

Feeding through experience

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 22 August, 2021

Shared Reflections by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 13B

Contemporary Reading: *A Trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith, from Gondwana Theology* by Gary Worete Deverell; John 6, 56-69.

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

JOSEPHINE

This morning, I'm going to share this Reflection as a conversation with Penny, on how we feed on God through experience today. For, as we reflect upon John chapter 6 once more, where, and what, is the Bread of Life for us in the midst of some of our greatest challenges? Through whose eyes are we looking at this?

An offensive Gospel?

Penny, what is the main thing that strikes you out of this Sunday's Gospel reading?

PENNY

Well, above all, I think it is that question of Jesus, when he asks: '*does this offend you?*' It seems to me to be a good question about the Gospel for our own times. It certainly comes as a retort to the disciples' complaints. As they say: '*this teaching is difficult: who can accept it?*' They too have been struggling to make sense of the Bread of Life discourse we have been reflecting upon this month, the final part of which we hear today.

JOSEPHINE

So what do you think is at the heart of their difficulty, and, for that matter, our own? It is a strong reminder – isn't it – that the 'good news' of God in Jesus Christ is neither simplistic nor always comfortable for us?

PENNY

Yes, that is part of its value for us today, isn't it? Today, too many want the 'good news' to make simple sense and bring easy comfort. We are also particularly aware today of competing claims about being offended by what others say and do.

JOSEPHINE

Indeed: on the one hand, there are many complaints, from the powerful and well-heeled, about so-called 'wokeness' and supposed 'political correctness gone mad'. Yet we still seem to be struggling with basic issues of respect for different races, cultures, sexualities and genders – and trying to address them seems to offend others. Meanwhile, even very gentle critiques of institutions such as ANZAC Day can sometimes bring all kinds of grief to those who make them, despite the fact that, as a society, we seem willing to put up with all kinds of genuinely offensive things – such as deaths in custody and indefinite incarceration of refugees.

PENNY

So we are back with that question again – what is there to eat today? What is the bread of life which is being offered to us, through our spiritual experiences of Christ alive among us today?

JOSEPHINE

Yes, that is our theme for today's Reflection – what is God saying to us, through the voices of Christ speaking with and to us today? What is difficult and even offensive? We're going to look at this through two different sets of black people's eyes: one set of which is Aboriginal; the other of which is also distinctly 'queer': both of which speak from places of experience which are still struggling to be valued, and which offer us challenge, even difficulty and offense, especially to so-called disciples of Christ...

Gondwana Theology

PENNY

The first set of eyes is that of Gary Deverell, from his book *Gondwana Theology*. This is such a vital voice to hear, which is why we have part of this as our contemporary reading in our liturgy today. And it is challenging, isn't it?! With the disciples, well may we say *'this teaching is difficult: who can accept it?'*

JOSEPHINE

Yes, and, in particular, it is easy enough for white people, such as you and I, to agree with the first part of that reading we have chosen: that we need to hear and value First Nations' peoples' experience. Even then however, we might reflect on how far we are really traveling with that. Far more confronting is surely what meaningful responses we are making. In what ways do our church community lives actually bear the cost of what we may be hearing? Do we really want to receive the bread of life which First Nations people are offering? Or, like the disciples in our Gospel today, are we in fact not that very different from the others who have seen and heard, but not really tasted and inwardly digested?

PENNY

As an authentic voice of Aboriginal Christian reason and experience, through whom Christ speaks to us afresh today, Gary is really asking us to be honest about what we mean by grace, isn't he? He is also indicating that we have yet to recognise how deep the 'original sin' of dispossession and colonial attitudes runs.

Churches as a whole, he is saying, continue to carry this, at least unconsciously, even when they are making efforts to connect. Indeed, I am struck by how he is saying that a church which really sought to respond would, as he puts it, 'lose itself' in sharing in God's work of salvation from continuing colonisation. Unless we die to old ways of thinking and being 'church', Gary is affirming, we have indeed missed the very 'paschal mystery' we proclaim. Or, as John's Jesus puts it, we are not eating the flesh and drinking the blood that brings new life.

The famine of grace

JOSEPHINE

Yes, and that is a powerful theme and challenge which is central to the second set of eyes we want to share today. For, in his recently published book entitled *Black Gay British Christian Queer*, Jarel Robinson-Brown also challenges the predominantly white Church of the Western world to live into its true calling. Significantly, the subtitle of the book is *The Church and the Famine of Grace*. An ordained Anglican priest with a strong Methodist background, like Gary Deverell, Jarel challenges us to face up to the long Western Christian collusion with racism – and in Jarel's case also collusion with queer oppression. How far, he asks, are we really tasting the bread of life?

PENNY

Indeed: Jarel Robinson-Brown is even more striking than Gary Deverell in his language about what he believes is required of Christians. In a similar way to how the Black Lives Matter movement has called for the 'abolition' of current forms of policing, he calls for the 'abolition' of the Church as it stands. Again, only in dying to what we have been, can we find new life, for ourselves and others. For as with Gary Deverell, and as with Bonhoeffer and others who have faced the depth of structural injustices in the past, the only grace which can truly feed us is a costly one.

JOSEPHINE

As we said earlier, the challenging invitation of First Nations' Christians like Gary Deverell must certainly be at the heart of our concerns, and our wrestling with God and scripture, if we are to find and share the Bread of Life today. This involves us not only hearing other-than-white voices but acting upon them. Addressing 'the famine of grace', as Jarel Robinson-Brown affirms, also means hearing and acting on the experience of others who have been marginalised and/or silenced for too long. That is the reason for the title of his book. For Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer describes several major features of Jarel's shared identity. Each can sit in contrast however with each other. How do they speak with one another?

PENNY

That is at the heart of much of our world's struggle today, isn't it? We live in such a world of diversity but too often we silence some voices, fail fully to honour the experience of all, or do not acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of identity. It is a challenging pathway, but only a genuine intersectional approach, built on justice-seeking and the privileging of the most vulnerable, can bring us true food.

Intersectionality

JOSEPHINE

Jarel Robinson-Brown's reasoned reflection on experience and scripture is a powerful expression of intersectional theology today, and importantly embodies what he preaches. For he himself stands at the centre of intersections of race, sexuality, gender, religion, culture and other identities which do not tend to value one another properly, and sometimes even oppress aspects of each other, even when they legitimately cry out for their own liberation. Although not a transgender person himself, he thus draws significant attention to the challenges and gifts of gender diverse people. The experience of black people is shattering enough, he therefore writes, without being both black and transgender. After relating some of the appalling examples of black transgender experience, he rightly says:

"While it is popular in many Christian circles to mark the Transgender Day of Remembrance on 20 November each year, we must also question why it is that we are so eager to mark the death of trans folk when we do so little to nurture, embrace and protect them while they are alive... If death is the motivation for our solidarity with the suffering, then we have misunderstood the gospel, misunderstood Christ's cross, misunderstood the meaning of Christianity."

How then do eat and share bread of life?

So what do such contemporary calls mean to us?

PENNY

Such words are challenging, aren't they? For they speak truth from powerful experience, from places of deep wrestling with scripture and with God. That however resonates strongly with today's Gospel reading, and John chapter 6 as a whole. For Jesus' words were spoken, or written by John, into another situation where there was a great 'famine of grace'. People were longing for bread that truly satisfied, but not finding it. Instead, too many religious, political, and other leaders were offering only stale bread and confining grace to limited people and/or contexts of life. No wonder what Jesus was doing and embodying appeared as offensive. No wonder that even Jesus' disciples struggled with the implications.

JOSEPHINE

Yes, although Gary Deverell does not mention this directly in his Gondwana Theology, he seems to be saying that churches are missing the heart of John chapter 6. Faced by the challenges of feeding the thousands, Jesus responds, as well as they can. For grace is abundant for Jesus, ever-flowing, for all, from the heart of God.

Not only are there no boundaries to such grace, but it is always to be shared. If we keep it to ourselves, we no longer eat the living bread and drink of life-giving blood. So how are we going with that in our lives, our communities, and our church?

Amazing grace

PENNY

For me, one of the most moving sections of the book *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer* is where Jarel Robinson-Brown speaks about the great hymn Amazing Grace. *'It is fair to say'*, he writes, *'that when people think of grace – particularly when Black folk think of grace'* this is the song which comes to mind: *'you can hear it, he says, sung by Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Jessye Norman, Jennifer Hudson, and even Barack Obama!'* Yet it embodies the contradictions at the heart of faith that can feed us today. For that hymn was written by a white, Anglican priest who was born in the east of London and worked on three slave ships for five years. It is thus indeed *'a bittersweet thing that a hymn so loved by so many Black folk, so emblematic of our spirituality and community, is one written by a man who participated in our dehumanisation and enslavement.'*

JOSEPHINE

I agree. That is the core of the challenging invitation of Jesus in our Gospel, isn't it? The challenging invitation expressed by Gary Deverell and others in this land out of the continuing devastations of our shared history and our implication in it as church. To transform 'the famine of grace', and to share true Bread of Life, is to face up to our contradictions of faith and experience, and, like John Newton finding true hope in his hymn, to reshape them for the flourishing of all. Like the disciples, we will also cry out about its difficulty at times. Yet, if we truly seek amazing grace, we must respond. In doing so, we may be discomfited, and discomfort one another. Rationing grace however can never help us thrive.

A final word from Pamela Lightsey

PENNY

Well, we are two white British Christian Queer women talking about black men's theology, so we need to share at least one more voice today – that of the great womanist queer theologian Pamela Lightsey. Writing in the preface to Jarel Robinson-Brown's book, she highlights the challenge and invitation it offers to finding true bread of life. This, she affirms, requires:

the eradication of a kind of putrid ideology that is as dangerous as the pandemic... in the Church as with the pandemic one always finds the staunch resisters who refuse to believe that fat meat is indeed greasy.

JOSEPHINE

In other words, as she quotes Jarel Robinson-Brown, and which we hear echoed in the reading from Gary Deverell today, and embodied in the Jesus of John chapter 6:

It needs the true and living God, not the god of the White Supremacist imagination, but foot-washing, crucified, wounded God revealed in the Black Jesus who did not cling to power and glory, but who empowered the down-trodden and persecuted.

Only this God, 'queer' in so many respects, in Pamela Lightsey's words, *'will help a famished body receive the grace to feed its soul and be transformed.'*