

Beloved community - The fruit of the vine

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 April 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 5B

Acts 8: 26-40; Contemporary Reading: The Aboriginal Songlines “Tree” by Neidjie, Gagudju Elder from East Arnhem Land; John 15:1-8

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

To be honest, I sometimes get a bit tired of the John’s gospel readings after Easter; these farewell discourses about bread, sheep, grape vines... I’m always a bit sorry that we don’t get back to Mark’s gospel until after Pentecost.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts is more appealing; but three years ago I preached on this amazing story which tells how a queer black man was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity. I resonate with the way that Philip the deacon is guided by the Spirit out of his comfort zone into an encounter with one who was radically different, radically other. And the conversation resulted in Philip understanding his own faith in a new way. In some ways, he was converted as much as he converted the stranger/outsider.

Three years ago, I engaged with that story looking at the eunuch as a sexual and racial outsider who is offered baptism; baptism which means full membership of the community without the limits that being a racial or sexual outsider might usually imply.

Once baptised, a person may participate in the fullness of the community including being open to a call to ordained leadership and, I suggested, the possibility of having one’s intimate relationship blessed and recognised in the community – in the faith community - as marriage.

Thinking again about the conversation between Philip and the Eunuch brings me back to the idea that Philip was also converted. This text invites us to realise that sharing the Good News is relational and reciprocal. In mutual conversation with people whose life experience is different than our own, we come to understand our faith more deeply.

And it is this that opens for me possibilities in the John’s gospel text about the grape vine. For it also invites us to think about community and mutuality and interdependence....

And anyway, having spent some of the past week holidaying in Orange, exploring the delights of the region’s cool climate viticulture, and returning to Sydney with our car somewhat lower to the ground due to the weight of a couple of boxes of wine, I should be prepared to give grapevines another go.

The story from Acts and the gospel reading are inviting us to think about our faith in relation to others. The contemporary reading, an example of a Songline story remembered in a cave painting in Arnhem Land, spoken about by Aboriginal Elder Bill Neidjie, evokes the

interdependence of human beings with the earth. Such songlines trace the journeys of ancestral spirits as they created the land, animals, plants and the lore.

The identity of the human and the creation, plant, animal and landscape are one - and they affect one another profoundly.

All three readings remind us that we are who we are in relation. In relation with other people who are different from ourselves in the Acts reading, in relation with a living creation in Songlines, and in relation with Divine Presence in the John's gospel reading.

The early church knew that we do not come to faith alone. We learn from others, and we pass on what we know to future generations – into a community that has not yet been invited into the way of Jesus and the good news. Education has always been an important aspect of the Christian faith, and the best education does not happen in isolation – studying on your computer - but in conversation.

Today after morning tea, we will be having an Exploring Faith session. Our topic will be prayer. Exploring Faith is our Pit St naming and framing of what is traditionally called Christian education. There are things to learn, ideas and experiences to share. In learning together, from one another and with one another, sometimes venturing into uncharted waters, we deepen community.

Faith is best described as a team sport. We are much better at it when we pull together, when we learn from one another, when we interact with each other, when we reach out to others and experience their reaching out to us.

Relationships are the basis of Christian faith; our relationship to God and God's relationship to us, our relationships to the earth and each another.

I altered the words of the song that we sang before this reflection to reflect the sense that real relationship always changes both parties. New Zealand hymn writer Shirley Murray's original words speak of God's constancy. She wrote: "*Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise, God always faithful, you do not change.*"

I agree with the insight of process theologians that the Divine, if in real relationship with humanity, also changes. And so I made the alteration: *Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise, God always faithful, with us through change.*

Joe Bessler, who will join us at the end of July as our Common Dreams on the Road speaker for 2018, has some very interesting thoughts on what he calls our "proposals" about God which illuminates this idea further.

The image of a grape vine, is a rich source of reflection and comment on mutual relationship and on community.

The author of John's gospel has taken the grape vine as an organic image, and used it to talk about community, about society, about family.

And to suggest life, in our family, community and society, is about interrelationship, mutuality, and well-being.

