

# TEARS, LOVE, JUSTICE

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 May 2022

A reflection by Steve Walkerden

Easter 5C

**Revelations 21: 1-6; Psalm 148; Acts: 11: 1-18; John 13: 31-35;**  
**Contemporary Reading: *What the Pandemic is Saying to the World***  
**by Richard Rohr 2021**

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

---

Good morning, I'm glad to be able to offer this reflection today.

I'm conscious that we meet in the context of the federal election. I follow on from the excellent contribution by David Gill last week. He impressed upon us the need to think carefully about our faith, what it means, and then to vote. The principle that he offered I repeat – look to the matters of justice and love first and foremost. They are God's enduring qualities that we aspire to live out. Weigh them up and cast your vote.

This morning I'll use the lectionary readings informally to take you on my personal journey over the last couple of years. It centres on the Covid19 pandemic. At the start, I acknowledge the enormous impact Covid has had on many people, and continues to have. This is my story.

To Revelation first, and those words of comfort. ... *God will dwell with us, will wipe every tear from our eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.* Dare we hope?

Covid 19 was first detected late in 2019 in Wuhan, and we all know only too well the path that the virus has taken since then. Given the scale of the disaster it beggars belief that it has not received greater attention during the election campaign. The death toll this year is shocking – heading towards 17,000 people we are told.

Up until September last year my job was Chief Executive of a large aged care charity. There are many Covid stories from that time – here is just one...

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the ship, Ruby Princess docked in Sydney after a 13-day cruise. In the weeks that followed 662 passengers and crew tested positive to Covid and 28 people died. Two of the passengers with Covid were residents of a retirement village under my wing. With no cure and no treatment, we were worried.

As we have seen all along, skilled nurses and support staff make all the difference. With courage and love the team quietly went about their work. systems were quickly created and followed, no breaches of infection control occurred, privacy was maintained, and loads of support was given. For one of the folk, it was touch and go, but fortunately they pulled through.

During the recovery that resident said to the main carer... *turn around, would you? ... our staff obliged ... and then asked why? The answer ... "I just wanted to check that your wings are intact – you're my angel"*.

We all dreamed of an effective vaccine – collective anxiety was palpable. My office felt like Covid central as every day we would risk assess and make judgements. By mid-2021, after a very long time in that job, I felt it was time to retire. The vaccines were proving effective and there was the hope of better days ahead.

On the home front, both our daughters lost their employment because of Covid restrictions. Our younger daughter and her partner crash landed at our place after escaping New York just before the borders closed.

The horrific scenes of people's bodies being stored in refrigerated containers in the street because the morgues could not cope still haunts me. In Europe it was similar. And just two weeks ago the US passed a grim milestone – over one million people have died there because of Covid. There are estimates that put the figure at 15 million deaths globally.

Each one of those people count. Every single one of them has loved ones.

In Australia the number of deaths is over 7000, and worryingly, most of those deaths have occurred since January this year. This pandemic is not over, just the reporting of it, it seems.

For Deb, her work as an infants' schoolteacher was turned on its head. After her more than forty years of face-to-face classroom teaching, it was flipped to zoom, phone calls, and families juggling devices in corners of rooms at home – everyone just trying to make the best of a dire situation.

Anecdotally Deb can see the gaps in learning that are emerging after two years of disruption for these young children. Who knows what real damage has been done to their learning – only time will tell.

Well, up to that point I felt we had managed ok. Many fared much worse than us, and there was always something to be thankful for.

That changed for my family on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> August last year. Deb received a call from her sister Penny to say they had received the most awful news. They were on their way to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital as their eldest child, Katie, 34 years old, was undergoing emergency surgery to relieve the blood clotting on her brain that had been caused by the Astra Zeneca vaccine administered by her much-loved GP, just days earlier.

We are a close family. Deb and Penny are best friends. Our daughter Nikki and Katie were best friends growing up together. Our younger daughter Emily shares a birthday with her. We all love Katie.

The Doctors and specialists at RPA were compassionate, skilled, and shocked by what they were seeing. Katie was healthy, active, amazing. A Bridge Climb tour leader by day, and an actor and comedian by night whenever Covid restrictions permitted. She also worked at the Butterfly Foundation helping people with eating disorders. Katie was massively struck down by the vaccine's effect on her body. The doctors advised that she would not make it.

On 4<sup>th</sup> August, with her stunned family grieving by her side, she died.

The impact of Katie Lees' death was shattering. Worried about the mad anti vaxers, the politicians and others discounted her death as a one in a million price that had to be paid. Other countries with better smarter options dropped the Astra Zeneca vaccine like a hot potato. Why didn't Australia?

Katie was pro vaccines. She was following the urging of our leaders and took the vaccine for the good of her family and community. The impact of the lockdowns had smashed her world – she hoped for a better future.

Nine months on we are still reeling from it, and no day goes by without our thoughts turning to Katie. And we are just one family among millions.

