

Celebrating and continuing our stories

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 August 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin, Llewellyn Wishart and Dawn Robson

Pentecost 10C and memorial for Valwyn Wishart

Hebrews 11: 28 – 12: 2; Matthew 5: 1-11

The video of this reflection 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.

Rev Josephine

'By faith'! By faith! What a powerful and ringing repeated phrase that is in the Letter to the Hebrews chapter 11. Last Sunday and this Sunday we have heard it read in two parts, telling some of the stories of those who have gone before us in the story of God, as told in the Bible. This great passage relates the stories of so many heroes of faith in the Hebrew traditions.

'By faith'! The Letter affirms so strongly how all kinds of extraordinary events and achievements flow from the power of trust and courage that true faith enables. Note well: this is faith not as a set of beliefs or practices or organisational structures, as so many would have us see 'faith' today; but biblical faith, which is about inspiration, risk, and energy. As such, it encourages us to take heart, to draw on similar energy, and to take risks in our own day.

What might we ourselves seek to achieve? In a way, our current mission planning exercise challenges us all to write our own versions of the stories mentioned by Hebrews chapter 11. For where, we are being asked, do we see God at work today? Where is faith being made manifest? And how and where might we write new stories? What a lovely gift to us today then to have family and friends of the late Valwyn Wishart with us. For Valwyn would, I think, be one Pitt Streeter we might well include in our stories from the past.

In a moment, I will therefore ask one of her sons, Llewellyn, and one of her friends, Dawn, to share something of how 'by faith' Valwyn also continued the story of God in her own times. I will ask two questions: two questions which we might also ask of others who have gone before us in this community. Firstly, what was it that drew Valwyn to this place and what did she share in celebrating God's life here 'by faith'? And, secondly, what might she say to us today as we look to journey on 'by faith'?

Before I ask Llewellyn and Dawn those questions, I want however to point out two other central aspects of our scripture readings today. For, firstly, in hearing the Beatitudes again this morning, we do well to note that there is not a single word within them about what is often understood by 'church' and what is often called 'mission' and 'growth' today. In those powerful verses of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus does not prescribe a form of organisation, nor does Jesus seem at all concerned, as such, with numbers or money or buildings, careful planning or specific formulations.

None of those things are called 'blessed'. Actually, Jesus does not prescribe anything, for the Beatitudes are not a prescription of the kind of people or actions God might require. Instead, the Beatitudes are a description of the kind of people who simply find themselves caught up in God's mission of love. For Jesus is saying that living 'by faith' is not a matter of working out how to share God with others.

Rather, living 'by faith' is about opening our eyes to where God is in others, and in unlikely parts of ourselves, and thus catching up with God's mission which is always at the edge of our grasp and imagination. If you want to see where God is, Jesus says in the Beatitudes, well look for the kinds of people God calls 'blessed'. Celebrate them and join with them – that is what continuing God's story is about.

So – how will we do that, together, in our own times? Where are we looking? Who and what can we see? Of what stories are we going to be a part?

The second central aspect of our scripture readings this morning sits with that understanding of the Beatitudes – namely the story of Jesus themselves. For, whilst we may draw on various stories, both those we find in the Letter to the Hebrews and elsewhere in the Bible, and also those in our experiences and traditions, ultimately our Christian focus is shaped by Jesus. As the opening of Hebrews chapter 12 puts it, look '*to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith*'. It is so easy for us, like all people of faith, to become distracted into other pathways. Returning, prayerfully, to our focus in Jesus the Christ continues to be the centre we must seek – whether in our mission planning, or in anything else.

In the spirit of the Beatitudes, and in the love of Christ. Amen.

Llewellyn Wishart

I can't quite put into words what this place meant for Valwyn. This place of community with its concentric circles of friendship, fellowship, spiritual and pastoral care, compassion, joy, steadfast kindness and concerted energy. Unfortunately it became more difficult for Valwyn to be physically present in this church in her later years, she sorely missed being present with you all in worship and as an active member of a diverse multi-age faith community. But you were ever present in her daily living at Southern Cross Care with visits, phone calls, letters and the faithful mailings of order of services and newsletters coming from the Office. She loved all of this. In Valwyn's end of life process she and our family all felt your loving presence; she was held by your particular embodiment and expression of God's care.

Being here in this place with this congregation, also reminds me of how Valwyn's and my spiritual journeys were entangled although very divergent. I had the privilege of coming here on occasions with Valwyn, as did other family members. Also attending the North Side Group she was a part of for so many years and, getting to know many in this congregation. I'm grateful for this entanglement, grateful for your gifts, your fellowship and the potential of faith communities that this congregation exemplifies. Faith communities often go unrecognised as being protective factors in people's healthy development and wellbeing. I feel that this church community became a protective factor in Valwyn's life, no matter how difficult things got in her later years with hospitalisations, illness, the rupture and transition to living in residential age care pre pandemic and with the privation of lockdowns, she still had access to a wellspring of spiritual wellbeing.

