

Mother's Day, Mother's Work and Mother Earth

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 May 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 7C

Acts 16: 16-34; Contemporary Reading - A Psalm for Just Trade Reform; John 17: 20-26

Hear the You Tube version as you read – follow the link on the Sunday Reflections page at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/>

When I came to write my reflection, I realised I hadn't put a reflection title in the order of service. Well it's about Mother's Day, Mother's Work, and an end to the Mining of Mother Earth.

This morning the encounter of Paul with the noisy, persistent possessed slave girl, whose illness and labour was being exploited by her owners, has blended with my awareness of Mother's Day, Earth Day a couple of weeks ago, and Fair Trade Fortnight, which begins today.

The young girl in the Acts story was a slave, a possession herself, owned by other humans, but also held captive by a spirit that appeared to give her special powers but no peace.

Today I'm thinking about people around the world who work in conditions of modern day slavery, who desperately need not free trade, but fair trade.

Fair Trade Fortnight is marked in New Zealand and Australia in May each year. It is a celebration of the difference that our ethical purchases make for millions of farmers and workers in developing countries.

Fair Traders are businesses that have committed to an Australian Standard for Fair Trade. The Standard covers ten aspects of fair trade including creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged producers, payment of a fair price, greater transparency, better working conditions, capacity building, and care for the environment.

Fair Trade fortnight reminds us to pay attention to what we purchase. It covers food, beverages, fashion, and homewares. People are also becoming aware of the need for fair trade practices in electronics but there is a very long way to go in this area. We can be attracted and seduced by extremely low prices but how ethical is the sourcing, production and delivery of these products?

It is a complex issue but it is possible to find this information. In Australia there are many groups that resource us as we make purchasing decisions including Anti-Slavery Australia (ASA) and "Stop the Traffik." Thanks to increasing public demand, we now are able to purchase ethically-produced goods from Fair Traders in specialist shops such as Oxfam as well as in mainstream supermarkets. That block of Cadburys chocolate came from Woolworths across the road, but not all Cadburys chocolate is fair trade, so make careful choices. We can find out which clothing brands and stores ensure that garment workers are fairly paid and employed in safe conditions.

As we remember the slave girl in the Acts readings, whose ability was exploited by others, we should also remember the girls and boys whose slave labour is involved in the production of chocolate. Much of the chocolate that finds its way into Australian shops and homes is still made with cocoa from the Ivory Coast plantations that use trafficked children. These children are kidnapped and forced to work in the cocoa plantations from an early age, for long hours, in dangerous working conditions, without any possibility of attending school. A global movement has begun to change this. The movement tackles poverty and empowers producers who are doing the right thing. You can be sure that farmers are operating with Fairtrade Certification, Rainforest Alliance logo or UTZ Certified are engaging in good labour practices if you see those symbols.

So if you are still shopping for Mother's day chocolate, make sure it is ethical so that you are caring not just for your own mother but for the mothers of children who long to be free from cocoa trade slavery.

Mother's Day can be a day to succumb to the powers of commerce and consumerism, to honour our mother by buying her a vacuum cleaner, an iron, a bread-maker or a "lady shaver" just to mention some of the items I saw advertised this week.

Or Mother's Day may be an occasion to express love and gratitude to our mothers. But even this understanding of mother's day is complicated, and for some the pain of Mother's Day is painful:

I think of mothers (and fathers) who have lost children; men, women and children who have lost beloved mothers.

Of women who have been left unexpectedly to become single mothers or who have been forced into motherhood.

Those for whom motherhood was the result of rape. Those abused by their mothers.

Those who long for motherhood denied by an uncooperative body or by lack of a partner and possibility.

So today, knowing that mother's day produces mixed emotions, I suggest a more unifying reflection is an acknowledgement of our nature as initially totally dependent and then inter-dependent beings. Mother's Day can be dismissed lightly by buying a card or a gift, or we can pause and give thanks for the gift of life that we receive from our mothers and our fathers, and from the earth.

Mother's Day can be an opportunity to remember that our faith teaches us that we are creatures first, not consumers. That we were born in a bloody, messy, painful way to be earth creatures. And that if it were not for the care of our mothers or someone, male or female, who mothered us in infancy, we would not have survived.

We arrive in life, completely dependent on the care of others but we grow up in a culture that encourages independence. Independence is important if we are to survive and to contribute. But we have taken the process of individuation to extremes in western cultures and failed to remember how we were born, as interdependent creatures.

And I wonder if our amnesia about our creatured being, contributes to our sense of disconnect with the natural world. To our willingness to use and abuse it. To commodify it and to see ourselves as separate from it, as consumers of it.

There is another mother to honour on Mother's Day, our mother earth. For as Mother's Day can become so commercialised as to be without real meaning, so can our relationship with mother Earth. Mining and mineral extraction, which risks the well-being of our mother, is worse than forgetting to send a card or buy a gift. It's also to forget that mother earth has other more vulnerable children, who are damaged by our behaviour.

Mineral extraction can be seen as a form of unacknowledged violence against Mother Earth and her children.

This morning some of our community are not here with us, because they are gathered at Newcastle's beautiful harbour to take a stand against coal exports and environmental destruction, and to support Geoff Maddox who is taking part in the blockade. So today I acknowledge Geoff, Lizzie, Arthur and Rebecca – and many others who I don't know about - for this witness to the life of planet earth, the mother we all share.

Almost every form of mineral and energy extraction internationally entails severe exploitation of workers and their families: from the diamond mines of Africa, to the copper mines of Chile to the hideous suffering surrounding coal mines just about everywhere. The entire Niger River delta has been despoiled not just in terms of natural resources but appalling and chaotic conditions have been created for the human family in that region through the militarism and violence that have enforced the extraction of wealth from the ground.

Because we are locked into a particular kind of fossil fuel addiction, the extreme violence lurking just beneath the surface of the addiction has become all but invisible to us. Many of our business and political elites consider very rapid fossil fuel extraction to represent “normal” behaviour for a developed economy; but it isn’t. Considered over the long arc of human existence, our practice of drilling and mining incessantly for minerals represents a freakish aberration and a shockingly risky thing to be doing.

Aggressive wealth extraction and aggressive wealth accumulation are psychologically and spiritually linked behaviours. So often we are oblivious to the philosophy and spirituality that lies behind the creation of wealth.

But there are thinkers and activists, secular and religious, who are showing us that there is another way to live on earth: an alternative to battering the created order and ruthlessly extracting private wealth.

All countries – including Australia – are going to have to let go of the model of constant economic growth and transition to a new economic and social structure. This is a fact, as constant economic growth requires constant input of material resources from our planet – and these resources are finite!

There are limits to the amount of human growth that the planet can support. Australia, and all other nations on Earth, are going to have to face economic retraction and a transition to a new way of living sustainably on Earth.

Environmentally destructive measures that attempt to maintain business-as-usual for as long as possible are a strategy steering the runaway train for the cliff’s edge.

Destroying the integrity of the remaining ecological systems by mining will only temporarily allow the business-as-usual economic model to carry on, and even in the next one to two decades, we and our children will be left with nothing but gaping holes where once vital forests and farmland once thrived.

Australia still has invaluable resources for future generations, resources that can enable a softer transition into the inevitable stage of economic retraction. We have the resources of sun and wind and waves – renewable energy - that could enable us to become a sustainable energy super power.

If we could experience a dramatic conversion to sustainable energy I think that the heart of the Sacred would rejoice - and I believe that Mother Earth would smile to see her prodigal children finally repent of our profligate ways and begin to live within a world-view of inter-dependence, to live in gratitude to that which gives us life and that which sustains life, to live in ways that heal the earth.

And so, as I conclude, I return to the Acts story, to the beautiful practice of care exhibited by the jailer to Paul – after Paul and his colleagues had remained in jail when they could have escaped. The jailer washed their wounds, offered them food, and shared his family home with them, as he and his family mothered them....

So happy Mother's Day, as we celebrate trade justice for every mother's child, and eco-justice for our mother earth.