

**Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 February 2016**  
**A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman**  
**Lent 2C**

**Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Luke 13: 31-35; Contemporary Reading** (see page 4)

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Look for a moment at the symbols on the table: solid stone and fragile nest. Stone, the reliable foundation. Nest, in which the young and vulnerable are nurtured and protected.

But that stone of foundation is not innocent. So easily, it becomes a weapon. In a world divided by wars and the subsequent massive displacement of people, what will we offer the vulnerable? Cruelty or shelter?

The stone and the nest remind me of "*the powers of the weak*," the powers of the weak which we must now claim in the face of the institutionalized evil - of policies that condemn people fleeing persecution to torment and cruelty on Manus Island and Nauru.

I give thanks for all who have the courage to speak and the courage to act. In our community, I particularly give thanks for the prophetic witness of Dr Michael Dudley who publicly named prolonged immigration detention as "*reckless indifference and calculated cruelty*" and he spoke of the psychic numbing of the Australian population.

And I am thankful for the people in Brisbane who are standing watch at Lady Cilento Hospital to offer moral protection to baby Asha and her family. And I am grateful to Brian Owler, head of the Australian Medical Association, who yesterday warned Malcolm Turnbull against forcibly removing the child.

A nest or a stone ... a safe haven or abusive detention?

The short story we heard read from Luke's gospel focuses on one moment for Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. This Sunday, as we reflect on our world – and on ourselves - is one moment in our Lenten journey, in this season of remembering the community-shaping story of the death of Jesus on a cross.

In the story we have heard, Herod attempts to block Jesus on the road. The threat of stones, the breaking of a prophet's body and spirit, is countered by a fragile, yet powerfully protective love.

Herod Antipas was a small-town tyrant, successor to the frightening Herod of the nativity story. He was motivated by fear and the lust for power. His vision of how the world should be clashed fundamentally with Jesus' vision of the world.

Herod was an agent of the Empire with its values of domination and oppression. Jesus called the people back to the ancient promises of God, to love and to justice, as the prophets before him had done.

We stand at this moment on our Lenten journey to Jerusalem, knowing that Jesus would die – that he would die at the hands of the Empire that Herod represented.

And yet we also stand as people of the resurrection. We stand in a world shaped by a compelling story that has engaged people of faith so much so that we live within it, not as a dry history of facts, but as a way of understanding human life and community.

Today we recall the place that Jesus of Nazareth had in revealing what is true about the human condition and our relation to the sacred.

This understanding of the Christian story, which sees it not so much as historical fact but as inspiration for our living, is profoundly disturbing to many Christians. But then Jesus, himself, was a threat to the orthodox, who insisted there was only one way to understand the faith. Human self-understanding needs memory but the interpretation of that memory need not be set in stone.

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In the Hebrew Bible, we hear that when the children of Israel finally got to the land promised to Abram and Sarai, they crossed through the midst of the Jordan River on dry ground.

Joshua commanded the elders to gather twelve stones from the riverbed. Stones to stand as memory: "*When your children ask their parents in time to come 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground'*" (Joshua 4: 21-22)

The stones marked the place and held the memory of what God had done. These stones are important. They connect generations to the stories that would have otherwise been forgotten.

I don't know if Joshua's stones were still there when John the Baptist came to preach at the Jordan. But, there must have been some stones by the river. John said, "*I tell you, God is able, from these stones, to raise up the children of Abraham*" – (and I'm sure he meant "and Sarah too!"). John was speaking of bloodline and tradition. And he was saying something about stones: maybe the stones were not as solid as they seemed.

Now that would have been rather scary to those who trusted that stones were stones, to those who guarded the walls between insiders and outsiders. When fear sets in, we hold the stones tighter in our hands and shore up the walls of tradition and identity. We protect our borders.

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Some of the stones are words: creeds, confessions, and constitutions. These words handed down are important. They have lasted for generations. They have been passed down so that we, the children's children, will remember what we would never have known.

But stones can be misused. They can harm and destroy. The stones can become more important than God.

By the time Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, the stone keepers were anxious. The one who was baptised by John had come up out of the water blessed with God's sign. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus was on his way - today, tomorrow, and the next day - casting out demons and performing cures, making whole and healing, and raising up children of promise where, before, outcasts had been.

Before he even got close to the city, Jesus wept over it, wept for what had been and for what was yet to come: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*"

What was Jesus thinking? What is a mother hen against the stones? The mother hen is a strange image for Jesus to choose. And yet like most of the images Jesus used, it references the Jewish tradition.

In the book of Sirach, in the wisdom literature, we can hear Wisdom's song: "*She made among human beings an eternal foundation,*" it reads in the English translation of Sirach 1:15. But the original text actually says: "*She made as a nest ---among human beings an eternal foundation.*"

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Was Jesus holy Wisdom nesting among us? Can we then say that Jesus is Sophia (the feminine wisdom of God) enfleshed. Can we call Jesus Sophia's child?

Many years ago now, I remember an art exhibition in James Chapel at Union Seminary in New York. One of the paintings exhibited during Lent that year was of an image of Christ gathering in the living and the dead, arms outstretched in compassion.

But the face of Christ was not gendered. Was it male or was it female?

The painting was titled "*The Mothering Christ.*" But mothering Christ is not written in any book - certainly not written anywhere in stone. It is not in the historic creeds and it's not in the Basis of Union. It cannot be found in the Constitution or the Regulations. It is heresy! It is blasphemy!

The stone becomes a weapon.

I believe that it is time to put down the stones of orthodoxy. The orthodox images of God, and the orthodox interpretations of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus still longs to gather us in. Jesus comes to us in ways that startle and surprise us. Jesus is able, from these stones, to raise up names that we had not yet dared speak.

Some of us might pray in words he taught us: "*Father, Abba, holy is your name.*" For many, these words are not just as strong as a rock, but as close to us as breathing.

Yet, some of us have prayed for other words - not out of self-centredness, but out of deep and faithful yearning. "*Mother, Sophia, Christa, Wisdom, holy is your name.*" And in praying thus, we are gathered under Christ's wings of safety.

*"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings?"*

Jesus, the mothering Christ, still calls. Come, children of promise, come. Don't be afraid, you can put the stones down now. Come. Open yourself to the Lenten journey of risk and revelation, but for now, in this moment, in this hour on our Lenten journey - shelter here on the journey to Jerusalem.

So often we speak of faith as costly, and forget the promises of God. God is our shelter and stronghold. With God, we live in covenant. Like Abram and Sarai gazing at the stars, like Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, we are asked to live in the strength of that promise and with the audacity of courageous faith.

God knows we need that now.

Jesus of Nazareth, the human one, lived and died as a Jewish male of the first century. Where his bones lie, who knows. It matters not.

Jesus, Christa, child of Sophia, embodied wisdom lives with us

and journeys with us

through a Lent of

changing our minds, changing our hearts, changing our world.

Contemporary Reading:

**"Colours of Lent" by Gillian Hunt ©**

(written in response to last week's reflection)

taking up, not giving up  
holding on, not letting slide,  
a love feast rather than fasting,  
this time  
it's painting outside the lines

forty days of focusing  
on life in another's shoes  
on home and what home-less  
signifies,  
a desert to navigate through

pruned like a tree in winter  
but immune to its flat grey skies,  
a hope-filled future to invest in,  
forty nights  
sifting truth from lies

security's lure to chide  
and power to re-define,  
accepting the blessing of being beloved  
as, this time,  
we're painting outside the lines