

# God is the recollection of steady love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 March 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 4B

Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21

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

---

When I was eight, my grandmother gave me a pretty cardboard plaque with a Bible verse on it. *"For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life."* It hung above my bed. And I treasured it.

It spoke to me of God's love and the assurance that because I knew Jesus, I would not be separated from that love.

Some years later I began to think more deeply about this verse, to read it in the context of the rest of chapter three of John's gospel, to understand that it is inextricably linked to the two verses that followed it.

In John 3:17, there is good news: *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

In John 3:18, there's some bad news: *"Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."*

I began to worry about the God of love. How could a God whose name is love condemn, maybe in advance, those who did not know or believe in Jesus?

As a young adult, I met Christians who were not like the comfortable, caring congregation that I grew up in. People who seemed to delight that they were on the inside with God, who almost seemed pleased that these verses meant that other people would be damned, excluded from God's love for all eternity.

I saw that the verse that I had loved as a child was being used as a weapon. A weapon against people of other faiths or people of no faith. Or even against other Christians who didn't believe exactly the same way that they did. The ones they considered not to be true Christians.

A little later on, I began to worry about God's attitude to Jesus. I had concerns about God's parenting style. If God had indeed sent Jesus to die as a sacrifice for our sin, there was reason for concern.

Were people really so bad that God had to have Jesus killed? As a child being read the Easter story from the Children's Bible, complete with horrifying illustrations, I had reconciled this by thinking that perhaps because Jesus was God, it didn't really hurt when they nailed him to a cross. As an adult, I was unconvinced.

When I left home to go to university I took the little plaque off the wall and put it away in a box of things that belonged to my childhood.

I would never hang it again because my aesthetics had changed; but also because I realised that the text that had assured me of God's love was also being used as a weapon against the world God loved. It had been used for Christian exclusivism, and also to bolster the idea that God requires violence for salvation.

So this morning as we approach Easter deeply embedded in a tradition that still glorifies sacrifice and violence, how do we understand God's love and the meaning of salvation?

Belief in the redemptive power of violence has suffused Western culture for centuries – and it continues to do so. Although Jesus inaugurated a new order based on partnership, equality, compassion and non-violence, his example and teachings have been eclipsed by an emphasis on a human unworthiness that demands and defends the need for Jesus' violent, suffering, atoning death.

As contemporary Christians we need to know that this is not the only interpretation. Throughout Christian history, it has never been the only way of understanding the life and death of Jesus, though it has been the dominant one.

In our time, theologians have been challenging this interpretation for over forty years – through Process Theology, Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology.

I've spoken before about Rita Nakashima Brock, a Japanese-American Christian feminist theologian, who is one of my inspirations. She has written about the shape of walkways, pathways, to traditional Japanese homes. In Japanese tradition, the walkways are always curved because ghosts can't follow along curved paths. In her book *Proverbs and Ashes* she has written a passage (that I think I have shared before) that I find incredibly thought-provoking when I think about the meaning ascribed to the death of Jesus, the Jesus who tradition tells us died for the sins of humanity, past, present and future.

Brock wrote: "*The Christianity that I have studied now for over three decades does not understand the power of ghosts. Christianity is haunted by the ghost of Jesus. His death was an unjust act of violence that needed resolution.*

*Such deaths haunt us. Rather than address the horror and anguish of his death, Christianity has tried to make it a triumph. Rather than understand and face directly into the pain of his death so his spirit can be released, we keep claiming he is alive. We try to use him for our personal wellbeing, to release us from our own burdens. We keep calling to his ghost to take care of us, instead of letting him go. This haunting has erupted into violence in the name of Jesus, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, the need for punishment, for judgment of the unredeemed, as if the infliction of more pain on others could cure our own. We have not found the curved path that frees us, that will let us heal from and relinquish the trauma of [his] violent death."*

Rita Nakashima Brock re-imagines redemption as liberation and as creative transformation.

