

Powers of the Weak

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 October, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 20 C

Joel 2: 23-29; Luke 18:9-14

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TEGYoWBU9A>

This gospel parable would have been a shocker for the Pharisee if he'd heard it! The tax collector is justified! Hah!

However, the parable was not told to the Pharisees but to people who followed Jesus. For them, and for us, it is a story about finding our prophetic voices and voicing our visions. In both Joel and Luke, the reign of God is exemplified in the radical, disturbing extension of voice to all people. Joel and Luke challenge every division, every arrogant assumption, and every form of exclusion - and instead, illustrate a spirit-filled life, which is for all people.

The prophet Joel addressed the situation of Israel in about 400 BCE. The Exile in Babylon is over, the second Temple has been built, the priests and the elders are the ones who are leading the community.

Joel moves between words of judgment and a hope that is grounded in God's grace. The benefits of reorientation to God are not merely material. God's spirit will be poured out on all flesh. (28-29) *"Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old people shall dream dreams and your young people shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my spirit."*

"Your daughters shall prophesy..." I didn't hear the full import of that text until I was in my early twenties, training for the ministry in a patriarchal institution where a number of my fellow students were adamant that women could not be ministers.

In Joel's vision I heard a portent of a world that was yet to come, that is still yet to come in many places in the world - including in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. *'Your daughters shall prophesy.'* And their prophecy will not be tamed and constrained by the religious or political or social institutions that will finally let them in the door. Their prophecy will be the stuff of visions and dreams - of another world, another way of being, in which the broken things, and the broken people will be made whole.

I began studying theology three years after I returned from spending my final year of high school in Cape Town, at the height of apartheid. In the midst of that, the white South African government needed to trade with the booming industrial economy of Japan, but the Japanese people with whom they sought to do business were not white.

They could not stay in hotels for whites, or eat with whites, or go to the bathroom that was shared by white people. So the South African government decreed that the Japanese (and Maori All Blacks and Aboriginal tennis player Evonne Goolagong) were deemed to be “*honorary whites*”. The South Africans thought this was generous as well as pragmatic, but I can’t imagine how insulting and demeaning it was for people of colour. But for the sake of doing business, or playing sport, many of them appeared to put up with it.

Reflecting on the designation, ‘*honorary whites*,’ I remember thinking, as a young theological student, that women theological students were accepted as long as we behaved as honorary men. We were to be grateful for admission to the hallowed halls.

And yet the daughters did prophesy...in biblical studies, in constructive theology, in pastoral studies, church history and in ethics; prophesying not for admission to theological education and ministry formation as usual, but to join with the visions and dreams of the stories of Jesus, and his outsider friends who bore his dangerous memory down through many generations. As young, female theological students (and there were only a handful of us) we did not have a great deal of power, but we did develop ways to resist hegemonic power. The powers of the weak is what was available for us.

Discussing feminist theory in relation to theology was shocking to men who still insisted the word ‘men’ actually just included ‘women.’ Mostly they didn’t care about the things we were raising, but they did notice when my friends Judith and Glenys and I, having had enough of liturgical language that rendered us invisible, remained seated for the singing of ‘*Rise up, O Men of God*’ in the chapel. It was a small symbolic act, but it announced our claim to the full equality that was offered to us by the gospel.

Luke, in the book of Acts, has the Apostle Peter quoting Joel’s words at the sermon at Pentecost. For Joel, this outpouring refers to a future event when all people will be intimately filled with God’s spirit: when all people will find their voices, and voice their visions.

No longer will the spirit of God be mediated exclusively through the power brokers and priests. Now God’s spirit comes to all people who turn to God: to young and old, to male and female, to slave and free. The Spirit is manifest in prophecy, visions and dreams. In prophecy, voices are heard critiquing the current order, and in visions and dreams, hopes for a new way of being are imagined. Those who have been powerless are filled with power, not power to dominate but power to transform.

In the gospel parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, we hear another story of finding voice in surprising places. Pharisees in Jesus time were not the bad guys. They were people of exemplary religious practice. They regarded themselves as justified, in terms of being in right relationship with God. They were respected and they were revered.

Tax collectors were contracted by the Roman military to collect land and poll taxes and other sorts of tolls. They paid for the right to collect taxes, and adding a commission for themselves. Tax collectors were considered collaborators with the oppressive Roman occupying forces. People despised them and feared them.

The New Testament scholar, William Herzog, interprets the parable in a refreshing way that stresses the social, economic, and spiritual implications of the tax collector finding a place of welcome in the temple precincts. Herzog renames it “*the parable of the two tax collectors.*”

The Temple was the primary place where redemptive practice was institutionalised in ritual and tithes were collected. Tithe and sacrifice meant money - and so the Pharisee represented another form of tax collection.

Failing to meet tax or tithing and sacrifice requirements resulted in the poor being seen as impure and unable to participate in the life of the Temple. Within the parameters of the purity codes, the poor were no longer the people of God.

Herzog believed the tax collector was a very low-level functionary, working for someone else who had contracted with the Romans to collect taxes. So there they are in the Temple precincts, Pharisee and tax collector, both standing a little apart from the crowd, one too impure to participate, the other standing back to avoid contamination from the likes of that one!

