

Hope for Peace by Practising Peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 December, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 2 A

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12;

Music for Reflection: “Jerusalem” by Steve Earle

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

On the front cover of your service sheet today, you will see, just under the Second Sunday of Advent, the words of our Advent theme, a quote from the essayist and writer, Richard Flanagan.

We will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage.

It spoke to the worship team, as we chose a theme for Advent, of the act of nature, of the hope that is required of us – and given to us this Advent. We also have this amazing fabric sculpture that Lori has created – a Rose Breasted Cockatoo. That evokes Emily Dickinson’s words about hope:

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.

We receive our hope through our actions, but even when we can’t find the words to name it, it endures. We seek it also in the sacred texts of our tradition.

But the people who chose the lectionary readings for the second Sunday in Advent were not getting into the Christmas spirit. John the Baptist takes no prisoners – there are no tinsel trees or flickering candles; no sweet carols in his words. But John makes sense when we see him as a descendent, 800 years later, of Isaiah. One who was writing in the time of the Exile.

Isaiah’s prophetic poem paints a powerful, memorable, hopeful vision of a world that is dramatically different to that which the people of Judah are experiencing.

After years of rotten, unjust, tyrannical political leadership, the prophet speaks to the people of a new ruler who is to come. And this new ruler will not just transform politics. The whole people of God will also be transformed.

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch will blossom:
The spirit of Yahweh shall rest upon you,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
A spirit of counsel and power,
a spirit of knowledge and reverence for Yahweh.
You will delight in following the ways of Yahweh,
and you won't judge by appearances,
or make decisions by hearsay. You will treat poor people with fairness and uphold the
rights of the land's downtrodden.*

We know about that image of green life that emerges, fragile and yet somehow defiant, from a dead tree stump. We know it in the weeds that sprout in the concrete in the midst of the city; and, just now, we see it intensely in Australia when we do see the signs of regeneration that come after fire – though God knows it is hard to hold onto hope of new life in the midst of the bushfires that are being experienced now. Yes, the dead earth will live again, but now we dwell, quite appropriately, in a time of grief for the earth and in a state of deep despair at what humans have done to it. In despair we may doubt the truth of the Easter hymn – Now The Green Blade Rises.

*Love lives again; that with the dead has been;
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.*

Dwelling in doubt and despair is appropriate now. And hope, courageous, ferocious hope, does not deny despair.

At the Common Dreams Conference, Jason John, who is here this morning, I just noticed, did a presentation that I wasn't able to get to, but which I have heard about – about an axis that has along the bottom, deep despair, and up one side, ferocious hope. It's a really helpful image. It's been picked up by the Grail for their Advent series and Elizabeth brought it again to us at Reflect and Connect this week – because it reminds us that you can have both hope and despair. It's not a linear continuum, but you can dwell in both places. We decided, on Thursday that you might move day to day, even hour by hour, as to where you are on that axis.

Deep Despair, Ferocious Hope. Both/and.

The prophet Isaiah understood this tension and paradox. This week's reading though, is even more powerful when read in its setting. At the end of chapter 10, the prophet Isaiah says that God is going to cause the trees to be cut by an enemy military campaign. That's why there's "*a stump*" when this passage begins. It's not accidental, or random, and it's not just a stump sitting there; it's the result of God's sweeping judgement across the land. A judgement of the people's failure to care for the poor and to raise up the downtrodden.

Walter Brueggemann casts the scene as a great struggle, a "*deep conflict and contest*", he says, between the stump (Israel's political situation), and God's spirit, the power beneath "*the religious yearning of Israel*".

Isaiah moves between deeply judgemental critical accounts of the reality of what is happening in Judah, the life of the people of God and their king, what they've done wrong, where they've taken the wrong path, and intersperses this judgement, this naming, with utopian visions of what might be possible with God.

For today, in our readings, we don't read Isaiah 10. But we do have the uncomfortable words of judgment from John the Baptist, accompanied by a call to repentance. Repentance is not just a matter of saying sorry. Repentance is doing the hard work of naming the wrongs, dwelling in the pain of that, and making a radical commitment to a radical reorientation of self and society. We are used to comparing John the Baptist to Jesus - who really seems like a much nicer guy. But the writer of Matthew's gospel included John's harsh words for a reason.

As progressive Christians we might wince with discomfort and reject the ways that the church has used the naming of sin and judgement to shame people, and to keep people dependent on priestly power; on the power to effect confession and absolution.

But in rightly rejecting that construction, we might also lose the wisdom of repentance, inappropriately rejecting the idea that God might consign people to eternal damnation, or that God might order the execution of enemies. We miss the sense of judgement as 'assessment'; an assessment which allows us to consider how our lives, personally and collectively, measure up against what we know, through the Hebrew scriptures and through Jesus. What we know to be God's will for people and for the planet.

Isaiah's hearers knew despair. The temple, which they believed would always be at the centre of their culture was no more. Leaders were corrupt, the people were scattered, unmoored from the practice of their faith, from their homes, from their families, from all that they held dear - in terms of their very identity.

As we can imagine the despair of our fellow citizens who have lost their homes and livelihoods and land, even those who have lost someone they love in the bushfires; as we can imagine those people who are making a temporary home in an evacuation centre, we can begin to imagine the deep despair of the people of Judah during the exile.