Bill Loader, Australian Theologian, suggests that this image invites us to sense the 'divine' or the 'sacred' as beneath us and around us, rising up, rather than above us, condescending. (William Loader, website)

Relationship is what matters, and what matters also is flows from those relationships. Like good wine from good grapes.

The focus, in John's Gospel exploration is not on differentiating this vine from others, but on the need to remain, to dwell, to abide in the vine and to bear fruit.

Remaining in, abiding in, the vine is crucial. The language of abiding in or simply being 'in' is the language of intimacy, expressing a continuing relationship of closeness.

For John's Gospel, salvation is, above all, a relationship with the Risen Christ and with God made known through Christ. The image of the vine serves to reinforce this interrelationship.

Branches need to remain connected to the word of love, the word of life, to the word which Jesus brings.

Jesus's people were rural, farming people. The wine, the grapes, the branches, the vine, the earth were central to their daily lives.

But where might all this, touch the raw edges of our everyday lives: Living in a large city in the 21st century?

The organic vine metaphor is a strong challenge to contemporary Western political and business leaders who argue that the well-being of society as a whole will be maximized only through a corporation's self-interested pursuit of profit. (Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God*, p. 104).

The relentless pursuit of profit that has been exposed by the Banking Royal Commission has revealed a set of values that are completely at odds with Jesus' understanding about human value and human society.

One set of values, based on consumerism and individualism, holds that people should be responsible for themselves and look after their own interests; that help given to others without expecting something in return diminishes initiative and leads to dependency; that efficiency is the key to a healthy economy, and competition is one of the chief techniques for promoting efficiency, so competition must be increased.

The other set of values is based on respect for the sacred in the other; recognising the spark of the divine in the other. It calls for co-operation instead of competition; a vision which says *look after others at least as much as ourselves*; a recognition that we have a common destiny - or no destiny at all, and justice and fairness in all our dealings.

John's gospel image of the vine, does not draw attention to individual gifts. The fruit is anonymous. It has no place for celebrity. There is both intimacy, and anonymity. John challenges contemporary Western understandings of personality, individualism, and self-expression. The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not the status of its members.

The language of abiding and dwelling evokes a sense of mysticism, but in John's gospel it is not a world-denying mysticism that removes us from community life. It is a spirituality of community. It is about abiding in the Divine made known to us in Jesus, by keeping the commandments he gave – to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

It is the mysticism that Australian writer David Tacey speaks of when he writes: *"the art of community is the art of the soul, and community is what happens when deep, invisible bonds are shared..."* (Tacey in *The Spirituality Revolution*, p. 217).

The Christian life begins in love. In the verses that follow our passage for today, we hear: *"as the Mother-Father God has loved me, so I have loved you"*. And the Christian life is continued in love *"that you love one another as I have loved you"*. This passage directs us from Divine love to human love.

The purpose of our abiding in the Divine is not personal self-development or fulfillment. The purpose is that we may bear the fruit of love.

These words from John's gospel are part of the farewell discourses, as Jesus prepares his friends for a time when he will no longer be with them, at least in the way that they had known him.

As Jesus teaches and prays with his disciples, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in the God with whom he deeply identifies. It is in this way that he will remain with them. Jesus warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own they would be cut off from their life source. They would bear no fruit.

This is a teaching that we, as followers of the Way that Jesus charted, in our time, also need to hear. The temptation to go it alone is great. Our society promotes independence and making something of yourself (often at the expense of others). Though a valid goal, self-worth often becomes equated with our own success and what we can produce, and what we can achieve and the recognition that we get. It becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges.

But as in the words of the Brian Wren song that we sometimes sing, *"We are not our own, earth forms us...we are not our own, earth names us...in a human life, God finds us, dying, living, love is fully known...we are not alone."*

Community – the beloved community - is what happens when deep, invisible bonds, like that of a vine,

are embraced and shared,

rising up around us,

among us, within us,

where the well-being of others contributes directly to our own well-being – and we to theirs.

We are loved, and we are called to love.

May it be so for us, in all our living

as we seek to nurture the vision

of inclusive, life-enhancing community

in this place.