The Pharisee begins his prayer of self-congratulation. *Thank you, God that I am not like the impure. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of my income.*

The tax collector's prayer, on the other hand, does not consist of a list of his sins as might be expected. Maybe he didn't feel the need as the Pharisee had already publicly pointed them out! Instead, he calls out for the mercy of God. He asks that he be included in the atoning sacrifices that are being made in the temple that afternoon.

Jesus announces that this is indeed what has happened. The tax collector is justified, acquitted, and offered grace. With no restitution and no reparations, because he has nothing to give, he is included in God's realm.

Jesus' hearers would not have been expecting this. Up until the Pharisee's shaming denunciation everything had gone according to the script. If the tax collector had left in shame at that point, put in his place, no one would have been at all surprised. But he does not go quietly.

Having heard the worst that the Pharisee could throw at him, he cries out, beats his breast, and prays for mercy, the very mercy that is being made available to the pure that afternoon through sacrifice. He refuses to consent to the Pharisee's shaming but appeals to a higher source. He refuses to accept the labels that have been attached to him, but speaks directly to God. He breaks the silence that followed the Pharisee's effort to reinforce the status quo. He breaks through the intimidation and fear that the Pharisee's words have created, and by his actions, he challenges the Pharisee's reading of God's judgments. He claims direct access to God.

"And I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old people will dream dreams and your young people shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves...I will pour out my spirit."

Reading the parable as Herzog does enables us to understand why Jesus was stigmatised as a friend of tax collectors and sinners and why he was eventually crucified by Roman officials in collusion with Jerusalem elites. His teaching among the oppressed was designed to enable the peasants to demystify the temple and the empire so that they could name oppression as a prelude to renaming the world.

The parable provided the people with a model of a figure who refused to be silenced but found his voice in the process of discovering God. So the story becomes a manifesto for the powers of the weak.

For surely, prophecy and dreams are about naming oppression and that is the beginning of reclaiming the world. The tax collector voiced his claim on a new way of people relating to God, with an emphasis on forgiveness and grace.

For the writer of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is the Spirit-anointed prophet who announces the Reign of God as good news for the poor and the oppressed. If God reigned - and the domination systems propped up by the Pharisees and tax collectors did not - the poor would be blessed and the hungry fed.

In invoking the reign of God, Jesus advocated a theo-political solution and he invites us to dream and enact God's reign in our time and place. This invitation is for all people and there will be no exclusions.

Living with a vision of the reign of God in the here and now is crucial for Christians; and with that a commitment to live as if we believe it will come into being, to notice and name the ways in which it is already present.

During my Study Leave that starts next week, one of the books I'm going to be reading is *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In without Going Crazy*. I thought it might have been written after the election of Trump, but it was twenty twelve, so crazy has been a mess that has been going on for a while! The authors are the American Buddhist eco-feminist Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone who is a specialist in the psychology of resistance and change.

In a chapter titled "*Catching an Inspiring Vision*" they talk about the vital importance of dreams and visions. They recall Dr Martin Luther King's "*I have a dream*" speech where he evoked the vision of a world where black and white children would hold hands, and where his children would be judged by the content of their character, not by the colour of their skin. At the time, no-one could have imagined a day when an African American would be President of the United States.

Without dreams, without visions, we will never reach the Promised Land of freedom and justice. Yes, we are living in mess, but consider how many of our realities started out with someone's dream - the end of chattel slavery, votes for women, women in religious leadership, the return of Uluru to the Anangu (arn-ung-oo) people and the closure yesterday of the climb.

If we only look at the way things are now, we limit ourselves and the movement of the Spirit in the world. We need imagination to formulate creative responses to the challenges of ecological and social justice; and to the challenges of alienation that wreck our society.

Macy and Johnstone suggest we spend time focusing on what we would like to have happen and then do our bit to make sure that it's more likely. To do this we view our reality not simply in terms of its challenges but as an evolving story rather than as a static picture.

We don't have to be powerful leaders; change also occurs through small acts of resistance, through the powers of the weak which are imagination and solidarity.

For me, being part of a church means that I am reminded of hope again and again: in the stories of the people of Israel, the stories of Jesus and his community of friends that we re-enact in liturgy each week. And also in the community of justice seeking friends - the community which seeks to practice the future into reality and into our lives.

Jesus taught that the reign of God is always dawning, that peacemakers are blessed, that his disciples are to turn the other cheek and love their enemies. He rejected revolutionary Jewish nationalism and related humanely even to the Roman occupiers, whose leaders ended up crucifying him without Jesus offering any physical resistance.

Jesus did not seek to defeat the world's evils through the world's own strategies, and especially not with violence.

And, yet, he resisted evil every day. But he did so by practicing and teaching the overcoming of evil through courageous, creative, and transformative resistance - through a kind of resistance that refuses to settle for evil as the means to resist evil.

We have been promised the spirit of God poured out on all flesh; a radically inclusive vision for all people: for young and for old, for male and for female, for slave and for free.

Whoever you are, you are included. You are a child of God invited to claim and participate in a vision of peace, forgiveness, justice, love, compassion, and hope.

Jesus points us all toward Spirit life, challenging us to speak out and imagine the world moving toward the reign of God. To do this we must give up self-assurance and enter into the reality of the universe, dependent on the Sacred, on the Earth and on one another.

So let us pray for peace; let us live in hope, and let us enact the future we want for our children and our children's children. Let us be prophets and visionaries and dreamers.

Let us dream of communities marked by justice, love and compassion. Let us envision and enact the reign of God.

And let it begin here and now.