

Hearts are Torn Apart

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Friday 15 April 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkipin

Good Friday C

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.

The First Tearing of the Heart - of our Planet

Readings: Matthew 12: 38-42; *The World In The Whale* by Rebecca Giggs. From *Fathoms*.

How do we handle suffering and death? And what has God to do with them? These are questions at the heart of Good Friday. They apply at all levels of life, including the ecological. For ecological suffering and death are very real and they raise significant theological issues. These days, for example, I hear people use expressions such as '*trust the universe*', or '*trust mother earth*'. They are usually intended either to express their own faith in something more than ourselves, or to encourage others. As such, where traditional religions fail, I guess they can be euphemisms for God. They are a bit limited, but nonetheless something to help humanity on its way, especially when we face suffering and death and when we seek hope beyond the human hopes which are so frequently, or seemingly utterly, crushed.

The problem is that trusting in something other than God doesn't tend to work much better than perceived traditional religion. For, I don't know about you, but it is pretty hard, to trust 'mother earth' for example when she/it is full of such threats. As we have just heard, pollution by plastic is everywhere. Even in the 'developed' world, we often cannot, literally, entirely trust the water we drink. As Covid-19 above all has taught us, we also certainly cannot always trust the air we breathe. We could add the threats of fire, flood, nuclear and other potential ecological concerns. No wonder there is such existential angst on our planet.

Much ecological suffering is, of course, due to human agency. For this we come to repent today. Yet can the glorious, but flawed, planet, or universe, really help us, ultimately? For don't these remain created things, subject to decline and decay, and without ultimate existence in themselves? This compels us back to God, particularly because the suffering of the wider creation itself struggles for redemption.

So how do you feel about whales – the sea creatures we just heard mentioned? Whales, it has to be said, have an uncertain, even sometimes a bad, reputation in both biblical and wider Christian traditions. This is not surprising. Before modern times, whales were viewed as powerful, and often very scary, creatures. Much is due to interpretations of the striking story of Jonah and a lack of close awareness. For sometimes, Christian art would picture whales with large fangs, elephant-like trunks, or even horns - particularly when Jonah's whale was seen to represent the gates of hell, or the devil. Yet, like other aspects of the more than human Creation, they also point us towards God.

The whale symbolises the process of resurrection, through the transformation of suffering, as we experience it on all levels, including the ecological. No wonder Jesus, and later Christians, picked it up. Jonah's story, though told fancifully, is a type for Christ's crucifixion and resurrection - itself a symbol for all our lives, including that of sea creatures, the planet, universe, and the cosmos as a whole. We therefore need to attend to the whales, not least to our experience of living in the whale. For whales, like other sea creatures, typically lay before us choices between life and death, and the challenges of endurance to find hope again.

The Darkinjung people know this well. You can see the whale, as a totemic symbol, and a source of practical life, on so many of their rock engravings on the Central Coast. They knew how to live in relationship with sea and other creatures, and not to plunder and destroy. For they knew that what we do to the whales, and to other sea creatures, we indeed do to ourselves, and to God, the Spirit of Life itself. And so, as we come in lament and penitence today, may we trust in God, into whose depths we are plunged, so that, like the whales, we may surface and swim more gloriously and joyfully again, with all the torn heart of Creation.

The Second Tearing of the Heart - of our World

Readings: Luke 23:13-25; *Resistance* - by Simon Armitage

Like so many of us, my heart is certainly torn by war. We all have our particular concerns and memories in this. It is hardly just Ukraine, is it? Yemen, Myanmar, Syria, Sudan, the list goes on. According to the United Nations, two billion people, or a quarter of the world's population, now lives in conflict-affected areas. An estimated 84 million people were "*forcibly displaced because of conflict, violence and human rights violations*," and an estimated 274 million people will need humanitarian assistance due to conflict, the U.N Secretary-General said recently. Indeed, speaking to the UN's Peacebuilding Commission, António Guterres said the world is experiencing the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945, when World War II drew to a close.

For what, on this Good Friday, during a federal general election, are we gathering?

What truly matters to us? Will we choose to dwell on death, and death-dealing, or will we tuck them away separately?

