

Singing the Song of the Mother Hen: *Listening for the 'hidden ones'*

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 13 March 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin and Rev Penny Jones

Lent 2C

Contemporary Reading (below); Luke 13: 31-35

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.

From Lent and Easter Readings from Iona by Peter Millar

With the beckoning and dawning of another day
can the fragile, yet extraordinary
words of Jesus
propel us to a wider awareness,
a gentler compassion?

To the rediscovery of the sacred in ourselves,
and in our world?
To that risk-taking place
where the imprisoning bonds
of our self-enclosed lives are finally shattered?

To a different journey
in a listening companionship
with the prophets of our time –

the wounded and weary
who announce the Kingdom
and carry in their stories the seeds of the morrow?

The 'hidden ones'
in our global culture,
whose pain and joy
when threaded through our lives
enlarge the heart
and bring new meaning
to our common future:
that 'sacred future'
where, impossible as it seems,
we 'love our neighbour as ourselves'.

JOSEPHINE

God the mother hen, the chicks, the fox and the cruel city - that is quite a Gospel reading, isn't it?! And, without hopefully sounding too much like children's entertainers, we know a song about it too, don't we Penny?

PENNY

Well, sort of – I guess most people know the song as being about five ducks rather than four chicks, with 'quacks' rather than 'clucks', but it is very similar. Maybe we can sing it, and others might like to join in, at least with the clucks? Shall we do that? Let's try it. It is called 'four little chicks':

Four little chicks went out one day
Over the hill and far away
'Cluck', said the Mother Hen, "cluck, cluck, cluck"
But only three little chicks came back!

Three little chicks went out one day
Over the hill and far away
'Cluck', said the Mother Hen, "cluck, cluck, cluck"
But only two little chicks came back!

Two little chicks went out one day
Over the hill and far away.

'Cluck', said the Mother Hen, "cluck, cluck, cluck"
But only one little chick came back!

One little chick went out one day
Over the hill and far away
'Cluck', said the Mother Hen, "cluck, cluck, cluck"
But no little chicks came back!

Sad Mother Hen went out one day
Over the hill and far away
'Cluck', said the Mother Hen, "cluck, cluck, cluck"
And all of the four little chicks came back!

That, my friends, is our Gospel for today.

JOSEPHINE

Do we need to unpack that, do you think?

PENNY

Well, we can. However in some ways the Gospel today, like that little song, really speaks for itself, doesn't it?

JOSEPHINE

Yes, I think so. To my mind it speaks directly into our own world, full of foxes – including the great fox Vladimir Putin – and full of vulnerable chicks – like the people of Ukraine. We could perhaps think of many more examples too, couldn't we?

PENNY

Yes, indeed we could.

That is part of the character of the Gospel of Jesus after all, not least in passages like that we heard read today. We can find suggestions, guidelines, even great encouragements to action. Yet, very often, our texts of scripture challenge us to see and feel more deeply, teasing us into greater awareness rather than action as such. In doing so, as we see today, we are encouraged to hear and sing the song of the mother hen, and listen to what Jesus called '*the hidden ones*', the chicks of our lives and world.

JOSEPHINE

That is what our friend Peter Millar is saying in his reflection on Lent, which we also heard read today. As Peter asks us to consider, in the first of four questions:

With the beckoning and dawning of another day can the fragile, yet extraordinary words of Jesus propel us to a wider awareness, a gentler compassion?

PENNY

So what do we make of Jesus' fragile and extraordinary words'?

JOSEPHINE

Well, on the face of it, Jesus' words seem to be an extended metaphor, don't they? - with Herod as the fox, Jesus as the hen, and maybe ourselves as the chicks. Feminist theologians have certainly understandably cherished it, as it offers something of an easily grasped female image of Christ. That can all sound pleasing, if a little bit homely perhaps - all that clucking around in the backyard, whilst the other animals get on with other, 'real', business. After all, mother hens also get a pretty bad press in our culture - being seen as fussy and flappy and not really to be taken seriously. What do you think?

PENNY

I think perhaps we need to remember that hens share DNA with Tyrannosaurus Rex! They can be pretty aggressive in protection of their chicks and will shelter them to the death if necessary. It's not a cutesy image really - certainly not in the context of Jesus carrying on despite receiving death threats from a bully. The words may sound fragile, like a hen's delicate skeleton, but they are an extraordinary expression of courage and determination to face down tyranny. They are words capable of speaking into such horrors as the current invasion of Ukraine and giving strength to the apparently smaller and more vulnerable and often overlooked.

JOSEPHINE

So, they help us stand up, even if we don't feel very strong? But what about propelling us in to '*a wider awareness, a gentler compassion*'? I'm intrigued that it is the Pharisees who warn Jesus that Herod is coming after them. Now of course, we can't entirely catch the tone, and maybe they were goading Jesus - '*you know Herod's going to kill you, better be a chicken and run away*' - yet probably not. I like the way this messes with our tidy assumptions that Jesus and the Pharisees were always at odds.

I suspect Jesus had time for some of the Pharisees. We know Jesus ate with them, and I think Jesus kept their gaze wide, their compassion broad. This might encourage us to see things from a broad perspective and resist judging others too quickly. Maybe we might even have something more in common with some of our supposed enemies than we think?

