

Repairing the breach

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 6 March 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 1 c

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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 reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Today I would like to introduce you to an old friend. Do you like their orange flowery skin and scrunched up green and other patterned ears? I call them Angell – with a double 'l'. They come from my first year at theological college: from way back when, in some of the darkest days of Margaret Thatcher's time as UK Prime Minister. For I brought Angell home from a church fête stall during a formation placement.

This was in Brixton, the scene of two (in)famous 'uprisings', or riots – depending on your outlook – led by Black British people. The immediate cause of the first of these, in 1981, was a response to extraordinary 'stop and search' laws and police brutality. Tensions were particularly high after a suspicious fire in which 13 black teenagers and adults had died. The final straw was the so-called Operation Swamp 81, named after Mrs Thatcher's speech in which she claimed the UK 'might be swamped by people of a different culture.'

The 1981 Brixton Riots lasted for three days. They triggered similar 'uprisings' across Britain's inner-cities, and led to the landmark Scarman Report, which began the long journey of addressing racial injustice and police reform in the UK. It was fuelled by a powerful cocktail of poverty and deprivations of many kinds, as well as race. In Brixton, the large African Caribbean population were at the centre. And it is out of this background that Angell comes, so called after Angell Town, a particularly challenged and challenging housing estate, after which the Church of England parish was named. So Angell reminds me always, both of the very real violence involved in today's Gospel in the Temptations of Christ, and of the continuing struggles for what Martin Luther King called 'the beloved community'...

Knowing ourselves as beloved – is that how you see the purpose of Lent? Being beloved is what Angell reminds me about, and whenever Lent begins I want Angell close to me, to help renew my understanding of myself as beloved, and the purpose of church as being 'the beloved community'. How about you? What for instance, do you see in my friend Angell? Do you see an odd, misfit, creature, with different characteristics and some faded features? Or do you see a deeply beloved child of hope? When you look at yourself, do you also see an odd, misfit, creature, or do you see a beloved child of promise? When you look at others different from you, do you see odd misfits, or do you see the possibilities of beloved community? Those questions, I believe, are at the heart of Lent, as they are of our Gospel reading today.

My friend Angell also has a second name – Michael. They took on that name, some years ago, after the priest I stayed with in Brixton died. For priest Michael was one important formative influence on me, including for my understanding of Lent. Why is it, he used to say, that when there is such real misery in the world, Christians typically seek to make themselves more miserable?

And why, if Christians really want to grow in holiness during Lent, don't they/don't we give up the real sins of our world – like the poverty, deprivation, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other violence which are so hurtfully apparent among us, not least in places like Brixton? Michael felt that, rather than Lenten mortification, we might be better to put on a bright dress and splash on some perfume – reminding ourselves that we are beloved. For, when we come to today's Gospel story of the Temptations of Christ, it is easy to forget that it has a vital context – and that context is indeed being beloved.

Significantly, each of the three Gospel Temptations stories is preceded by the baptism of Jesus, and those vital words '*This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.*' This is crucial to grasp. For like Jesus, we will simply not manage the wilderness challenges of our lives - our own Lenten times - unless we hear that word first and keep reminding ourselves of it.

The reason Jesus triumphed over their temptations is that they stood strong, through God's grace, in the knowledge that they were beloved, just as they were. After all, Jesus is offered three great temptations in the Gospel story: the temptation to make money (otherwise known as 'bread') for its own sake, the temptation to seek worldly power; and the temptation to a false identity, whether through fame or something else. These, some say, are what gives life and security.

So Money – Power – and false or oppressive Identity - are recurring temptations for human beings in all ages. They lead us astray, into oppressing others and/or repressing ourselves. What then can ultimately overcome them except re-focusing on love as the ground of all things – knowing that we are beloved, just as we are, irrespective of the siren calls of money, power, or false identity? For those things cannot ultimately bring us peace, as individuals, as communities, or as a world. The answer lies in knowing we are utterly and eternally loved, just as we are. That is the heart of our Gospel story today.

My friend Angell – or Angell Michael as I sometimes now call him – captivated me because they are loveable, just as they are, and not because they spoke, or speak, of money, or power, or false identity. They were hardly even the most obviously desirable of the homemade creations on the church fête stall. However they represented many of the people of Brixton I met years ago: people who were, and still are, so easily despised – like the congregation of St John's Angell Town in Brixton, who were made up largely of Afro-Caribbean families, gay people, and various other supposed misfits. They did not have much money, very little power, but they were strong in their true identities, as beloved children of God, and, together, part of God's beloved community.