“*Staying with the trouble*” is a book by Donna Haraway – and I paraphrase from those who have written about it when they describe the work the book does as:

“Learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth”

Many things troubled Mum, both within and without, but these were her terms of engagement. She didn’t stop witnessing or caring about other people, other forms of life (the more than human world). She stayed with the trouble of the human condition, her own and others. She stayed with the trouble of her own doubts and things she found bewildering, unjust, unkind and egregious in the wider world. I know she experienced despair, depression and anxiety about all manner of things (as so many of us do). But perhaps if you don’t sometimes experience despair (with the human world) then you’re not paying attention (to quote my wife Kim).

Elizabeth Mattis Namgyal interprets elements of the Buddhist spiritual journey stating that “*we burn with love for a world we can’t fix*”. This was Valwyn’s spiritual work as well, staying with the trouble and as Mary Oliver states in her poem *When Death Comes* – “*I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world*” this was my mother, this was Valwyn.

As Josephine suggested what would Valwyn want to say to us? I think she would say to us, to lean in and stay with the human world. To not give up, to share our gifts with the world as she did.

I would like to close with one of Valwyn’s more pithy poems:

ONE MORE DAWN

Through my window
I see the majesty of clouds
Gilded by the sun.
Day’s beginning shows me
the inconsequence of human beings

Thank you Josephine, Liz, Carolyn, William and others from the Pitt Street congregation for making this commemoration for Valwyn possible and having us all here today. And thank you to family and friends from near and far who have made the effort to come today to celebrate Valwyn’s presence in our lives.

Dawn Robson

You may be familiar with the phrase “*the communion of saints*” which occurs in the Apostles Creed. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews uses the phrase “*the great cloud of witnesses*”. These are folk who have lived Christ-like lives, and who have been, and are, an inspiration to us.

To me, Valwyn was one such person, although she would feel uncomfortable about that label.

I have been asked to speak about what drew Valwyn to the Pitt St congregation. I have consulted with Sheila, and Lyn who were among those who knew her best.

Valwyn had a love of theatre, of drama, of musicals, of all of the creative arts. She was a director and one of the instigators of the Sydney Film Festival.

I think Valwyn joined the congregation in the late 80's or early 90's when we had several creative people who loved acting, like Dick Mason, Rosie Whiley and others. From time to time they would write and produce a play which was performed during the morning service. I well remember the Good Friday plays. Valwyn, of course, was one of the actors.

Valwyn was a great believer in Social Justice and regularly joined the group of Pitt Streeters who marched in protest over many issues through the years. She was also very involved in the Women's Reconciliation Network. This group inspires and encourages women around Australia to build greater appreciation of and understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

There were several other women from our congregation who were and are also members of the WRN, including Elaine Telford and our then minister the Rev. Dorothy McRae-McMahon.

Valwyn had a great love of literature and was a member of the Society of Women Writers. As a mature age student she did an Arts Degree at Macquarie University. Feminism and women's history were her main interests. Valwyn was a supporter of the Jessie Street National Women's Library, which holds a collection of Australian women's writings. Several other people from our church were and still are involved in the Jessie Street library. Pitt St, with its emphasis on leadership of women in the church was a natural for her involvement and support.

She was a deep thinker and was attracted by the non-literal interpretation of the Bible and theology at Pitt St. She loved to attend the Common Dreams conferences.

And then, there is her love of the natural environment. She would have found many in the congregation shared her love of all things green.

Valwyn loved Pitt St UC, and was a dedicated friend to many. Her care of others, especially those entering their fragile years was especially important. She wrote a paper to the Church Council, titled "*The silvering of the congregation*", in which she stressed that older folk can sometimes be overlooked. Her gentle reminders about this gave rise to a more special awareness of our older people.

Valwyn cared deeply for us. One illustration of this follows:

Valwyn usually sat in church next to Jim and Priscilla Rowe. They were a similar age and shared similar concerns. Priscilla died suddenly and Jim struggled into church the following Sunday. Imagine his surprise, when placed on the seat where Priscilla would have sat was a beautiful bunch of flowers. That simple act of kindness and thoughtfulness by Valwyn brought tears to the eyes of some of us.

In her later years Valwyn produced a book of poetry titled *Birdsongs for Our Times*. In her own words is a short verse: "*Caught up in anxious busyness we fail to understand the grace and peace of silence.*"

The second question I have been asked to address is "What would Valwyn say to us today?" Firstly she would thank us for our friendship through the years.

Valwyn appreciated the grace and peace which she found at Pitt St and she would urge us to continue to share it with others.

She would ask us to think deeply and read widely.

To offer our gifts, our talents to enrich the experience of Sunday worship services, whether it be through music, drama or dance.

To work for social justice, and to support women's issues;

To continue to work for reconciliation with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, the original inhabitants of this land. This is an ongoing process,

And so today we reminisce on Valwyn and give thanks to God that she was part of our Pitt St congregation.