

Follow me... I need you

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 January 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 3A

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4: 12-23

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

Yesterday, Donald Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States. On the night of the election, 2 months ago, I heard the news on the bus on the way in to Worship Team meeting. I was in tears then – and I don't feel a whole lot better this weekend. How different the world seems now than it did eight years ago, when light shone forth and people were filled with hope and joy as the first African American president gave his inaugural speech.

Trump's speech yesterday was dark. I couldn't bear to listen to it, but I did read it. It painted a terrible, fearful picture of America, of a chaos which he alone can overcome. The Guardian editorial described it as a political declaration of war. There were references in it to the Bible and to God, and yet it was in total contrast to the message of liberation in Isaiah, the message of unity in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and to Jesus' own inspiring inaugural message of transformation.

Eight years ago, light broke through the dark evils of slavery and Jim Crow, and the decades of institutionalised racism that followed.

Today, in different times, we need to hear again Isaiah's vision, Jesus's vision, Paul's vision and to reassure ourselves that bitterness, bigotry, and banality are not the best that the human community can do.

The light that Isaiah prophesied, and Matthew's Jesus recalled, shines on people walking in darkness. It is a light that gives direction and drives out fear. Today there are many in America who are afraid, and many around the world share their fear.

Isaiah also spoke his prophecy into a time of tremendous anxiety for his people. They were experiencing the distress and anguish of occupation.

Assyrian invaders had attacked the northern kingdom, dividing portions of Israel to create Assyrian provinces. With its images of "*the boots of the tramping warriors*" and "*garments rolled in blood*" (Isa. 9:5), the prophecy of Isaiah 9 reflects the oppressive military occupation under which Israel struggled to live.

Isaiah feels God's absence, and yet amid the darkness of cruelty and oppression, he proclaims that the light of God's face will shine again on the people. God's light will break through the gloom and anguish, scattering it. Isaiah sings a song of liberation into the darkness.

It is not easy to preach hope at such a time, then or now. There is a danger of appearing to ignore pain and suffering in a facile declaration of hope. But Isaiah spoke hope as one who knew the suffering of his people, and yet with authority and passion and confidence, he announced that God was still present.

No matter what political party is in power, no matter who the Premier of New South Walesⁱ or the President of the United States is, there will always be a need for voices like Isaiah's that proclaim a vision of a world at peace. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to say clearly what is unacceptable: the rod of oppression, the exploitation of the poor, the rule of fear. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to stand outside of the halls of power and lift-up a vision of what our world, and we, can become. There will always be a need for prophetic voices to call us to new ways of living.

Isaiah's bold vision, not just for individuals, but for communities and nations is recalled by the writer of Matthew's gospel as he introduces Jesus's inaugural speech.

Matthew's gospel understands that Jesus is the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise. And in the context of that proclamation he tells us that Jesus called on people to repent, as John had before him.

Modern hearers of this passage tend to personalise and spiritualise repentance, aligning it with confession of sins. So, we think of repenting of trivial things often - like procrastination, or drinking red wine, or eating chocolate gelato (to name a few of my own top of mind sins).

But this is not how Jesus understood repentance. The coming of the light in darkness was the context for a total change of direction in personal and corporate life.

Repentance has been confused with unhelpful theological ideas about original sin and human fallen-ness, in which Jesus is understood as the rescuer, first of the disciples, and then of us. We hear the call to follow him as a declaration that we are not good enough, and in the process, we give away the power we have to be children of the light.

But what if Jesus called his disciples not just for their benefit but also for his?

I want to digress here to tell you about a movie called *Under the Mountain*. My son Andrew has an amazing memory for plot detail and while we were in Auckland last week, he reminded me about this movie we'd seen ages ago that was set in Auckland.

The film's message centres on the words: I need you. And the strength that can only come from deep connection.

The main characters are twin teens Rachel and Theo, who as youngsters had an almost telepathic connection with each other. In the movie, their mother has died in a tragic accident and to give their father space to heal, they have come to stay with relatives at Lake Pupuke on Auckland's North Shore.

