

Waiting with Love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 20 December, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Advent 4B

Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26; Contemporary Reading:
“*Lilies of the Field*”; Luke 1:26-38

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

Here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, less than a week to Christmas in the middle of a Pandemic with the focus on Love.

It is all very apt as we consider the state of the world, with vaccines now emerging and being dispensed across the rich countries while very many poorer, less equipped countries may not ever be able to access them - except by the grace of the rich. There is clearly a pecking order.

Here in Australia we seem to expect, with good cause, that we too will have access to the vaccines within a reasonable time, and I expect we will.

We are, much to our benefit - and no doubt somewhat to our shame, not that far from the top of the list at least when it comes to access to vaccines.

Except as an island continent we tend to live in isolation anyway; and I also expect that we could wait for a while to allow those who need it more, access the vaccines so they get what they desperately need. Far too many are suffering and dying because of it. Here, really, we have it easy by comparison – even with today’s restrictions.

Of course we are not immune and we need to be vigilant, constantly vigilant. This last week has shown us so much, so that we are not sure what this coming week will bring. Some of us may find ourselves in lockdown for Christmas, or at least somewhat more limited in our ability to celebrate than we might have thought possible a week ago.

That you are seeing this reflection on line today is in response to the need that, right now, we need people to stay at home and refrain from gathering. It is a pastoral response to members and one of ethics within the wider community. As long as we take care, as long as the wider community is in our minds, we should be on track to stopping any spread of infection. It does take a village - and we are part of that village; or in this case a city, a state, a nation and indeed all nations to work together for the world to be a safe place.

And my hope is that this means that we can learn some lessons along the way that go beyond attending to a viral pandemic, to then give our energies to overcoming the pandemics of apathy about the climate, the earth, famines and wars and greed that permeate every living thing on earth.

The care of every living thing on earth. Hmm.

Today's gospel story is of a heavenly angel, named 'Gabriel'. Now, there's an interesting piece of research you might want to follow up sometime - Gabriel.

Today's story is about this angel, the messenger of Divine tidings, announcing to Mary that she will have a child, one who will bear within them Divine Love and Grace - and who is to be named Jesus, meaning the one who saves.

Mary responds by talking about being a virgin and how is this to be so. Oh, how many sermons have I heard and writings have I read, trying to explain this immaculate conception! We can focus on that only for so long. But it is not the point of the story, nor is it why Mary, I believe is referred to as such. (But isn't it enticing to want to focus on sex rather than ethics, or politics, or grace, or humility.)

Mary is a young, very young, woman. She is of child-bearing age. This conversation is not about genetics, or chromosomes, or parentage, it is about how God is to be revealed; or perhaps I should say how God chooses to be revealed in the world - through the humble, the poor, through those who understand that it takes a village and that we need to be in this together to make a difference in the world; through those who know what it's like when there is inequality and people suffer.

The point of the story is that Divinity will flow through this seed of life now growing within her. Mary a young woman, chosen to be the nurturer of the life that reveals God's Grace to the world in a way that is tangible, accessible and human!

Here we have an announcement of God's immanence, of Emmanuel, God with us, not making a grand entrance but a profound one.

This all takes place in the midst of the people crying out for liberation in a time of oppression.

Pax Romana certainly did bring many benefits (just take note of Monty Python who will remind us of that). But, Pax Romana also came at a price. the price of freedom as culture, beliefs, social practices, commerce and the prosperity of those now under the clear, present and imposed authority of the Romans was challenged, threatened and in many cases squashed.

This is the story of faithful people crying out for liberation, awaiting a Messiah to guide them to a new life, a new world order.

But Luke does not present this as an instant fix to the people's dilemma rather an ongoing promise of God with us, among us, working in and through us because it takes a village and a whole lot more. It takes a change in the mind-set, in the heart and spirit of the people to bring about true liberation based on love - not yet another conquest.

Love.

What kind of love is this? This love of which we speak when we refer to God?

Is it *eros* - sexual or passionate love? Interesting, that's the first love we mostly think of when the word love is used.

Is it *philia* - the love of friendship and goodwill? This love depends on those involved actually liking one another.

Is it *storge* - familial love akin to the love between parent and child? This is about the obvious link between the parties.

Is it *Agape* - universal love - the love for stranger, nature or even God? This does not depend on familiarity or filiation, rather it is about the unselfish concern for the welfare of others.

Is it *Ludus* - a playful, uncommitted love focused on fun, maybe conquest with no strings attached? (This might sound like a young adult's growing space as they explore life and relationships.)

Is it *pragma* - a practical love founded on reason and one's longer-term interests where sexual attraction takes a back seat to personal qualities, shared goals and compatibilities and making it work? (You may wonder about this one a little, but it is more prevalent than you might imagine.)

Is it *philantia* - a self-love which in the negative can lead to hubris (not at all to be confused with some leaders of which we might be aware from time to time)? In the positive *philantia* is a healthy self-esteem that would fit the phrase 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

Not surprising, *philantia* is considered the matrix through which we think, feel and act. A reflection of how we relate to ourself, others and the world.

Of course, all of these forms of love are present at any time and interweave. And in English, we just use the one word, love! Hmm.

So, which love is the love that comes through a Messenger that says: "you, the lowly one, the one who knows first hand the suffering of the world, who knows what it is to be human, who knows what it means not to have a voice under the law, it is through you that I will be revealed in the world".

I want you to nurture my presence, to give me life.

Well agape seems to fit the bill rather well, but not without a certain touch of *storge* if we understand ourselves as being in relationship with our Creator. And not without the need for a touch of *philantia* for confidence that with God and even me (that is Mary in this case) something rather amazing is possible.

Agape, within a relationship that promotes *storge*, and not without the need for a touch of *philantia* or confidence that with God and you, yes you, something rather amazing is possible.

It does take a village, and a world of villages, with everyone working together, committed in love, self-giving, other-caring love that's respectful and has the confidence that something rather amazing is possible.

There we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, less than a week to Christmas, in the middle of a pandemic with the focus on love.

With a focus on love that can – and will – change the world. One little act at a time.