Just a couple of weeks ago, on the 4th of May the family launched a tribute website dedicated to her memory, <https://katielees.com/> – google it and you will see our precious Katie. It's an attempt to overcome the silencing of our grief that we all feel.

The pandemic poem read earlier exhorts us, "*never play the victim*". Well, Katie was a victim, and she did not survive.

Over the nine months since her shocking death, bit by bit, family and friends have rallied to build something out of this horrendous experience. We are survivors, not victims.

A fellowship grant for emerging young female actors has been established, there is a change.org petition calling for a Royal Commission into the Government's handling of the pandemic, a website to provide a forum for people grieving loss caused by Covid to tell their stories is in early stages of development, and we are calling for public acknowledgement of lives lost in the pandemic – a one minute silence at appropriate events, a national memorial place.

I encourage you to visit the website <https://katielees.com/> and you will see it all there.

Encouraged by Richard Rohr, let's extend our compassion to all families across the world who have suffered so much because of Covid. Lives cut short, years of love and contribution, friendship and support ripped away. There are so many tears to be wiped from our eyes.

John's reading has Jesus saying: *you're to love one another the way I have loved you*. Love is the only way forward. Through the tears and anger somehow love endures.

What I have seen through the words and actions of Katie's father and mother, Ian and Penny is quite simply, extraordinary love. In their immense pain and grief, they have nurtured and reached out to hundreds of Katie's friends, have shown the way of dignified, wise grief to her siblings and wider family, and now are speaking publicly to bring about change for the better.

Our elder daughter Nicola, along with other members of the family, has been beside them in this working hard to gather the evidence and drive home the message that change is needed.

For them, their love is a deeply human response to loss.

Conventional wisdom says work hard, obey the law, look after others and you will be rewarded with benefits as you live out your life. That's what Katie did.

A counterbalance to conventional wisdom is radical grace. Best demonstrated by Jesus in his healings, his passion for justice, love, forgiveness, generosity, humour and courage. Katie, a humanist, had this in spades.

Spong, at the conclusion of his book, "*Jesus for the Non-Religious*", references a poem by Lucy Newton. I read an excerpt ...

*Grasp the freedom with which Jesus loved;*

*See deeply the way that he gave himself away;*

*Look at his courage, and the contagious quality of his love;*

*Know that you are accepted, and accept yourself;*

*Know that you are forgiven, forgive yourself;*

*When you are loved, love yourself.*

Psalm 148. When I read the Psalm my reaction was: *oh, stuff that. It's way too cheery!*

But I did persist and read it a few more times.

In Psalm 148 we see that everything is invested with a spirit. Angels, sun, moon, stars, waters, monsters, fire, hail, wind, snow, frost, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things, birds, and people, ... basically, the lot.

Our First Nations brothers and sisters, despite their horrific treatment from 1788 on, have been trying to get this message across to white people for more than 200 years. Their wisdom and love for their country, their spirit connection to it, predates that of the Psalmist by tens of thousands of years. I can see them patiently rolling their eyes as the light dawns on me, another dumb white bloke, that it's all connected. We are all connected. Rohr nailed it.

Listening to country, caring for country is needed to spur strong action on climate change. I leave you with the question: *is a growing acknowledgement of that interconnected spirit, for us today, the horn that has been raised up, as the Psalmist describes? We hope.*

Finally, to Acts 11.

I take all of Acts with a few grains of salt. A lot of it sounds like an in-house argument between Peter and James in Jerusalem, and Paul and his followers elsewhere. Well, the fact that we are all here today confirms that Paul prevailed.

The sheet being lowered before Peter sounds a bit like the Wuhan fresh food market – not my cup of tea. The chaps who walked from Joppa to Caesarea by my calculation must have walked most of the night to arrive there when they did. They would have been knackered.

Anyway, good for them, good for Peter, good for Paul and his ministry, and I guess James in Jerusalem just winced and moved on.

Luke, a follower of Paul, has Cornelius and his household speaking in tongues and extolling God, the very things that satisfied the Jerusalem elders that a person was an authentic follower of Jesus. But Paul writing decades earlier had already staked out his position on these fancy signs of the spirit – in the very familiar 1 Corinthians 13 he most eloquently puts them in their place as he describes love, by far the most important evidence of God's presence.

The experience of God's Spirit in our lives deserves a closer look, more than I can do this morning. Mystical, ambiguous, exhilarating, humbling, certain, uncertain, inspiring, disturbing, the essence, the "*more*" ... these are just a few words that come to my mind.

Marcus Borg stresses the importance of practices, routines, and worship to create opportunities to connect with that spirit. He encourages the seeking of "*thin*" places, where the barriers between our day to day lives and the presence of God are minimal. What he says makes sense to me. That's why I'm here today.

To draw these threads together, they take us back to the Gospel reading with Jesus saying: *you're to love one another the way I have loved you.*

It's as simple as that.

Amen.