

Grounded vision

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 March 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 4A

1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41;

Contemporary Reading: "Lent" by Jean M Watt, *From The Heart's Time.*
A poem a day for Lent and Easter

Video from lentevent.com (week1)

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

This week, the theme of water that we are watching through Lent comes to us as Psalm 23, which we didn't hear read, but we sang a paraphrase of in the song "The King of Love My Shepherd is. *"Where streams of Living Water flow"*! We search for the Living Water in the season of Lent. I've loved that hymn ever since I was a child – and I remember singing it as a little girl, old enough to read, but having no idea what *"unction grace bestoweth"* meant, but I just knew that, somehow, it was comforting and that it was about the presence of God.

But today, I'm going to reflect, not on that Psalm, but on the Gospel of John.

Who defines you? How are you defined? Who supports you to be who you are and who you are becoming, despite what has been in your life?

I still can't quite believe it, but I was very moved during the week by watching Senator Jacqui Lambie's speech to parliament - as the government with support of other right wing minor parties tried to screw the poorest Australians, people dependent on welfare, in order to pay for its beleaguered, non means-tested child-care policy.

Lambie spoke about being, for seven years, a single mother living on a disability pension for seven years after being medically discharged from the army.

I want to read you some of what she said:

"This is what it is like. It is not a choice for many of us, to be on welfare. It is shameful and embarrassing, but we do it, not because we want to, but because circumstances put us there, and for you to take more money off those people, you have no idea how bloody tough it is. Every little cent counts to those people.

"If you really realised the damage that you are doing to that part of society, you would stop doing it.

"We're not living when we are like that, we are surviving, we are in a bloody war zone and we are surviving.

"We are surviving to put bread on the table to make sure our kids can get the basics in life.

"I drove an unregistered car ... [I drove] without having a licence because I couldn't renew it.

"I want you know what it is like to be at the bottom of the crap pile through no fault of our own."

It's worth watching the video because I can't begin to describe the raw emotion of Lambie's speech. And yet, I struggle to understand why someone who has experienced the marginalisation of poverty would vilify other minorities as Lambie does. Chris Longfoot wrote this when she posted the video of Lambie's speech on Facebook.

"Perhaps the most important first step in erasing racism, bigotry, homophobia is to assist the "have nots" in our society? Poverty is humiliating and divisive and often its only recourse is anger born of powerlessness. It can lead to blaming other minority groups in a misguided attempt to obtain a degree of self-esteem."

In a nutshell, Chris made a wise assessment of what is going on with the phenomenon of Trump and Hansen supporters, people being used by elites to promote fear and division while the powerful continue to amass extreme wealth.

But it is also important to remember that among the poor are people oppressed by racism, bigotry and homophobia. They are not two discrete groups. People of colour are poor, queer people are poor, especially trans people, migrants and refugees are poor. We should resist characterisations which pitch poor white people against other groups that are marginalised.

In today's story from the gospel of John we hear about the response of the character who is described as *"the man born blind"*. About his response to a change in his life circumstances. Over and over in the story, he gets described as *"the man born blind"* even after Jesus heals him. It's a label that seems to stick to him, that limits other people seeing his humanity.

When I spoke about this passage from John's Gospel three years ago I addressed in some depth the issue of disability and the problems of using healing from physical disability as a metaphor for faith and enlightenment. I am not going to do that this time, but I want to acknowledge that I am very aware of the interpretive problem and to point out that while disability is not the result of sin, the injustice of failing to support people with disabilities to live and to participate fully in society is most certainly sin.

But back to the characterisation of the man born blind. Even after he is healed, he is referred to directly as *'the man who used to beg, 'the man who formerly had been blind,' and 'the blind man.'* His life has been transformed and yet for the religious authorities and the crowd and even his parents, it seems he will always be the person with a disability, the person depending on the kindness of others. He is defined in terms of his limitations and by what excludes him from full membership of society.

Commentator, David Lose, suggests that we do a similar thing when we talk about someone as widowed or divorced. Yes we are, to some degree, honouring a significant relationship that has ended, but we are also defining a person in terms of what they once were.

In the story people can't see the man as anything other than who he used to be. Some people don't recognise him at all.

The two who are able to see things differently are the man himself and Jesus. The man rejoices and looks to a new future with delight. He has the humour and fortitude now to tease the religious authorities, asking in response to their questions: "*Do you want to become disciples of Jesus too?*"

In response to the hostility of the authorities toward Jesus, the man makes an amazing declaration of faith:

"Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. God listens to the godly person who does the will of God. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If Jesus were not from God, he could do nothing."

So, here he is, a new person, open to the future, living fully and confidently – not defined by the labels, by what he had been.

Jesus also sees differently. He sees in the man, not a category of person who is outsider, beggar, disabled. He invites him to faith by seeing him, taking him seriously, and revealing himself.

So, this week, may we hear Jesus calling us to let the past be in the past. To forgive ourselves and others for what has been. To examine what self-designations no longer work for us, and to open ourselves to the future as God's children. A future of grace and forgiveness and yes - even a future of resurrection. The past matters but it does not define all of who we are.

And likewise, as we look at other people in our community, can we see past the way that the dominant society defines them. Homeless people. Poor people. Migrant and refugee people. People with disabilities. That God has a future for them that does not depend on the labels assigned to them by the powerful. How can our response change their reality from being seen as leaners not lifters, to being survivors and strugglers who deserve our respect and support?

This is a short sermon because I want to take the remainder of the time to also invite you to think differently about people in developing countries, people who live with poverty and often with illness and reduced life spans because we fail to believe that things can be different for them and our world.

Each Lent, Uniting World invites us to participate in LentEvent. We are going to view one of their video resources. It is a general introduction to the projects that LentEvent will support this year. There are other 4 minute videos on the website that focus on each of the projects in more detail. But this one, as you'll notice, is the overview. Notice where streams of living water are indeed part of the vision.

Uniting World has a relationship with its partners that ensures that people in developing countries are seen, and that their future is open with new possibilities for life abundant. Uniting World does not characterise its partners as lacking agency or hope. It does not use images that can best be described as “poverty porn.” Uniting World invites us to imagine a future for the world where resources are shared fairly and everyone has enough. And they invite us to join with people whose lives are being transformed - and to experience transformation in our own lives by giving generously this Lent.

As you watch, remember the story of the one whose life was transformed. The one who spoke back to authorities with humour and with courage, the one who celebrated a new future, the one who recognised in Jesus hope renewed. His story is inviting us to a new vision, to a grounded vision, from mud and spit, to a life of grace and generosity.

There followed a short video presentation from Uniting World on Lent Event – watch it at:
<http://www.unitingworld.org.au/get-involved/resources/videos/>