made by pregnant women; agreeing with the proposed legislation that, legally, it should be regulated under healthcare, not criminal, legislation.

Reflecting the view of the Uniting Church developed over 25 years, the Moderator said: *“When abortion is practised indiscriminately it damages respect for human life. However, we live in a broken world where people face difficult decisions. Respect for the sacredness of life means advocating for the needs of women as well as for every unborn child.”*

He said: *“the decision to have an abortion is not just a moral issue but a social one. While some aspects of the current debate attempt to pass moral judgement on the act itself, it ignores the many emotional, physical, financial and social issues that often create a situation where a woman is forced to consider an abortion.”*

And he concluded, *“The Uniting Church asserts that abortion is a health and social issue and should not be a criminal issue.”*

Writing to members of parliament, Bishop Peter Stuart addressed the need for the church to focus on the social conditions that led women to feel that they did not have a free choice:

*“One thing that is quite clear is that people who are in poverty have less ability to make a range of health choices. We are in a situation in Australia where we have increasing groups experiencing poverty and as we look at the social determinants of health, we do need to be confronting and challenging policies that keep people in poverty – like the government’s decision [not to increase] Newstart, which traps people in poverty if they’re unable to find work.*

Bishop Peter went on to say *“There are also choices in how the church talks about sex education and about people’s understanding of intimacy. And a range of choices in ensuring people have free and easy access to healthcare and, finally, the whole area of vulnerability to violence and coercion in family relationships and the impact that has on abortion.”*

My contribution focused on women’s moral agency and decision making. I agree with the broader Uniting Church framing of removing abortion from the criminal code and I added to that a feminist analysis of how we arrived at the current legal situation and the theological stance taken by religious opponents of the bill.

When the law was passed in 1900, women’s inequality was institutionalised. Women didn’t have a vote. There was little question that women’s bodies and women’s sexuality were best controlled by patriarchal power exercised in government, medicine, religion, and family life.

The proposed legislation recognises women's moral agency, women's capacity to make good decisions. It separates divisive questions of moral agency (either for or against – and I recognise that, among us, there will be people who hold different views about this). But it separates that moral deliberation from a law that must apply to all citizens, no matter what their religious or ethical beliefs.

I addressed the fact that, in the face of strident (and sometimes violent) religious opposition to abortion, some feminists have insisted that it is a health care issue, not a moral issue. I believe it is both. But I consider that the choice for abortion can, on occasion, be a morally good choice in some circumstances, and that it is morally wrong always to coerce a woman to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

The moral questions are undoubtedly divisive. Philosophers, religious leaders, lawyers, legislators, bio-ethicists, feminist theorists debate the status of the foetus viz a viz a woman's right to bodily integrity and self-determination. But qualitative research that's available to us suggests that this is not how many women think about it.

Women draw on the resources of their personal values - including their religious beliefs, scientific and medical knowledge, and their own moral wisdom. They weigh up sometimes conflicting values in the context of complex lives, giving consideration to their emotional, physical and financial capacity to parent a child; the stability or safety of their relationship with the father; their responsibility to other children that they already have; risks to their physical or mental health; and to the health of the foetus.

While the language of rights, and competing rights, is pivotal in the legal debate, the language of care and responsibility, toward other people and ourselves, features prominently in moral discernment about abortion that women engage in.

Using random, out of context, biblical quotes does not solve the issue. Neither does asserting that life begins at conception, which is actually a relatively recent claim in Christian theology.

At the Inquiry, Peter, Simon and I were seated as a panel. Fred Nile quoted from Jeremiah chapter 1, where God tells the reluctant young prophet "*before you were in your mother's womb, I knew you.*"

My colleagues pointed out the specific context and the poetic nature of the passage. I pointed Rev Nile to the appalling story in Numbers chapter 5, where it seems that God is commanding abortion, to be administered by a potion of bitter herbs by a priest to a woman suspected of infidelity.

The bible is a mixed resource. The way Jesus treated women with respect and equality is what has authority for us. Christian tradition, since Biblical times, on the subject of abortion is also mixed. Historically, theologians appear to believe that human personhood began when the child could survive outside the womb. There were heated debates about the point at which 'ensoulment' happened.

The debates have ranged for centuries, but the voices that have been given credibility in the debates have been those of male religious leaders, medical professionals, and legislators. I believe that it is well past time for the church and the state to trust women.

Some people are critical of people like me who disagree in public with other Christian leaders. This week there has been division aplenty.

So let's turn back to that challenging Gospel story.

Listening to Jesus despair - and almost rant - is initially disturbing. This isn't the gentle, long-suffering Jesus. This sounds like a harsh, despairing outburst from somebody who is losing his ability to keep it all together.

Tellingly, in the context of the religious divisions about abortion, Australian theologian Bill Loader says: "*This is not a text one would choose for a sermon on ecumenism...or is it?*" he asked.

Loader writes: '*Harmony*' is one of those soft words which people sometimes use to plea for peace. The peace is often a shallow calm of suppressed fears and conflicts which are bound to emerge eventually. At worst it means everyone in their place, an unchanged and unchanging status quo. For many people, Christian peace is still seen as that kind of harmony."