So, how are we going with growing as beloved children of God ourselves? Our theme for Lent this year is *Repairing the Breach*. This is drawn from Isaiah chapter 58, where the prophet speaks of the promise of renewal of their society and invites us to share in it. It thereby places what Judaeo-Christian Tradition calls 'sin' in its fuller context, highlighting the breaches of God's love we see around us in their many social, ecological, and political, as well as personal dimensions. It encourages us to reflect more deeply on the causes of those breaches, and how, with God's grace, they may be repaired.

It encourages us to focus less on acts of personal denial, except where they may give us time and refreshment for more loving perspectives and renewed energy. Instead it offers us Lent as a pathway to deeper healing, on all kinds of levels.

At the heart of *Repairing the Breach* is therefore the cultivation of God's love. That is the only real point of giving things up for Lent, if, in doing so, that does help us find more loving perspectives and renewed energy for what really matters. Stepping away from our addictions, and decluttering aspects of our lives can help. Yet the point is always to strengthen love. Indeed, that is one reason I love the phrase '*returning our hearts*' as a way of speaking about what reconciliation and repentance really means. We can apply it to our personal relationships, not least including our relationship with God. We can apply it to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, to climate change action, to peacemaking and economic justice – all of which are about '*returning our hearts*' and repairing powerful breaches of love.

My friend Angell reminds me too of a little book our mutual priest friend Michael wrote, called *Jesus Loves Brixton Too: Practical Christianity in the Inner City*. It resonates with the choices Jesus made when he rejected the three temptations of Money, Power, and false Identity as the foundations for life. The chapter titles Michael used still ring true to me, as expressions of the alternative pathways that Jesus chose, and where we may continue to find God today. They read like this:

'Jesus Was A Revolutionary',
'Jesus Was Poor',
'Jesus Was Homeless',
'Jesus Was Unemployed',
'Jesus Was Black',
'Jesus Was A Communicator',
'Jesus Was A Pacifist',
'Jesus Criticised Authority',
'Jesus Mixed With The Wrong People',
'Jesus Wanted People To Be Free',
'Jesus Taught Us How To Pray',
'Jesus Brought Life In All Its Fullness'.

What a difference it might still make if Christians were to focus on such realities, rather than merely personal self-salvation projects, or, still worse, religious discrimination. In priest Michael's case he also embodied that in imaginative ways, not least in the use of the arts in worship, including a reggae mass, and the promotion of a vision of community arts as a means of empowering the marginalised and aiding regeneration.

Can we say Jesus loves us too? And can we say that Jesus loves places like Brixton here too – whether that be Aboriginal communities, the homeless and struggling on our city street; those still oppressed for their racial, sexual, gender or other identities, those struggling with mental health, or others left behind by the often obscene races for Money, Power, and False Identity? It is not an easy ask, but that is why we need Lent: to face up to the ways in which Money, Power and False Identity oppress us and our world, and to rediscover grace and divine imagination to move forward.

The grim realities of raising Money, Power and False Identity to the meaning of life are apparent around us – as they were in Jesus' day, and have been since. The year after I met my friend Angell, for example, there was a second major 'uprising', or 'riot', in Brixton. London's Metropolitan Police casually shot and killed a middle-aged black woman, Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce, when they broke into her home, searching for her son Michael for a suspected offence.

However it was only in 2014, 29 years afterwards, after an inquest found eight separate police failures complicit, that the police were eventually forced to apologise. Does it sound familiar? It should, as casual violence continues to be inflicted on the marginalised, here in Australia and elsewhere, with our own Deaths in Custody a shocking, shameful example – yet to be accounted for, never mind adequately given apology and reparation. What do we do to help repair even that one, staggering, breach?

You know, I'm thinking of giving my friend Angell Michael another name. I'm thinking of calling them Arch too. For an arch - like the one our pulpit and organ stairs form behind me – is a beautiful symbol of relationship: think bridges, think rainbows for a start. An arch encourages us to connect, repair and renew, the breaches between and within us. An arch offers us ways to return our hearts.

Arch Angell Michael – yes, that sounds pretty good for my little friend and their inspiration to know ourselves as beloved and share and nurture beloved community. For, let's face it, we all need an angel or two in our lives, even an archangel. After all, as Matthew and Mark's Gospels tell us, when the story of Jesus Temptations was complete, the angels ministered to them. May we therefore know angels in our lives, and be angels to others.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.