

The Season of Creation - River Sunday

Glenbrook Uniting Church & Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 September,
2020

Contemporary Reflection by Elizabeth Maddox

Season of Creation 4

Genesis 8:20-22; 9:12-17; Matthew 28:1-10.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I'd like to begin with a poem about happiness, by Christina Rossetti.

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

I wanted to read you this poem because when we look for a way to express joy, we talk about water. Rivers, lakes, springs and fountains mean new life, hope, happiness, healing. In all our stories and poems and myths and fantasies, water is the source of life and happiness and love.

The idea of water as hope is inscribed into our language. The “source” of life, the “spring” of life, is the place where it wells up out of the deep artesian basin, out of the earth and flows into the world. People or books may be the “fount” or “font” of wisdom. Good ideas “flow”. We dip our toe in or dive in; we are swept along with the current; feelings well up and bubble over and things go swimmingly.

It's no coincidence that Jesus is described as the water of life, that streams of life-giving water flow out of the heart of those who love him; that it is a river of the water of life that sparkles like crystal in the street of the City of God in the book of Revelations.

Water is a central symbol in all world religions. The Rainbow Serpent moves through water and rain, shaping, naming and singing the Dreaming into being. We are made of water. Yes, we are dust, and to dust we shall return; but our bodies are 60 per cent water. Through water we live, and through the stories of water our lives gain meaning.

In contemporary Australia we recite myths about rugged country and droughts and flooding rains and cycles that will restore the green earth eventually. In the bush ballad, Hanrahan says “*we’ll all be rooned*” by drought, fire and flood, but the point of the ballad is that nobody believes it. Everything will be all right, in spite of prophets of doom like Hanrahan.

In three of the bible readings set for today we see this same human yearning to know that our future is secure, that God’s constancy will provide water and food for us and for our descendants, numberless as the stars.

But we know what’s happening. We know that global heating due to the carbon emissions of fossil fuels causes drought. Logging slows rainfall further, and misguided river management and land use causes erosion, salination, desertification, extinction. The Murray-Darling Basin is Australia’s food bowl; it produces one third of what we eat; and it is in jeopardy, as money rather than a careful balance of needs guides decisions about how to distribute its waters.

We know that Australian rivers are in peril. In summer the Ngunnhu Brewarrina Fish Traps on the Barwon River, possibly the oldest human construction on earth, lay bare, dried up. The mouth of the mighty Murray-Darling River closed and thousands of fish died as the water ceased to flow. Towns like Walgett and Armidale came dangerously close to running out of water. Low water levels in the Namoi River exposed the pump that takes water from the river to wash the coal from the Whitehaven coal mine at Maules Creek, although local farmers are forbidden from using this water. The waters of the Great Artesian Basin that lies deep beneath Queensland and northern NSW are being taken by mines, and poisoned as toxic chemicals leach into their depths.

We know the reasons for all this. They are various, but mostly associated with human folly. We can’t call it greed because what humanity is doing, like Satan in Paradise Lost, to quote C.S. Lewis, is cutting off the branch that we are sitting on. Folly, madness, is official state policy and internationally accepted economic convention.

We in Australia are not alone in our fear for food and water. The waters and harvests of the world are increasingly unpredictable. A 2016 Guardian article quoted by Ali Smith in an epigraph to her novel *Autumn* claims that “*At current rates of soil erosion, Britain has just 100 harvests left.*”

Each year the mighty Brahmaputra River in Bangladesh thunders down from the Himalayas with more floodwaters and glacial melt than ever before, and washes away farms, villages and towns. Increasingly there are disputes over water rights, and this will only get worse as the globe continues to heat up. We are tempted to despair for the future of the earth and its people.

Today I want to speak about the one reading in our lectionary that has nothing to do with rivers. The two women in Matthew who come to Jesus’ tomb are in despair. The light of the world has gone out; the bread of life is no more; the river of life has dried up. Jesus is dead, and everything they have hoped for, their dream of peace, justice and the kingdom of God, has passed from this world. In the Mark and Luke versions of this story, the women bring spices to wash and anoint the body of Jesus, according to Jewish rites.

In all these stories the women come early, at daybreak, to honour the dead Jesus. They come, in their despair, to do what little they can; to honour him with their observance of grief, with their ritual washing, with their spices. There is nothing they can do; and yet they do find a little something to offer, a small act to pay tribute to their beloved Jesus, comforting themselves and each other with the celebration of a ritual, a small act of grace.

