

# Voices and Visions for Justice

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 October 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 24C

Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2; 1-4; Luke 19:1-10;

Contemporary reading: Desmond Tutu on Peace and Justice

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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It's really good to be back with you after six whole weeks! The first weekend that I was away, I spoke at the Common Dreams Conference in Brisbane. This was followed by five weeks travelling in Europe with Clare, the first time I had ever been to places like Paris, Marseilles, Barcelona, Venice and Rome. It was an amazing time. Not just the places we visited but the luxury of all that time together just to be. We got back on Wednesday night, knowing that on Friday I was due to travel to Newcastle to speak at not one but three sessions of the Inspiracy gathering that was planned by three Newcastle Uniting Churches.

When I said yes to the Inspiracy invitation some months ago, I told myself I'd have it all ready prepared before I went to Common Dreams and Europe because there would only be one day in between and I might be jet lagged. But the weeks before I went away were unexpectedly hectic. (I don't know why they were unexpectedly hectic, but they were!) So preparation happened on Thursday. Unfortunately, I had the worst jet lag I've ever experienced. Not that I felt tired at the wrong times. I just couldn't sleep at all. Which I guess was ok as I really needed the prep time. The other thing that didn't get done before I left was the sermon for today – though I had done the liturgy for this morning - so I was planning to write the sermon very early this morning ... after I got back from Newcastle last night!

But yesterday when I was talking to Paul and Mae Cotterell, who were at Inspiracy, Paul suggested that instead of writing a sermon, I share my Friday night talk with you. That was a blessing and so that is what I'm going to do.

I said yes to speaking at Inspiracy, despite the timing, because of the opportunity to meet the Filipino artist Emmanuel Garibay and to see his work. You might remember that on the Sunday after Easter I showed images of Garibay's amazing Emmaus meal paintings in which he represents the risen Christ as a Filipino woman in a bar surrounded by companions who roar with laughter when they recognise the Christ in their midst not as an elite Anglo male but as a working woman of colour.

I was inspired by the way that Jenny Burns and Rod Pattenden were bringing together of spirituality, with justice and art ... and by the way in which the programme valued beauty in the struggle for justice.

By the blending of inspiration and conspiracy.

By the naming of Spirit in a way that is embodied and active: an understanding that Spirit is something in which we all participate and yet greater than any one of us.

By the understanding of the human person as earth creature, one with the planet, which undergirds so much of what was on offer over the weekend.

Doing the work of justice has been a passion in my life. And Inspiracy made the important point that it took me years to understand: that art and beauty are not luxuries, but essential to sustaining a life committed to justice and peace.

So on Friday night I told a story about an event in my life that inspired me to join the conspiracy of justice and love.

I began with talking about something very down to earth: toilets. While Clare and I were tourists in France in late-September, it was still quite hot, so keeping hydrated was an issue. And subsequently, so was finding public toilets.

I have an odd fascination with French toilets because as a teenager I had decided that I wanted to spend my last year of high school as an exchange student. I initially wanted to go to France. But my mother was adamant that I would not be going to France because (quote) *"they have strange toilets."*

While Clare and I were travelling in Provence, we stopped in small villages and I did see some of the old 'squat over a hole in the ground' toilets that so concerned her. At that point, I felt that she had a point and it seemed worth paying 2 euro for an espresso and the use of a more modern café toilet.

The toilet is not the point of the story, because my parents agreed, quite naively in retrospect, that I could go instead to Cape Town, South Africa. The toilets were unremarkable, but it was 1976, the year that the revolution to end apartheid took flight with the Soweto uprising. It took me another 40 years to get to France but that year in South Africa changed my life.

I lived during the year with three ordinary white families during 1976, attending a whites only high school. The families had black servants, maids and gardeners, who lived-in and only returned to their own families in the black townships for one night a week. I was critical of the system that kept them apart from their own children, and appalled by the segregation of public spaces into white and non-white. The toilets may have been physically ordinary but the discrimination and segregation, into white and non-white, was morally dangerous. Dangerous to the spirit of black and white, Coloured and Indian peoples.

But as I had been instructed by Rotary, I mostly kept my views to myself, carefully testing the waters before embarking on any conversation about the morality of apartheid. I did read what I could, especially the Cape Times, which provided a counter source of information to the sanitised normality of everyday apartheid, including reports of the numerous deaths of black people in custody and the farcical explanations for their deaths provided by the state.

I remember standing on a beach outside of Cape Town with my host sister Alison – and Alison pointed out Robben Island, where she told me, Nelson Mandela and other violent revolutionaries were imprisoned. By then Mandela had been in prison for 12 years. He would spend another six on Robben Island and eight more on the mainland before his release in 1990. That he would one day be free, let alone President of South Africa, was unimaginable on that sunny day on Bloubergstrand.

Mid-way through the year, things came apart. School children, first in the Transvaal, and then in the Cape, began to march in the streets protesting apartheid, protesting the inadequacy of their education, particularly that they were forced to study in Afrikaans, which Desmond Tutu, who was then Dean of Johannesburg, called the language of the oppressors. Their peaceful protests were met with tear gas and guns. Yet their protests continued for months. Hundreds of people died. For the first time Coloured and Indian people joined together with Black people to resist apartheid. Though the struggle took years, change became inevitable because of the events of June 1976.

On the day of the first protest in Cape Town, a month later, I had done something previously unimaginable in my “good girl” life. I skipped school, and took the train into the centre of Cape Town to explore. I especially wanted to see District 6, the historic Coloured inner city neighbourhood that had been re-zoned as white but where Coloured people continued to resist relocation to the desolate Cape Flats.

I was in the city when hundreds of young people, descended. I remember how youthful they were, my age and younger. I remember how passionately they chanted as they were met with army tanks, soldiers in camouflage, firing tear gas and rubber bullets. All around me shopkeepers were locking their doors. My white privilege protected me and I was let into a clothing boutique, safe inside watching the violence and chaos from a distance until it passed out of sight.

After the protest had ended, I made my way back to the train station. The air was still thick with tear gas, my eyes were streaming and I was finding it hard to breathe. A middle aged black man passed me, and seeing my distress called out, “*it is your government that has done this to you, madam.*” He used the deferential word madam to a white girl and yet he was also defiantly saying that it was not his government. I replied, “*It is not my government.*” I later wished I had answered with more compassion. What the apartheid regime was doing to his people was beyond my imagination, until that day. For the first time, I saw the resistance and solidarity that is necessary to act against injustice, to act against evil.

Police repression of black students in Cape Town’s townships of Langa, Nyanga and Guguletu led to further protests, and coloured students joined with them in solidarity. At night, in our white suburb of Pinelands, we could hear gun fire in Guguletu. My white friends were concerned about their own safety, but we were oblivious to the fact that during 1976 a total of 128 black and coloured people - mostly young people - were killed and over 400 were injured in Cape Town’s racist violence.

At that stage in my life, I was a somewhat evangelical Christian teenager and I participated in a number of churches during the year, eschewing the deadly boring Presbyterians (which was my tradition) for the more lively Baptist and the Pentecostal churches attended by my host families and my friends. The vast majority of people attending those churches believed that apartheid was in the interests of black people and that it was God’s will. When they prayed it was for their own safety.

But I also met Christians who were committed to denouncing and ending apartheid. One of them was Frank Nelson who is now Anglican Dean of Adelaide. On an exchange trip to Kruger National park, on which Frank was a “chaperone,” I first learned about Christian opposition to the injustice of apartheid. Not an accidental conjoining of people who were Christian and opposed apartheid, but Christians who actively opposed it because of their faith. These church leaders were able to criticise the government more freely than the leaders of militant groups. In the following decade, they were pivotal in altering public opinion about apartheid policies.

Spending Year 12 in apartheid South Africa taught me that religion could either be a source of oppression or a force for transformation. Since then I have tried, in small ways, to work on justice issues including race, gender, disability and sexuality, challenging the streams of my faith tradition that are life-denying and drawing from the wells of spirit and liberation that are ironically also part of our tradition.

It’s been forty years since I spent that life-changing year in South Africa. If I had only my anger at injustice to sustain me, I would have burned out long ago.

As an ethicist, I am grateful for the resources of faith that nourish theological reflection, spiritual refreshment, and celebration along the way.

Visual, literary and musical arts, spiritual practice and theology all sustain my commitment to justice.

I remember the time when I first discovered the Christa first in the writings of feminist theology and then in the art of Emmanuel Garibay ... scandalising those who would freeze the maleness of the Jesus of history, and those who would constrain the wild liberating power of the transforming of the Spirit, which is borne now by the whole people of God.

I concluded my Friday night talk by talking about my Saturday sessions. The first involved theological reflection on the power of the Risen Christa, for women and men, to free the Christ from the individualised, gendered limitations which restrict the idea of ‘*God with Us*’ to one particular expression in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Using art, including Emmanuel’s Emmaus paintings, and Nicola Slee’s Christa poetry, I explored the claim that while Jesus died as a Palestinian, Jewish man, Christ rises to be God with us in many different forms – including Christa/Community.

In the Saturday afternoon session, I told some stories of liberation struggles I have been involved in since my year in South Africa and invited the gathering to explore the ethical and spiritual implications of re-imagining Christ as the whole faith community engaged in the work of love and justice.

If Christ/Christa/Community is risen with us and in us, how does this inspire our lives as people of spirit and faith? St Teresa of Avila claimed in words we still speak today: “*Christ (Christa) has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ (Christa) looks compassion on this world.*”

In concluding the Friday talk I asked: How then shall we live in just relation with all who are excluded from being understood as bearing the image of God: people, creatures and planet? Where will we find bread for the journey and how will we celebrate the glimpses of God’s reign?

As Zacchaeus's story illustrates, in the midst of an oppressive and oppressing society God's justice comes when people are willing to change their perceptions and their actions.

The church, as a community of justice-seeking friends, encourages me and calls me to account. The work of poets, painters, musicians moves me to claim that there is so much more to life than we are being sold in shopping malls.

On Thursday I questioned why on earth I'd said yes to speaking at Inspiracy. By yesterday, I was so glad I did. Because it enabled me to reconnect with my passion for justice, and for the church as the community loving the world God loves. To return from holiday, delighted by all that we had seen and done, but also delighted to be back here at Pitt Street resuming our journey together. As we listen to one another's stories and sustain one another in the work of life and justice.

Inspiracy reminded me that we are called to embody Christa/community.

And to remember that poetry, music and art that we share in liturgy each Sunday, are not frivolous luxuries but bread for the journey of love, life and liberation.

May it be so.