But let us turn to the second of Peter Millar's questions, namely: *Can those words of Jesus propel us to the rediscovery of the sacred in ourselves and in our world?*

PENNY

I do hope so! It is not just the words of Jesus we heard today of course, but those throughout the gospels that speak of the divine all around us: in the commonplace, the seeds and salt, the pearls and the swine. Jesus helps us with seeing the world otherwise, differently, upside down. That takes imagination and, as Revd. Philip Carter has written (in the latest edition of Presence magazine):

One of our besetting problems is that we too often devalue the imagination. Yet imagination is crucial for the life God calls us to. For too long we have devalued the imagination and relegated it to the merely imaginary, to fantasy, and to make-believe. Our imaginations reveal an un-seen level of inner reality. When our imaginations are blocked—when we have forgotten the power of story, image, symbol, and poetry—we can so easily become vulnerable to despair.

JOSEPHINE

I strongly resonate with that. As you know Penny, one of my most favourite sayings of John O'Donohue is very similar. *In the western world, he said, we have placed such emphasis on the mind and the intellect of God, and particularly, the will of God, that: we have devastatingly neglected the imagination of God – the divine imagination – because that is the true source of all beauty.*

PENNY

Yes, indeed. The imagination is crucial for the life God calls us to, isn't it? It makes connections for us—between our experience and the texts and stories of our tradition. For we are called to be image makers and image bear-ers—made as we are in the image of God. We have a remarkable ability to form and be formed by images. We can grasp and deal with reality through our imaginations—through story, poetry, pictures, and symbols—and, as a result, are able to grasp the true and the real far more effectively than intellect or reason could ever do.

JOSEPHINE

Today's Gospel reminds us then, that Jesus was a highly imaginative person, and their vision of the Kingdom, or Reign, of God—the centrepiece of their teaching—is an imaginative, alternative, and attractive vision of reality. This vision moreover is one that always pushes us towards the other, the one we have rejected, the part of ourselves we would rather deny. Sacredness, for Jesus, always has to do with love, the love of God but equally the love of neighbour and of self. As in today's metaphor, it expresses the longing to 'gather', to bring under the sacred wings, and make whole by the experience of being loved.

But of course, our own stubbornness and that of others often prevents that. The longing meets with resistance. For, as Jesus puts it: *'how often have I desired to gather ...and you were not willing'*. By refusing to be loved, to see the sacred in ourselves or the other we imprison ourselves as often as not.

Which take us on to the third of Peter Millar's four questions for us today: *Can those words of Jesus propel us to that risk-taking place where the imprisoning bonds of our self-enclosed lives are finally shattered?*

PENNY

Peter Millar is saying - isn't he? - that there can be no liberation from our inwardness and self-concern that does not involve risk. Globally through the Covid19 pandemic we have been living with fear, and fear always tends in the direction of self-protection. When we are driven by fear, for ourselves or for others, we turn inward, close our gates and try to stay in control. Jesus's response in today's story is very different. They must have known that it was likely that they would die; that the fox would get the hen.

Yet Jesus was not afraid. They were fearless, but not so much because they were divine and beyond all that. Jesus was not afraid because he had come home to a simple human truth, open to all of us if we will receive it, that love is stronger than death, and therefore there is nothing to fear.

JOSEPHINE

John O'Donohue talks about that too. He said: *you cannot hide from death...yet we still have a great freedom about the way we approach it...we have been given wonderful shelters about the belonging that is in it. It is not a dark end but the beginning of a path of new brightness. If we can learn not to fear death, then we have literally nothing to fear.*

It reminds me too of that great prayer of the Dutch diarist and Jewish mystic Etty Hillesum, as she awaited deportation in 1941: *Lord, help me not to waste a drop of my energy on fear and anxiety, but grant me all the resilience I need to bear this day.* That is very much a prayer for our own times, isn't it? Yet I have to say that seems so much easier to say than to practice!

PENNY

Indeed – which is why we need always to draw on the source and wells of love and wisdom, and support one another on the journey. For, as Peter Millar says, we are propelled by the words of Jesus, to a fourth question, about: *(how do we travel) a different journey in a listening companionship with the prophets of our time – the wounded and weary who announce the Kingdom and carry in their stories the seeds of the morrow?* In other words, how do we attend, Peter Millar asks, to what he calls: *the 'hidden ones' in our global culture, whose pain and joy when threaded through our lives enlarge the heart and bring new meaning to our common future; that 'sacred future' where, impossible as it seems, we 'love our neighbour as ourselves.*

What does this mean to us? Beyond our fear, and even beyond our loving actions, how well are we actually seeing the 'hidden ones'? That is something for us all to reflect upon today.

JOSEPHINE

I think so, and it is at the heart of our contemplative style of worship this Sunday. For if we are to help repair the breaches of our world, we have to learn how to listen more fully, so that healing waters may flow. Part of that is learning to see with a true artist's eyes, isn't it? As we reflect upon the image of the mother hen, the chicks, and the fox, perhaps we can thereby also see God alive in different ways?

PENNY

Yes. That is why I agreed with you to bring this painting of the mother hen and chicks which was painted for me by an artist friend in the north east of England. She also keeps chickens. She gave it to me on the occasion of my ordination as a priest in Durham Cathedral – an historic occasion on the wider level, as women finally broke through the barriers of sexism and violence in the Church of England. It is therefore an expression of love, and of hope triumphing over great odds, opening the door to new possibilities and different, more loving, futures.

JOSEPHINE

That is part of the point of the song we sang, isn't it? – the song of the mother hen. Yes the foxes are about us in our world. Yes we feel the fear and violence they inflict and inculcate. Yes, we will face love and perhaps utter devastation.

Yet the love of God remains among us, gathering us home - and home we will come, together, one day. Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck.