

Living upside down

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 30 January 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkipin

Epiphany 4C, Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Candlemas)

Contemporary reading: *The Fullness of Time* by Richard Rohr; Luke 2:22-40

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflectors spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

One of my grandchildren was particularly fascinated when I was in England in December. She was trying to grasp how it was night with me when it was daytime in Australia, and how it was so warm here and so cold where I was. One day, she had it sorted. Speaking to Penny on the phone, she loudly proclaimed '*GranJo is upside down!*' I am not sure whether she thought that I was standing or walking on my head.

However, in more than one sense, she was right - not least spiritually. After all, as Acts of the Apostles chapter 17 reminds us, like other early Christians, Paul and Silas were accused of '*turning the world upside down*'. It remains part of our Christian calling and sits well with the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, otherwise known as the feast of Candlemas, which we mark today. Wherever, or whoever, we are in the world, we are all called to '*live upside down*' in spiritual terms...

A few years ago, in words we have included in our liturgy today, the Methodist Church in Scotland put this calling to '*live upside down*' in this way:

*Things are topsy-turvy in your kingdom, God.
The poor bear gifts of great worth, the dead rise, the meek inherit the earth. Teach us
how to live in an upside down world
where we are called to welcome the outcast,
prepare a feast for the ragged, and forgive those who offend us*

So how are we going with that?

Those words were included in a study resource, entitled *Living Upside Down*, which I commend to us (and available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/14202/living-upside-down-2.pdf>). A series of four small group discussions, which can also be used by individuals, it offers us one fruitful source for reflection together in the next four weeks before we come to Lent. For this resource was purposely designed to address a gap in our journeying through the Christian year: namely this season after Christmas, and before Lent, which we call Epiphany. As such it is part of inviting us to cultivate what Richard Rohr called '*the fullness of time*', about which we heard in our first reading today. As he says:

'liminal space', or threshold space, is a very good phrase for those special times, events, and places that open us up to the sacred. It seems we need special (sacred) days to open us up to all days being special and sacred.

This is part of what the Methodist Church in Scotland points us to in the *Living Upside Down* resources it published. For we are invited to reclaim Epiphany as a time in which to renew our lives at the beginning of a new year, by pondering the question:

'If God's light now shines in the world because of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, what difference will that make to our lives?'

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That question flows out of the story of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple which we reflect upon today, and connects to many Christian traditions in what became known as 'Candlemas' in many parts of the Church over the centuries. It is a question which is, however, as much about what is to be as what has been – just as retelling the story of the Presentation of Jesus is not so much about learning about the responses of Simeon and Anna, as prompting us to our own responses. In other words, as Richard Rohr encourages us, it is about re-dedicating ourselves, and our world, to the fullness of time.

For, at this time in the year, we are at what can be called a 'hinge' moment. In terms of nature, in Australia, we mark the mid-point, between the summer solstice and the autumn equinox. In the northern hemisphere, it is of course the other way up; between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. In Gaelic, the word for this time is therefore 'imbolc' – which means '*in the belly of the Mother*', because the seeds of a new season are beginning to spring in the depths of Mother Earth.

Here it is different. Yet it is no less significant. Indeed, perhaps, as a 'hinge', Candlemas works equally well, but differently, in both hemispheres. For here we mark the beginning of a new school year and the starting, or re-starting, of many things. So, as in our liturgy today, we are invited to consecrate both this movement of time and the changes of our world with the light of Christ.

Light – this is the pre-eminent symbol of this season, and of Epiphany as a whole. For, in the Christian calendar, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple represents the 'hinge' between Christmas and Lent - as we turn from the astonishing light of Christmas towards the amazing light of Easter. It reminds us of how all things can be transformed into the fullness of time by the light of God's grace. As the Methodist Church in Scotland reminds us, this has always been at the heart of Christian witness during the season of Epiphany. The early Church writing known as the Acts of Peter indeed '*captured in almost surreal terms the idea of seeing the world in a different way*', encouraging us to see that:

Unless you make what is right, left, and what is left, right, what is above into what is below, and what is behind into what is in front, you will not learn to know the Kingdom.