In the midst of that, in his 8th century context, Isaiah somehow understood that, if you cast the vision of how things could be different, then that itself will make a difference.

In our context, with inept - and sometimes downright evil - political leadership (and I'm not being partisan here, for both of our major parties have the blood of asylum seekers on their hands and both have played their part in promulgating fossil fuel industry and denial of climate change) - in the midst of that despair, we also need to hold a big vision of what is possible with God by entering into the theological world view of Isaiah and of John the Baptist. In doing so we touch our ferocious hope and begin to reshape the present through the exercise of our own courage.

Isaiah doesn't give us a prescription for what the new political arrangements will look like. The only way to see what the possibilities are is if you get a sense of what God has always intended for humanity, in relation to each other, and in relationship to creation.

Isaiah is tackling grief and loss in real and honest ways. And so in Advent we do not put on rose coloured binoculars and train our sights toward Christmas. We name the aspects of our time that are despairing - most obviously in the midst of the flame of the bushfires and in human inaction on climate change. But in so many other situations as well.

We don't have leaders that are wearing the belt of righteousness. Medevac has been cruelly overturned. People still languish in physical and mental distress in PNG and on Nauru. There is violence at the core of many relationships - not just the violence of wars between nations, but the violence in homes and families and on the street.

Christmas time is marked by an increase in intimate partner violence, particularly directed by men toward women, and child abuse.

And there is just what there always is – sadness. And there's sickness and there's struggle. So, we name in lament the gap between God's promise and where we are now.

Where we are now?

The powerful are not dwelling alongside the weak in justice. The lion and the lamb are not lying down together. The child and the snake are not playing safely. In Isaiah's time, in John's time and our time, the powerful eat of the weak and inject venom into the vulnerable.

John the Baptist, in chapter 10 of Isaiah, says: if you get it wrong in terms of connecting to the vision of God; if you fail to attend to the ways of God, there will be political chaos. In chapter 10 of Isaiah, "*the master lord of armies hacks away at treetops with an axe*"...connecting us with plainly with John the Baptist. An axe will be laid at the root of the tree. And yet - the shoot that emerges from the felled tree is a genuine message of hope. Hope that is not understood fully, unless you have grasped the full extent of the despair.

We say that Advent is about waiting. But it is not waiting absent-mindedly, wondering what's going to happen. It is an intentional waiting in which we are invited to look within to see what is the truth about our own lives and that of the world in which we live. But it also invites us to look up, to imagine how it might be different. To imagine how we might be different.

Isaiah's vision was picked up by the writer of Matthew's gospel, communicating decades after Jesus with a Jewish audience. connecting Isaiah's vision of a peaceable reign of God with the life of Jesus. Jesus who stands up for righteousness, who stands up for the people of the land, and especially for the poor – and the excluded and the outcast.

If we pay attention to this week's readings rather than rushing toward the child in the manger, we will see things emerging that the claims of Christmas start to address. What does this ruler look like? How will this one come to us? What does justice, right judgement, wisdom, insight and strength look like? The gospel is an account of the ways in which the life and ministry of Jesus fulfils these expectations.

For us to make sense together here today, for me to reflect on these readings, we must hear them in our own culture, where there continue to be questions about the viability of the settled political accommodations that we've come to about the way our lives are governed, about how we relate to one another, what we are doing in relation to creation and the environment. In so many places around the world, the word of hope comes to us in people who are saying that what we've settled for might not be the best way.

Isaiah's vision, and John's words of judgement are not fact – they're poetry. But they contain truth. They invite us to use our imagination to find another way. For Christians, Utopian imagination like that, which has a strongly political and poetic dimension connected to Isaiah 11 and to a particular claim about God's relationship with a particular person who will come to bring justice, restore creation and bring the nations back to God. That is the message that we are hearing as we move toward Christmas.

This is not going to be done by God but by a human ruler in Isaiah. This is the one upon whom the spirit of God rests.

This connects with the Christmas story that tells us that God endowed Jesus of Nazareth with that spirit – and when we look at his life, and the way that it embodies these values, we get a sense of how we might follow in his way.

The Messiah – which means the anointed one - is the one on whom God's spirit rests.

For Christians, this is deeply centred in Jesus. In listening to Jesus we hear the answers to our questions. What does the world need to be? Where does God show up in the midst of this? Where do we encounter God?

So in Advent we hold on to the vision of how the world might be different and we also come to see where God might be present in the world.

We're going to conclude this time of reflection listening to Steve Earle's song, *Jerusalem*. There are so many beautiful pieces of Christmas music, classical pieces, carols. But John the Baptist was a rough edged person and Steve Earle is a rough edged singer.

I thought that after I leave, you may not get very many more opportunities to hear Steve Earle for a while, and it may be a while before I can get away with that at St Michaels on Collins St in Melbourne.

We are aware of a Christmas that Steve Earle addresses. Not a sweet and beautiful Christmas crib scene of a silent and holy night, but a burnt desert landscape where the military machines roll over the ground where Jesus stood.

And we are aware of our calling to think about the relationship of the people of God to each other, and to all the creatures, and to the creation.

To hold on to our hope of beauty and peace. That the green will come again as God is incarnated in us as peacemakers.

As people who bear a courageous, hopeful vision of the world – not as it is, but the world as it will be.