Moving through Lent, we engage with the texts and the stories of the past, in order to find in the things that have been life-denying, new ways of seeing that are life-affirming. Theology as re-imagination.

Always in Lent, ahead of us is the crucifixion of Jesus, death in agony on the cross. How do we transform the way the story is told that we might find life and freedom instead of death and guilt? What is redemption personally and politically?

The premise of *Proverbs and Ashes* is a simple one: Rita Brock and co-author Rebecca Parker argue that the doctrine of atonement put forward by St. Augustine (that God sent Jesus to die to pay the price for our sins) is theologically wrong. It has created a culture of abuse and violence in the Western Christian tradition for nearly 1,500 years. It has glorified suffering and taught passivity to the victims of violence.

It is dangerous theology. It hardens our hearts when we understand violence as God's will. We turn away from the suffering of others: from survivors of intimate violence, from people facing the death penalty, from abused asylum seekers who are out of sight out of mind, from indigenous people torn from the land that is sacred to them and essential for the survival of their spirits, subject to mass incarceration when they cannot cope with this rupture.

At the end of *Proverbs and Ashes*, both Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker reflect on suffering that they had experienced in their own lives; the pain of abuse for Rebecca, and the pain of racism for Rita. They remind us that suffering is part of life, no matter what faith we follow: sometimes it's random, sometimes it's a consequence of human action, but it is always unavoidable.

In this context they reimagine God, not as some kind of being but as a state of Be-ing, in and beyond each of our hearts and minds. Its presence is a fire that burns high and lights our way through the dark night. God is Love, and God is that part of us that can survive and transcend all suffering that comes to us through the random tragedies of life. They say that God is "*the recollection of steady love*" that remains with us through storm and night. God is "*the recollection of steady love.*" The love that has been shown to us in our lives – and the love that moves us as an energy through this world.

What would our relationship to Jesus be if his death was seen as purely an act of terrible violence by an empire that was determined to crush all opposition? If Jesus' death was simply that and not a mythic sacrifice for all our failings, how would we consider his life?

I think that we would re-discover the Jesus attuned to a God who is "a recollection of steady love." Jesus the human, the teacher, the subversive sage, the social prophet, and the healer. We would find in Jesus' life, as much meaning as we have ascribed to his death. We would see in him the one who reveals the nature of the Sacred and the purpose of life.

The Jesus who taught us that God's love for the world is not only for those who look and think and believe like us, but also for our enemies and for those who persecute us.

It was such love that stirred the early church to open its doors to Gentiles and to people whose very existence was troubling: the blind, the lame, the eunuchs.

In this, we see the Jesus story as inclusive and hope-filled. In this, it makes sense to claim that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, for his way is the way of openness and inclusivity.

Jesus is the Way because his way is welcoming and honouring of the diversity of paths and people. It is the way of justice and peace. It frees us rather than limits us. It makes space that we might forgive ourselves and others; so that we may live hopefully instead of in despair and regret. It gives us a basis for appreciating the diversity of other religious stories through which spiritual experience and wisdom are also expressed.

In our time, divine compassion for the oppressed, and divine passion for justice, have called forth prophets to declare that God's love includes all, regardless of gender, age or race, nationality or creed, gender identity or sexual orientation. Prophets who imagine a world in which God's love is still at work among the oppressed and the outsiders.

These prophets have shaped who we are, here at Pitt Street Uniting Church – as we offer a ministry of hospitality and welcome – reclaiming the truth that is at the heart of the Gospel: *for God so loved the world...*

We have a part to play in freeing Jesus, in ending the story of sacrifice and conditional redemption in Jesus' name, so that the subversive sage and the god-intoxicated prophet that he was, can show us the way to be free – through the practices of making peace and justice, through loving and forgiving, through welcoming the stranger and opening ourselves to transformation.

On this day of our Annual Meeting, let us recommit ourselves to live out our calling – our calling to follow in the way of Jesus' radical hospitality:

to share God's compassion,

to enable God's justice,

to seek God's peace,

and to embody God's presence.