Is our future to be one of more death and mourning or a choosing of paths of life?

When will we, as nations and a species, choose Christ, the Prince of Peace, over Barabbas? What kind of leadership will bring us peace? Do we seek true makers of peace, or will we settle for our own Pilates?

Which treaties do we really need to establish?

In what kind of weapons will we put our trust?

Today, each of us is implicated in the sin of war, not simply through our media but through our deeper human global connections, and through the structures of power, the economy, and the choices we ourselves make. So let us acknowledge the things which make for war today, and seek Christ's Peace. For like a sunflower seed falling into the ground, in this there is also hope.

The Third Tearing of the Heart – of our Nation

Readings: Luke 23:26-31: *10 Black Deaths In Custody* - by Ali Cobby Eckermann

What does the word atonement – at-one-ment - mean to you?

Making one, or making whole, is another way of putting it. Sadly, one devastating aspect of recent Christian faith is the insistence by some that there is only one way of understanding at-one-ment, and that this requires a very harsh idea of God, with considerable judgement, punishment, and hell. Instead we should always remember that Christians have never had one way of understanding atonement, and that the oldest ways do not focus on blood or guilt satisfaction.

One helpful way in is vividly expressed by the wonderful Chinese artist and professor He Qi. Look at his ‘Crucifixion’, used, with He Qi’s permission on the front of our liturgy sheet today. What strikes you? Do you see how the Crucified Christ is surrounded by those from the margins?

Who do you see there? With whom do you connect? Who challenges you? Is it the prisoner behind bars; the Person-with-Aids; the poor man lying on the pavement; the parent mourning her dead child? Perhaps, like some, you are challenged by the naked woman clinging to Christ? Significantly, this has been seen as the most controversial aspect of the picture – as if nakedness of women had nothing to do with God in Jesus, or because our society, even in exploiting it, thinks that women’s nakedness is less shocking than a prisoner behind bars, a person with Aids, or the poor and homeless on our city streets? A key point of the picture is surely that God, and atonement, is in all these people, and more.

He Qi is affirming that atonement is about becoming at-one with all, especially those on the margins. Just as the Spirit of God – the dove in the picture – is present in all of God’s Creation, so the Spirit is present, in Christ and the crucifixion, in all of Redemption, and in the New Creation, which unites God with all who suffer and are marginalised. Atonement in other words is about God’s solidarity with all of God’s Creation, especially the suffering – not so much punishment as liberation. Indeed, if there is judgement present, surely it is of the powerful who condemned Christ to suffering, either actively, or, like Pilate, passively washing their hands of compassion.

Jesus’ words we have just heard are powerful:

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’”

The unjust suffering of individuals, like that of Jesus, may indeed tear our hearts. Yet Jesus is saying that we are not to dwell on his death alone, except as it reveals the powers of fear and hate, and the structures of sin and oppression that oppress and threaten others, perhaps us all. If Good Friday is truly to be Good, to be salvific, healing, and bringing new life and freedom, then let us hear Jesus’ larger message.

Who and where, are people being crucified in our nation today? – and, crucially, as in the Jesus story, what can we learn from how this is happening and what else it threatens?

The Fourth Tearing of the Heart – of our City and Communities

Readings: Luke 23:32-43; On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX – by Denise Levertov

Yesterday, as I travelled to the Central Coast for David Aderman's funeral, I saw one of those church signs which I wish had not been put up. It read *'The crucified God understands Ukraine pain'*. Now, I don't know about you, but whilst I appreciate that church was trying to express solidarity with Ukrainian suffering, it leaves much to be desired. For, immediately, I want to ask, *'if God understands Ukraine pain, what is she/he/they doing about it?'* As I have already affirmed, if we are to proclaim the love of God on this Good Friday, then we do well to avoid expressions which suggest that God is the cause of suffering and death for some supposed ends of guilt and judgement.

As He Qi reminds us, God is, at the very least, in solidarity. To have any real meaning for us, God surely has to do more than understand. Indeed God has to represent, and offer us, something more. God has to be more than a bystander. For God is involved in the transformation of suffering and death, through constant presence, and the ever continuing bearing and outworking of love.