Such is the character of '*living upside down*' and the transformative power of the light of Christ.

In some ways, the original traditions around the story of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple are far from us. Not least this is so in relation to ideas of purification around birth. Except in some places, we have mercifully left behind the idea that a mother needs to be 'purified' after childbirth.

However we are still so far from truly honouring and consecrating life-bearing processes in healthy ways, particularly where they involve the bodies of women and the vulnerable. We do not have to be Grace Tame to recognise the continuing need for attending to such matters, and shining light upon them. As we light our candles today, we thus renew our commitment to them.

The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is a call to us to see, share, and shine light in such places, through *'living upside down.'* For it is striking, isn't it, how the vulnerable and the marginal are at the centre of this story: on the one hand, the very old, Anna and Simeon; on the other, the very young and tender, Jesus and Mary. Long held, almost extinguished, hopes and dreams meet new, but so fragile, seeds and stirrings. It is in such, as the song of Simeon proclaims, that salvation, transformation, Richard Rohr's fullness of time, is to be found. Tired, aged, eyes meet the newly born. In this, the light of revelation, true Epiphany, is found.

Such light – what Orthodox Christians call divine *'uncreated'* light – does not always come easily to us, as Simeon goes on to say, in those heart-rending prophetic words to Mary:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

At Candlemas, as we have noted, we therefore turn from Christmas towards the Passion. Yet, in this, and beyond, lies Resurrection, the ultimate light of transformation, the true fullness of time. In this lies the grace and power of *'living upside down.'*

Another aspect of today's central biblical story which can seem far from us is also the sacrifice of two birds, which we are told, was made to satisfy the religious Law. Well we live in different times with different outlooks. Yet, if the idea of killing other creatures as part of holiness seems troublesome to most modern minds, the call to 'sacrifice' - in the sense of 'making holy' - is still relevant.

The derivation of the word 'sacrifice' is after all exactly that – from the Latin words *sacer* (holy) and *facere* (to make). *'Living upside down'* – or following the way of Christ – is our more modern Christian expression. This also leads us back to the place, and symbol, of the temple in another life-giving, transformative manner.

Re-lighting temples today: the Methodist Church in the UK is among a number of strands of our Uniting Church relationships which, in a number of valuable ways, are renewing our Reformed Christian understandings of Epiphany and wider faith.

Another example is the hymn *'Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming'* which we have sung today. It was specifically written by the United Reformed Church Minister Jan Berry at the request of a fellow URC Minister who was seeking resources to mark Epiphany, particularly to encompass powerful aspects of suffering, not least Herod's massacre of the innocents.

As Jan Berry originally intended however, its themes pick up so many other fears and pains, and our search for physical and spiritual healing. I therefore further commend it to us for reflection during these times through which we live, and as we prepare ourselves to journey again through Lent to Easter.

Like Anna and Simeon, when our eyes dim, or our prayers and efforts seem futile, let us always recall that the light is still with us, if often hidden by shadow and in silence. For, in Jan Berry's words:

*Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming
Calling us out from the safety of home
God of the questions, the mystery of dreaming
Lighten our journey into the unknown.*

So where is the light calling you, calling me, calling us?

In the ancient world, the light of Christ, the light of grace, the '*uncreated*' light of divine love, lit up the temple, and the eyes and hearts and lives of those were open to see and receive.

Today the light of Christ is once more presented in the temple. This temple is however the temple of our own lives and world.

God's Love, not other living creatures, is offered to us,

inviting us to see and receive, that, like Jesus,

we too may live upside down –

welcoming the outcast,

preparing a feast for the ragged,

and forgiving those who offend us.

As we light up and hold our candles this morning, may the light of Christ thus truly shine in us and shine through us in the days ahead.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.