

# Reflections on Hope and Courage

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 December, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Phil Ryan, John Thorpe and Patricia Curthoys

Advent 4A

Isaiah 7:10-16; Contemporary Reading: “*Blessed are you who bear the light*”  
by Jan Richardson; Matthew 1:18-25

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

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## Introduction - Warren Talbot

During the season of Advent we've focused on the themes of hope and courage. The words came from an article by Richard Flanagan about responding to climate change and Hazel Hogarth presented them creatively in our banners. This morning we hear from three members of the congregation with their reflections on hope and courage. We commence with Phil Ryan.

## Phil

Divine Holy Spirit I pray that the meditations from my heart in the words of my lips may be acceptable to you this day.

First and foremost, my brothers and sisters here, in the name of Jesus the Christ our Saviour and on behalf of my beloved Angela and I, I wish you much love joy peace and happiness this Christmas season considering all the vicissitudes of life that have assailed us this week

A couple of weeks ago when I sat here in the congregation and I heard our beautiful Margaret share the words of Richard Flanagan: “*we will discover the language of hope in the quality of our courage*” and what this might mean for you.

I have to tell you, as I sat there and listened, meditating on the words, I had what could be called an “Aha” experience. Those words really resonated with me, as they are Clarion words that I had been offered to me in my disillusionment over the inaction in regard to the leaders in our country in respect of climate change.

As it turns out, several years ago I read this book - and somewhere along the way I lost it. But my beloved Angela happened to wander into a shop in Newtown one Sunday afternoon and there on the shelf was this book again and she picked it up because it was being offered at a bargain price. And the book is *We Are The Weather Makers*, the story of global warming by Tim Flannery.

Now as I read the book, I opened it to this saying and it's a very poignant saying: *it has been the consideration of our wonderful atmosphere in its various relations to human life and to all life which has compelled me to this cry for the children and for an outraged humanity let everything give way to this vote for no one who says it can't be done. Vote only for those who declare it shall be done.* As I gaze at these two banners on our choir loft - hope and courage - I take great solace in that.

I stand here very proud, really proud of a two year old little bundle of joy. His name is Archie Ryan Tyler. Ryan after my surname; Ryan given to him by his parents, my daughter Amelia and my son-in-law Zack. His initials are ART - and folks let me tell you he is a work of art in my eyes. On my phone I have his picture with him sitting on my knee and I'm reading him a book. When I get low, all I have to do is look at that picture and straight away my heart sings and my feelings are lifted. I know that the peace of God is with me. I look at him and I looked at our beautiful little sweet innocents today and I think "*what does the future hold*"?

But no! We have to step back. We have to be detached from the emotion of that and say: *what can we do as adults in our time that we've got here on this planet?*) Here I am at my three score and tenth year - how much more time have I got?

So let me tell you that I will do my utmost to write the letters of disgust, to get in and join in again with the marches of the school children as we did here when this church was full to capacity, went to the Domain and walk, walk, walked - singing their chant, shouting their slogans etc, etc. I will not stop doing that because that is how I can be proactive.

As I read through the book, as I revisited the book, I came across another quote. It said: *the best scientific evidence indicates that we need to reduce our CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by 70% by 2050.* Here it is 2020, so in 30 years' time we need to reduce our carbon emissions by 70%! There it is. So we have a lot of work to do

As I further reflect on this, by 2050, if I'm still around, I'll be a hundred. Archie, my beautiful little pride and joy will be 33! And I trust and I know, because his parents are good parents, he will be an established good citizen and making his way in this world of ours. I've quietly made a personal commitment to Archie my grandson that I'll be doing everything in my power to ensure that he has opportunities and a better world to live in. a world free of fear and ravages the like of which we've witnessed over this last fortnight in our own country.

In closing, I'll leave this thought with you from Tim's book. There, in bold letters:

*When it comes to climate, everything is connected to everything else. We are all brothers and sisters in a family of mankind let us make no mistake about that. To understand what might happen in this future we need to know as much as possible about our atmosphere and how it is operated in the past.*

May I just rest for a moment? In my studies, in my readings - when the first settlers came here they came into our harbour and noticed fires in the forests around. It happened to be January at the time. January is a time we celebrate the foundation of our country. Fires were burning. so I just maintain that as an Australian in honour of our first Australians I will do all my utmost to connect with them and learn from them, because let's face it they were here 40,000 years before we settled in this land - and look how they managed the environment they had.

So we have to pop it at any form of arrogance and embrace and push our ignorance away - and embrace the possibility these first Australians - people of God I might add, because of their spirituality, can teach us.

Okay I am endeavouring to follow an acronym called KISS - keep it short and simple Phil!

So I close my reflection with a heartfelt prayer of surrender to the Holy Spirit. And I substitute the word God with love. So my prayer now is to love.