Another way into atonement which may help is therefore that of the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, creatively expressed in Denise Levertov's poem. Julian here rightly protests obsessions with the suffering and death of Jesus alone. Yet, equally rightly, as a Christian she affirms the importance of this particular suffering and death – not because it concerns settling a debt to God, but because it reveals God afresh, caught up in the transformation of the suffering of all. For God is no bystander, nor is God simply about understanding. Rather God is in the very midst of suffering. As Julian says it, in the poet's words:

*'the oneing
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies
– sands of the sea, of the desert –
from first beginning
to last day.'*

For Christ's Passion is not a harsh transaction of judgement and punishment. Rather it is a truly awesome revelation of divine love. It is not about personal salvation alone, delivered from destruction that others will receive. It is cosmic in its dimensions, and all-encompassing. Nor is this a distortion of so-called 'traditional faith'. Instead, it goes to the very heart of core biblical themes and, well beyond Julian of Norwich, to the very earliest days of Christian Faith.

Yes, certainly, our hearts, lives, bodies, and world are torn apart.

However God in Christ is among us.

For he/she/they have become one with us, they are at-one with us, in suffering and death, and the power of this at-oneing Love will prevail.

The Fifth Tearing of the Heart – of our Selves

Readings: Luke 23:44-49; Psalm: 22

Today is the first time I have worn this dress since my parents' funeral last year. It was hard, for a time, even to glimpse it again in the closet. Like other garments and fragments of our intimate lives, some things are tough even to recognise, never mind hold gently, and move through. What such fragments of your torn heart do you bring, I wonder?

T.S.Eliot's words spoke from my torn heart last December: as I travelled to England, as Omicron flared up vigorously in Britain, as I accompanied my parents in their deaths, just hours apart; as I stumbled through the repercussions, the funeral: and as I tried to let go of the home, the places, the people, the childhood memories, which had been there for me, even when so far away, for over fifty years:

A cold coming we had of it,

Just the worst time of year

For a journey, and such a long journey:

The ways deep and the weather sharp,

The very dead of winter.

However, doesn't T.S.Eliot speak for us all, at least metaphorically, in our journeys through grief, loss, suffering and death, when he speaks of the journey of the magi?

The journey of suffering is truly a cold, hard, deep, and wintry one. This is part of what we face on Good Friday, as we remember the seeming death of Love itself. Nor can we simply leap out of suffering or death. We cannot just flick a switch and usher in Easter. Rather only through our own Good Fridays, our own winters, our own wounds, will we experience grace anew. But, we will!

I know Good Friday is hard for many. Christians do not always help ourselves when we dwell too much on suffering and death. For they are very real, like the darker colour of my dress. Yet they are not the end.

Good Friday is good. For our story is not ended. There is hope, for Love has not been ended. It has triumphed, seeing through to the last.

Love, declares the poet-priest Malcolm Guite, does not leave us, even when we are so sorely pressed, or feel utterly forsaken. The rhythms and rituals we use to bear our suffering, grief, and death are, as he says, indeed too often '*beautiful useless gestures of relief*'.

Like the women after Jesus' death, we may anoint skin that seemingly cannot feel any longer; try to kiss wounds that cannot easily, or ever fully, heal; and try consolations, like perfumes, that cannot really fill now emptied air.

Yet Love is still there - and, as the poet puts it, '*the love that's poured in silence at old graves, renewing flowers, tending the bare earth*', well it '*is never lost*'.

Never lost – do we fear to believe it, to trust it? In suffering, and in death, we are never alone, however dark, absent, or far away, love feels. For, in Malcolm Guite’s words, in Christ, in the depths of suffering and death:

*‘all love is found
And sown with him, a seed in the rich ground.’*

There is blue, as well as dark, in my dress. So too in Good Friday: crucifixion yes, but also promise of resurrection.

We should, sorrow and grieve, today, and at other moments in our lives, for ourselves and for others, and for Creation as a whole.

Yet let us trust that Love itself can never be defeated, and that, knowing this, that we too will never, ultimately, be forsaken.

In the loving power of the Cross of Jesus. Amen.