

When the dust settles...

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 November 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 26C

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 21:5-19

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

On both Thursday and Friday mornings I woke up with a sense of unease. A feeling that something bad had happened. That all was not right with the world. And then into my consciousness came the dawning awareness that Donald Trump was president-elect of the USA.

Anger and fear had triumphed. Blatant misogyny, racism, homophobia and xenophobia were not enough to dissuade people who understandably wanted a better economic deal from electing a person who is ignorant and narcissistic and temperamentally unstable to a position of enormous power.

I had watched the election results on Wednesday afternoon while trying to write today's liturgy based on the lectionary readings, including the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Where there will be no more weeping. Where infant mortality is no more. Where people build houses and live in the house that they built, rather than labouring for the benefit of the wealthy elite. Where the crops they plant feed their families rather than creating profit the industrial agriculture. Where people shall not labour in vain working multiple minimum wage jobs to feed their families.

By the middle of afternoon, I had stopped trying to write a liturgy. And I sat and watched, thinking what it was going to be like to be Muslim, an undocumented migrant, a young black man, a lesbian woman or gay man or transgender kid, a woman needing an abortion in Donald Trump's America.

And I thought about the rest of the world: the poor, the refugees, the people in war-torn places... though in truth I do not think that hawkish policies of Hillary Clinton would have been good for the world either.

And in Australia, the enthusiastic response to the Trump victory by One Nation and by the right wing of the Liberal party disturbed me greatly.

I think that the most frightening consequence of this election campaign seems to have been the permission-giving to attack, verbally and even physically, people who are different. And that is also happening here.

The vision of Isaiah, the promise of God of justice and peace, seemed so far away.

Over the next few days I've read vast amounts of analysis. I think it is important to understand what happened, why it happened, because we need to plan and act decisively in response.

As I wrote in the eNews, I lived for over twelve years of my life in the US. From the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties I lived in New York City – in that rarefied atmosphere. In 2010, I lived for six months in Dayton, Ohio while I had a fellowship at the Kettering Foundation. I didn't really meet any Republicans while I was living in New York. But I met Republicans in Dayton. Some of them were good, people, just old school conservatives but I also met Tea Party supporters. Dayton had formerly been a centre of automotive manufacturing. Charles Kettering, whose fortune funded the foundation where I researched, had invented the electric starter motor for the automobile.

The Kettering Foundation was located in leafy green suburb with manicured lawns and beautifully kept houses. There was an easy affluence amongst the privileged who lived and worked there. But to the north of the city, economic devastation was evident in poor black neighbourhoods and in abandoned tracts of middle and working class housing. Families unable to pay mortgages on homes that had plummeted in value, when tens of thousands of jobs were lost during the Global Financial Crisis, had simply mailed the keys to their houses back to the banks and walked away. Weeds overtook gardens and paint peeled in the sun.

Seeing the loss of a secure lifestyle and the loss of the hope of the American dream helped me understand the Tea Party and the rise of Donald Trump.

I agree with the film-maker Michael Moore that the Democratic Party failed to understand or address the plight of poor and working people. In the US the minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour – and if you get tips, its \$2.13 an hour! It is worth dramatically less than it was twenty years ago. Even people who work – even people who work more than one job - are still desperately poor. While the rich continue to get obscenely wealthy.

And while this explains the explosive anger and fear felt by many Americans who voted for Trump, I do not think it justifies the hate. Commentators are falling over themselves to argue whether economics or racism and sexism that determined the election outcome. I think it's both.

It's important to note that many of those who are disadvantaged economically are people of colour and migrant people. But like so many despots before him, Trump has used fear of the 'minority other' to incite anger and violence.

Rather than blaming the elites, disadvantaged people were encouraged to blame Muslims, immigrants, people of colour, welfare recipients, and LGBTI people whose rights are seen as challenging the social arrangements of the "*good old days.*"

On Wednesday evening, as I took the bus to the Worship Team meeting to discuss Advent hope, the election result was called. I was close to tears. I felt anything but hopeful. And I realise that many people, Muslim people, immigrants and refugees, people of colour, LGBTI people are genuinely fearful. Already there have been attacks on Mosques, Muslim women's headscarfs have been torn off, immigrant children have been taunted at school with chants of "build the wall" – and gay men have been bashed.

It's too soon to know what will happen. Trump is fickle and he has a pathological need to be liked. But after three days, as the dust begins to settle, I have returned again and again over the weekend to the text that promises a new heaven and a new earth.

I don't think that Hillary Clinton would have been a bad president but I also do not think that she would have overturned the politics of business as usual that benefits the elites. She is one of them. As Peter Hartcher wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald, "*She is the very embodiment of the very embodiment of the wealthy, connected, entitled establishment.*"

Though he won't deliver, Trump supporters want that system blown up and destroyed. And that system does need to be transformed.

I am not suggesting at all that Donald Trump is part of God's plan. But we are being invited into a vision that is far more radical than anything most politicians are offering. In retrospect, it appears to me that Bernie Sanders, a Jewish socialist, was closer to Isaiah's vision than anyone else on the political landscape (except perhaps for Elizabeth Warren who is my great hope for the next election).

It seems to me important to remember that this passage in Isaiah was written at a time of disappointment. The people had returned from exile but they were dwelling in the rubble. Maybe Jerusalem, where Isaiah walked, looked like Aleppo in Syria after the bombs or like Italy after the earthquakes. The new temple was not a patch on the old. People were still suffering from the effects of oppression and displacement.

People were hungering for hope. And Isaiah related a vision from God who in the midst of suffering is about to "*create new heavens and a new earth... a joy, a delight.*"

This is not a matter of optimism or positive thinking or a pipe dream. It calls us to God's saying "yes" to life and justice in the midst of the "no" of suffering and exploitation. And it assures us that suffering will end because of the caring presence of an attentive, responsive Sacred Presence who will bring transformation in a concrete, "this-world" experience of all things made right - in and through us and other people of goodwill.

Biblical scholar says Stephen Breck Reid calls this dream *God's project*.

I like the word project because, more than dream, it invites us to join in. God calls to us through this ancient prophetic text, and through the life and work of Jesus, to join in with the intent of Divine Presence which is justice, love and peace. What better work is there for us to do, or to give our lives to?

Individually, personally, we cannot do much about US politics but we can inhabit Isaiah's dream for a city and land renewed, urban and rural in Australia.

Walter Brueggemann says this text describes God's intention for Israel. He illuminates the text in its original setting while shining its light on our own situation today.

Post-exilic Israel was looking at rubble; so are we. Israel may have felt overwhelmed and threatened by empires and forces they couldn't influence, let alone control; we feel overwhelmed, too. Israel worried about its children and lamented their deaths as well as the wasted lives of those who toil in vain; we worry and lament, too.

However, it's right in the midst of such despair-inducing circumstances that God speaks and moves. Brueggemann writes: "*Ours is not an empty world of machinery where we get what we have coming to us. No! Caring, healing communication is still possible. Life is not a driven or anxious monologue. God (The Lord) is findable... And that is the song of the promises and the image of the poets, the voices of Moses and of Jesus, that a new world is about to be given, and we can trust ourselves to it and live as though in it.*" (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*).

To this, in the spite of what is – and what has been - I want to say "Yes!"

How we do that is our challenge. One of the encouraging acts I have heard about follows on from the xenophobic attacks that followed the Brexit vote and that is people wearing a small but mighty safety pin on their clothing as a symbol of hope. Wearing the pin in public symbolises that we can be relied on to step in and speak out against vilification. It has been picked up in the US this week. And I think we need it here too.

On Friday morning I spent time in an interfaith conversation which included Lina Jebeile, a young Australian born Muslim woman, mother of four young children. She has used her Lebanese cooking blog to promote "*spread hummus not hate*" connecting people of different races and faiths by sharing food. During the conversation, Lina spoke of her own fear of using the trains in Sydney – particularly after the Lindt Café siege - and her concern that her daughters had been told on the train "*all Muslims are terrorists*". Her 8 and 10 year old daughters as they rode the train to school, even though they were accompanied by their father. She is worried that the US election and the rise of One Nation will make them less safe.

So this morning we have safety pins to share for anyone who would like to join in this simple act of solidarity that is an aspect of saying 'yes' to God's welcoming project.

This may seem daunting – we don't know what kind of situations this will bring us into. But remember also the teaching of Jesus in Luke. Following Jesus means testifying to our trust in God in the midst of circumstances that test our confidence and our hope. We are called to witness to the project of God, to see what the world does not see: the broken-hearted people and the hope...to change our world and ourselves so that all are welcomed in.

And if we are afraid that we are not enough to do that Jesus reminds us: "*I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.*"

With God's help, we will find courage to build a church where we struggle together, learning about the challenges facing our world and ourselves and also learning to be people of an ethical vision grounded in the scriptures like Isaiah and Luke.

We are far removed in time from their communities but like them we look to the end of empires that oppress and to the hope of a world renewed for all God's people.

It is a real hope, a challenging project. It will require us to change, and our world to change, to live in healing and peace for all people and all creation.

Hold on to that hope. Look around you and see who is here with you. And know that God, too, is with you.

We are not alone. There is beauty for brokenness.