On behalf of your children of life on this great planet Earth, I with my brethren here today, reach out with heart for good intent in the name of Jesus, asking that we are enabled to find in us the language of hope in the quality of courage by us taking affirmative action; knowing that in surrender to the higher powers of the universe. We have your holy spirit walking along with us. We will be agents for change and progress for all living people now and in the future.

And, my dearly beloved people, my friends of this church in this sacred space, I now in closing bow to you and say Namaste an ancient Sanskrit greeting because I honour the light of God living in you all.

## John

As we near Christmas, the time our tradition celebrates the birth of Jesus whose teachings we follow, on reflection, I was surprised to find how central courage is to the way we live out our faith. Frequently, Christians are told to keep out of commenting on the major issues of our day, to leave these matters to politicians and other power holders.

One of the major differences I noticed when I first came to Pitt St, was a total difference in the way people lived out an active faith, bringing a strong gospel focus on important issues in society. These faith heroes were very hands-on and I was attracted to the refugee hosting group as I'd had a little exposure to these communities through my work.

This led me to taking a major change of direction in my career, spending twenty amazing years working in refugee communities. Sadly, I feel the plight of refugees worldwide, has allowed a negative message to popularise the appalling treatment of those held captive by Australia. We have people among us passionate about this issue and we must support change in this denial of Justice. It is frustrating to think what could be achieved if all Christians banded together to demand a compassionate response to the rights of these refugees.

At this time, all those decades ago, many Pitt St people were courageously working to change attitudes in the broader community, and particularly in the church, to LGBTIQ people where much positive change has taken place over the decades.

One of my greatest "Faith Heroes" was the Rev Harry Herbert who led UnitingCare (now Uniting) for 27 years - and certainly made it what it is today. Harry retired a few years ago and died early this month. A lengthy obituary in the Herald this week paid tribute to his work. Harry was the focus of much controversy but his decisions, often criticised, turned out to be successful in allowing the organisation to survive in a time of changes in government regulation. At several Synods I sat with Harry as he dealt with criticisms. But his unwavering commitment to the vulnerable in society kept him on task.

When the Sisters of Charity had their plans for what became known as an injecting room in Kings Cross overruled by Cardinal Pell (and, as reported, the Pope), Harry was approached to take over the project.

Harry made many demands so that the values of the Uniting Church were forefront and showed enormous courage in the face of a huge conservative backlash, even inside our church but also all the way to the High Court. Harry saw the saving of lives as the priority and the *Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre* is said to have saved thousands of lives.

Harry said at a meeting, when near retirement: *"I'm all for strategic planning but in the end you've still got to have the intuition of the Holy Spirit"*

Let us take courage to work towards the seemingly impossible problems of our age. Climate Change is the major issue but many more domestic issues also demand attention. Courageous and united opposition can allow us *"God-botherers"* to make a difference.

## Patricia

As many of you know, each Advent and Christmas, for many years now, Pitt Street Uniting Church has supported the work of Act for Peace, the aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia. And we do this in both word and deed, through prayer and in our offerings to the annual Christmas Bowl appeal.

Each year the Worship Team thinks carefully about how we might include material from Act for Peace in our Advent services. Some years we have shared stories from the material provided. Other times we have incorporated the material into our Advent candle lighting prayers, whilst other years we have had members of the congregation pray for the work of Act for Peace during our prayers of thanksgiving and solidarity. All the while being mindful of concerns about '*prayers as propaganda*'.

The material we receive from the National Council of Churches in Australia about the work of Act for Peace is peppered with the language of hope – the ways in which the work of the agency nurtures hope in the lives of people with whom they work, the ways in which it embodies hope, the ways in which it encourages us to be hopeful.

But in reading through the material each year it is sometimes difficult to maintain hope, especially in the face of seemingly intractable, recurring situations. Each year, for instance, without fail, we pray for refugees in various parts of the world – Sri Lankan refugees in India - and those who have returned home; Syrian refugees in Jordan, for whom we will pray again this morning. We pray for people living in the aftermath of war – in Iraq, in South Sudan, in Afghanistan. And each year we pray for people in the Pacific – the people of Vanuatu, the people of Tonga – who face rising sea water levels and ever more destructive weather events.

Courage, on the other hand, is mentioned less frequently. The stories about the projects do not seek to valorise the lives of the people involved. We are not asked to see these people as courageous. If anything we are asked to see them as fellow human beings, with the capacity to transform their own circumstances, if only the world was more equitably and justly organised.

As for courage, this, I think, is where we come in.

We are the ones who need to find courage – courage to remain engaged with the stories we hear of people's suffering and of their needs; courage to continue to work for a better world, a more equitable world, a more just world; courage to persist in demanding that our federal government raise the percentage of our GDP which is spent on foreign aid from its current parlous level.

Then, maybe, as Richard Flanagan has suggested, we will discover our own language of hope in the quality of our courage: language which speaks to and sustains us, as individuals and as a community.

May it be so.