It is true – and confronting – that religion has at least been a contributing aspect to many wars and conflicts; that it has divided families.

And yet I find this story from Luke reassuring in a number of ways.

Reassuring that Jesus not only knew what stress was, but that he responded to it in exactly the way human beings have always responded to it.

Despite his habit of going into lonely places to pray and to restore his own space and equilibrium, he still experienced stress and tiredness and perhaps a degree of depression, and he reacted to it.

One of the marks of progressive Christianity is to see Jesus not as God but as revealing the nature and will of God, in the way he lived. And he did that as a fully human person, not as some sort of God robot. Of course the path that Jesus chose would have caused him anxiety and anger.

Christians often tend to think of him as some superhuman being.

But here in today's story is a very human glimpse, of a very human being.

Someone who's exhausted, frustrated, who suddenly erupts in an angry outburst.

The world that we live in, the world of the prophets and apostles, can be an angry and violent one.

Our world at the moment, it seems, is one that is wracked by religious violence.

While the struggles among churches about abortion are not for the most part violent, the rhetoric from opponents certainly is.

I am grateful that, unlike some of the other campaigns I've been involved in, this one hasn't resulted in a lot of online trolling. An article on the US website, LifeNews.com, condemning my views, has been shared over 16,000 times. But fortunately only a tiny handful of its readers have bothered to find me on social media. They seem mostly happy to talk among themselves, confident that I am – to quote - a minister of Satan, and undoubtedly headed for hell.

In the more moderate spaces of religious disagreement, we are more likely to hear reference to Jesus' prayer in John 21 that "*we may be one.*" However, the peace and unity to which we are called as the church cannot be an imposed uniformity, defined and determined by the majority. We are called to unity that reflects Jesus' love for the whole world in all its complexity and diversity. Jesus' life and death remind us that justice and love are greater than the uniformity of power.

Biblical scholar Teresa Berger suggests that, in the reading from Luke, we confront stark and conflictual sayings of Jesus that sit uncomfortably with our contemporary images of God. We want a God with an infinite capacity for empathy, a God who is "nice." Luke challenges our thinking. He offers a glimpse of redemption for a world (and I would say a church) that is anything but nice, and that needs much more than a gentle God to redeem it.

As he journeys towards Jerusalem, Jesus becomes a source of conflict and opposition when he lays claim to disturbing forms of authority and power. His words are marked with a sense of urgency and anguished intensity. The road to Jerusalem, after all, leads to a violent confrontation with death.

Berger suggests that Luke's Jesus knows the *burning bush* intimately.

Experiencing a burning bush and a '*fire within*' does not make one "nice." On the contrary, an encounter with a burning bush invariably leads to confrontation and conflict. After Moses meets God in the burning bush, for example, he is not led to peace and a resolution of problems, but into conflict with Pharaoh himself. Moses' God-sustained confrontation with the Egyptians is part of a larger vision, one that is necessary for the sake of liberation and flourishing, and for the journey toward that distant Promised Land,

This connection between the experience of the burning bush, the struggle for liberation, and the glimpses of the Promised Land - shed light on Jesus' stark claims.

Contradicting the promise that was made at the time of his birth by the angels, that this child will bring peace on earth, Jesus emphatically denies that he's come to bring peace. Instead, he claims to be the bearer of discord and fragmentation. He illustrates this claim by defying traditional systems of meaning and cohesion.

How can this be good news? The answer, I think, depends on what kind of world we live in.

Jesus uses division, not violence or war, as the opposite of peace. I think that's important to note – he is not advocating violence or war. He's talking about division. I think we can all think of time when division is necessary - to stand up for what is right and good rather than peace at any cost.

I don't believe that Jesus sought to subvert families as such. It was rather that he espoused a vision of God and God's agenda for change, which often stood in direct conflict with other absolute claims, like wealth, possessions, land, culture, religion and even family.

If our world, and our church, were nothing but places of created goodness and beauty, spaces of flourishing for all, just and life-giving for all in God's creation, then Jesus' challenge would be deeply troubling.

But if our world is marred and scarred, with systems of meaning that are exploitative and non-sustainable, then redemption can come only when these systems are shattered and consumed by fire. Life cannot emerge without confrontation. This is the basis of the conflict Jesus envisions. He comes not to disturb a nice world but to shatter the systems of meaning that are damaging the fabric of planetary and personal life.

Jesus created crisis so that change would be possible. He was saying, I think: *"I have come to bring crisis because business as usual means injustice and death."*

The vision embedded in Jesus' stark words is not one of conflict for conflict's sake, but of fragmentation for the sake of a wholeness.

In a world whose systems do not bring life and flourishing, the crisis might actually constitute good news. The gospel reading calls us to witness to good news and to the crisis that is God's consuming and compelling presence.

Life cannot flourish without this crisis.

And yet, in faith, we claim that crisis will not have the last word.

That together, in and through our beautiful, diverse bodies, old and young, male and female, transgender, gay and straight, we join with this disturbing God whose name is Love to bless love and live for justice.