They come early, dedicating themselves from their waking hour. They do not lie weeping in bed, and creep dishevelled towards the tomb, listless with grief, when the day grows hot and the stasis of home grows unbearable. Instead they rise before dawn and make their way through the watch of the hostile Roman soldiers to offer their small gift of presence, of patience.

They are women, not men; not disciples, not leaders of the community. These are powerless people; female adherents of a discredited and humiliated rebel who are too weak to be seen as a threat when his fellow rebels, the real menace to the Roman state, have slunk away. Even their doubled name, Mary, conceals their individuality.

Yet the small, unimportant act of these small, unimportant people in the depths of their despair becomes pivotal.

This is when mystery is unleashed, when the elements tear loose. Confusion breaks upon them. Earthquake and lightning, terror, voices assail them. But in this terrifying moment the women see incalculable beauty rise up. Hope is born in them at this moment. And they are convinced that it is not at the graveside that they need to seek the Source of Life, but in Galilee, among the people, in the peace that Jesus gives them there.

What is this mystery? Is it a mystery that will visit us, too, as we put our feet, one after the other, in the places that our heads tell us that we need to go? Even though our hearts would much rather slink away, to seek comfort in self-indulgence, in denial or disregard of the causes of our despair: our failing rivers, our drying earth, our wildfire, our insect extinction, our heating climate?

Is it when we face and address the darkness of our future that lightning strikes and we see in a flash the terrifying possibility that we ourselves might be messengers of comfort and peace? Is this what it means to be resurrection people: to face our despair, and to know God with us as we bring small tributes in defiance of death?

For me the essence of the story is this. By doing the little things that we know how to do, that we are able to do, but that seem trivial, we may avert the worst of climate change. Sometimes these acts feel pointless precisely because they seem so insignificant, or because they seem futile.

But global heating isn't a binary event. It isn't a simple matter of doom or salvation; it will be a question of degree. How much we warm the earth will determine how terrible things get. Every small effort will make a difference. If we are like those two women, humble, and early, and grounded in our knowledge that it is right to make an effort, though it may seem pointless, our actions will have a cumulative impact.

Our tiny individual acts of defiant hope will make us leaders, lights of the world; springs of living water will flow from our hearts as we look death in the face and refuse to despair.

For God, nothing is impossible. I do not see God as an omnipotent force. I see God as the mystery of love, that pours like a mighty torrent as the waters of our loves coalesce and the sum becomes greater than the parts could ever be. With grace, we can become part of a river of change that can sweep through this world.

The women aren't at all sure of what they see that Easter morning, though they know that their experience is momentous. They have to be told not to be afraid. Divine revelation is dangerous and uncertain. Like those women, we are called by what we encounter at the tomb to dangerous and terrifying things.

Our political and economic systems are currently unable to handle climate change; we need to find ways of fixing them. As Kevin told us the other week, we need to be a river, shifting our practices and even our values to respond to the time. Rivers can push stones aside; they can wash away economic delusion, political mismanagement, injustice.

In Matthew's story, Jesus doesn't stay with the women; he doesn't travel with them. He tells them he will see them in Galilee, that he will be present in the business of their ongoing lives. There is no restoration of comfort or safety in this resurrection, although there is joy. So Galilee becomes a metaphor for another layer of life, a different spiritual plane, a place where the world is thin and the divine bleeds through to us.

We too are called to Galilee - for some of us, that may even be the Galilee Basin! Well, Craig, our fellow parishioner, went there before us, when he chained himself to the cattle grid and blocked access to the Adani mine.

We know that being there for one another, whether in person or online, is crucial to our joy, to our hope. We know that when we gather together in God's name, God is there. In our crazy world there often isn't time for togetherness, for being radically present with one another, or even for being radically present with God.

In Jesus' day the opportunity was there, in every menial task. Company was human interaction, not the public display of Facebook and Instagram, or even the accountable messaging of emails. In order to evade the clutter that the industrial and electronic revolution have brought into the world, with all their wonders, we need to nurture each other: play, talk, ponder, sleep, enter into God's peace. The bliss of the mystic, of the ecstatic visionary, may not be something that we ever experience, but we might glimpse it in nature, in art, in one another.

It is time to invite this grace into our lives.

Perhaps if we encourage one another with radical presence we will be strong enough to let go of our denial and engage in the small acts of hope, maybe even the large ones, that are the calling of resurrection people.

Then we can be brave together like those two women who walked straight past those Roman soldiers; and perhaps the grace of God's presence will well up like a gillgai, or erupt like a mighty torrent, in our midst.