Here they soon stumble across bizarre creatures and events that stem from their fascination with the "Wilberforce" residence next door, which looks like the archetypical haunted house.

Struggling with their fading telepathic connection to one another that has weakened with age, and as they come to grips with the loss of their mother, Rachel and Theo eventually realize that they must trust in their relationship more than ever if they are to survive.

This awareness had stayed with Rachel but Theo believes he has the strength to defeat their enemies on his own.

Soon they face everything from alien forces to volcanoes, earth-quakes, and horrible shapeshifting creatures. They are guided by Mr Jones the “fire-raiser” played by Sam Neill who is the key to deciphering what is going on.

Near the climax of the movie, Theo’s self-sufficiency and overconfidence cause Rachel to fall into the hands of the Wilberforces and the gargantuan monsters, and it appears that she has died. In the moment of crisis, Theo’s twin telepathy returns and he wills her back to life with the words “*I need you Rachel.*” In the crisis, he realises that their power exists only because of connection and together they make magic that saves Auckland and the world.

I need you. I need you.

These are powerful words. What if we had been told that Jesus, rather than saying “*follow me*” had said to the potential disciples: *I need you Simon Peter. I need you Andrew. I need you James. I need you John.*

In calling the disciples to follow him, Jesus was creating a community of justice-seeking friends. Without the disciples, there would have been no mission, no dangerous memory of Jesus for us to hold.

We are so used to casting Jesus as the super hero. The one to follow. The one who saves. We are so used to reading into his story all the myths of the heroic loner who stands head and shoulders above the other characters, that we don’t allow him the humanity of needing others, of needing friends.

So, could we hear the call to repentance not as individuals who have sinned, but as community that is becoming, and connecting, and moving forward toward the light in partnership with Divine Presence?

Jesus invited his friends into a new community through his preaching. “*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*” says little about confession, remorse, forgiveness.

Repentance here means change of direction, gaining of a new set of values and readiness for a new way of being called the reign of God.

The demand for change is illustrated in the call of the brothers Simon and Andrew, and James and John. The message of God’s reign is not for the tentative or indecisive. It pushes people to follow Jesus’ way. Jesus who embodies in his ministry and his person the reign of God through the formation of the beloved community.

The community of disciple-friends reveals the theological heart of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus’ new community was not based on based on kinship or tradition, political party or nation, but on living a life that reflects the will of God through acts of love, and justice for the poor and the oppressed.

Race, blood, status, power or wealth will not lead to new life. The new communities formed in allegiance to the way of Jesus are instead based on living in harmony with sacred relational power.

This is what discipleship means for Simon and Andrew, James and John, and what it means for us.

As the first disciples walked away from the world as they knew it, so we are called to walk away from security and self-interest and materialism and follow on a path that isn't defined by how many fish we catch or how much stuff we collect.

This discipleship is not about "believing things about Jesus." Believing in Jesus means giving one's heart, at the deepest level, to the Divine Presence who is made known to us through the stories of Jesus and his people.

Believing means to be willing to acknowledge that we need one another, that the truth of life is interconnectedness.

In the wake of the US election, and Brexit, and global uncertainty and fear, our broken world needs communities of solidarity and resistance. It desperately needs the vision of love borne by justice-seeking friends.

At a time when the world is divided, we are reminded by the visions of Isaiah and Jesus not to lower our sights, not to get comfortable with the status quo, not to be satisfied with anything less than the release of the captive, the end of war-making, and the lifting of the burden of oppression from all people everywhere.

Let the vision of Isaiah and Jesus stay with you and inspire you to the fiercest hope that there will again be days of light-breaking, illuminating the path of those who walk in darkness and fear, and pain.

In troubled times, we are called to look toward the light, to hold on to hope. And we are called to celebrate the signs of light that can be found in our midst even now.

May the summer light of Epiphany reach to the deep of each of our hearts and warm us in love toward one another and toward the world God loves.

ⁱ The Premier of NSW had resigned this week.