

# Many and One...

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 August 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

(read by Rev Clare Brockett)

Pentecost 12A

**Romans 12: 1-8; Contemporary Reading: “*Everything Is Waiting for You*” by David Whyte; Matthew 16:13-20**

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

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Two weeks ago, we had a conversation about the future of Pitt Street Uniting Church, as we grappled with the complexities and challenges of care for our historic, heritage church and the depletion of our capital reserves.

Conversations about church buildings rightly raise concerns about what it is that we are actually here for. People have been gathering in this church on Sunday mornings since the 1840s. With those early settlers, we share a tradition and a faith, but the way we work it out, the way we live it out now, is inevitably very different. For the gospel always encounters culture, and the life of the church is expressed in relation to that encounter.

For a church to remain alive and able to do its work of loving, healing, welcoming, feeding it must always be engaging in a process of revitalisation. The work of hospitality, compassion and justice takes shape in the face of particular expressions of exclusion, cruelty and injustice.

We know only too well what these expressions look like in our time. Injustice is named in the cries of the men of Manus Island, abandoned to their fate by the cruelty of our government that has exploited them for political gain.

Cruelty is expressed in the anguish of more than 100 asylum seekers who will be effectively made homeless and destitute by the decision to remove their meagre \$200 a week allowance, in order to force them to return to the places where they fled violence and persecution. These are the same people to whom we offered sanctuary last year when they risked being returned to Nauru.

Exclusion is expressed when Christian denominations in Australia, with the exception of MCC and the Quakers, refuse to advocate for LGBTI people and their families who are being vilified in Jesus’ name by other Christians, in the lead up to the postal survey on marriage equality.

Exclusion and cruelty are evident in the institutional racism toward indigenous people that denies their autonomy, dignity and rights.

Injustice is evident in the ongoing abuse of the environment for short-term profit that will cause long-term devastation of fragile eco-systems including the Great Barrier Reef.

The gospel encounters the particularity of our culture's expressions of lack of compassion and justice and calls us to love, healing and hospitality.

Today's Bible readings, from Romans and Matthew, provide sources of wisdom to help us focus on the nature and vocation of the church in our time and place.

The apostle Paul's metaphor of the community of faith as a body is one of the most powerful and enduring motifs of the early Christian tradition. Paul was encouraging the church in Rome to be counter-cultural by challenging conformity to the Empire, and instead focusing on communion and deep relationality.

Paul calls us to a profound appreciation for the beauty and workings of a body whose parts function together, each with its own role and importance. He asks his readers to consider themselves parts of a human body in which each part has different functions, each part has value, and each part is as intimately connected to the other as the head, neck, and torso of a human body are. Each part of the body works to ensure the functioning of the whole system.

Paul is challenging those members of the community who think too highly of themselves, but his message also has meaning for those who think too little of themselves, who don't think of themselves as key players. There are people who may not think highly enough of themselves, assuming their gifts and participation are not needed. Paul's body metaphor challenges people who don't think they are significant to consider that everyone—every member of the body of Christ in the church—has a gift to contribute to the functioning of the body.

Everyone's gifts are needed for the living body of Christ to function in the world. This is true of our community at Pitt Street. That is why we postponed the mission planning day. We had not yet got the message out that everyone's voice, experience, passion and faith are needed.

The transformation of the mind that Paul writes of, suggests that a person no longer denies his or her gifts and instead steps out in faith to take a risk to belong, to be beloved.

This passage invites each one of us to think about how we are an essential part of the body, to challenge any notion of insiders and outsiders in this congregation. Everyone is needed. If you are here this morning for the fifth time or the five hundredth time, you are as valued and as valuable as anyone else. Everyone has something to offer and to receive.

We don't have to do it all ourselves. Throughout the text Paul suggests that transformation is a result of the gracious activity of the Divine Presence alongside human initiative. There is an ongoing process of divine-human interaction. By God's grace, we are given gifts; and when we accept that individuals receive different gifts from God, we become a vibrant, sacred, transformed community.

Stretching the body metaphor even further invites us to think not just about an individual, or an individual congregation, but the church of as a whole. From the beginning of its existence, the church has lived out being the body of Christ in a huge variety of ways. It's not accurate, for example, to talk about "the early church," as though all the Christian communities of the first century looked exactly alike.

From the beginning, different communities have structured their worship life, their governance, their teaching, and their theologies in various ways. Even recognising different sacred texts. Yet sadly this has often meant competition, conflict, and suspicion between Christians.

The Uniting Church is diverse. The global church is diverse. We do not all have to be the same. It's OK for us to be together in a very particularly "Pitt Street Uniting" way of being the church. Our distinctiveness is needed by the whole church, just as we need the diversity of the whole global church.

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We live in an age of individualism, in which the power for good that the community holds, has been diminished in favor of each person's value, role, needs and wants. How, as a church then, do we find a balance that respects and honors the worth of each individual, and also lifts up the common good?

Instead of being consumed with our own interests and needs we are invited to put ourselves out there for the sake of something else and someone else, and lay our gifts at the altar of compassion and justice.

We are all part of the Body of Christ, each with our own gifts and abilities and our own important role in the unfolding of the Kin-dom of God.

The rock that the church is built on was not Peter-the-person, but on Peter's response to Jesus question "*Who do you say that I am?*" The question to which Peter responded: "*You are the Messiah.*"

The church is built on the affirmation that through Jesus' way of being human, we know God.

Who do you say Jesus is?

I think that in Jesus we know that the Divine Presence loves us and all people.

God is a mystery beyond our knowing, so Jesus revealed God's heart;

a heart that aches with all who suffer depression and think seriously about ending their lives;

a heart that is upset and angry when a young indigenous woman dies in jail because her cries for medical attention were ignored;

a heart that is torn up in grief at the desperate situation and violence that rips apart the Middle East;

a heart that loves all creation and is always eager to welcome us home in grace, forgiveness, and love.

But more than that, Jesus showed us what is possible.

Rather than give in to the threat of exclusion caused by disease, Jesus healed.

Rather than surrender people to mental turmoil, Jesus showed compassion.

Rather than let people starve because of an unjust economy, Jesus fed people who were hungry.

Rather than acquiesce to the powers of empire, Jesus taught people to resist non-violently.

Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo. His life and death show us how much God loves us, His resurrection, our knowing that what he stood for did not die, shows us that that love is more powerful than hate and fear and even death. Jesus shows us that Divine love wins.

Jesus' question to each of us is, "*Who do you say that I am? What is your testimony of me in your life? What is your experience of the mystery that is God?*"

The answer comes in our own heart and in community. We become not only people who speak of our individual faith, but a community that speaks of, and lives out, the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ — together.

So how might you answer if Jesus asked you: who are you? What were you made to be? In Frederick Buechner's words... "*where does your deep gladness meet the world's deep need?*"

And how might we answer if Jesus asked us as a congregation: who are you? What were you made to be?

Being a part of the body of Christ means that we are called not just to get our own act together, but to live out God's love, visibly, to the world around us as a community, as a body.

Let us grasp the freedom to dare to express who we really are. Let us create an atmosphere in this place that encourages that expression, so that together we create a world that works for justice and hospitality for all people, creature and our planet home.

Let us dare to find our voice.

Let us dare to be open to Divine Presence transforming us, and through us and others, transforming the world.