

Bending and unbending

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 21 August 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 11C

Hebrews 12: 18-24; Luke 13: 10-17

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.

Today's Gospel story is one which resonates powerfully with me. For I had lower back problems for many years, and I still vividly remember my back going into total spasm as I once tried to change trains at Strathfield station. I was bent double and simply could not move, despite the help of others. It was a key moment in which I began to realise that my life, and especially my relationship to my body, had to change. I had to start listening to my body, in which so many emotions, not least denied gender and sexual emotions, were trapped. Not simply physically, but in other ways, I had to learn to bend and unbend, more fully to know and flow into my life and spirit.

Now, of course, not all our ailments and physical challenges have obvious spiritual connections. However many, in my experience, do, and this is certainly part of what the Gospel writer is trying to say to us in our story today. For whilst we may speculate on the likely form of physical arthritis with which the woman may have been afflicted, Luke is calling us to recognise our spiritual arthritis and its potential for transformation in God.

At this time, in the life of this community, and the wider Church and world, it is perhaps well worth reflecting upon. Indeed, as we continue to ponder our own mission calling together, it is good to ask what bending and unbending might represent for us, not least in our prayer and worship life. For whilst it might be tempting to consider today's Gospel story in relation to many whose physical bodies and lives need unbending, I believe that the great mystic Evelyn Underhill had it right when she said:

We mostly spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do... forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by, and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be.

Prayer and worship, she, and I, would propose, are about helping us with that fundamental verb: bending and unbending our lives and bodies, our whole selves, be-ing, in relationship to the Spirit of all.

Evelyn Underhill! That is not a name heard often today, even in her native land or faith traditions. Yet I believe she still offers some important insights, not least to Churches today. For so many of our Church patterns and institutions today are somewhat like the woman bent over, aren't they? Stuck in the same painful positions, they badly need transformation and renewal.

Without looking afresh, bending and unbending in the presence of what we call the Christ, there will continue to be little or no ability for release. For Churches can have as many organisational reviews as they like, devise as many mission plans as they want, and even jump on whatever moral or cultural bandwagon they can manage.

Without spiritual renewal however, Churches still remain self-obsessed, secondary vehicles of wider morality, and what ancient critics called '*waterless canals*' of the Spirit. As we therefore reflect on our own call to mission, this morning I want to open up the subject of how, as individuals and a community together, we approach worship and what we find variously inspiring, sustaining, and challenging in it.

Evelyn Underhill was one of the great first-wave Christian feminists who helped transform aspects of faith and world in the late 19th and early 20th century. She herself, among other things, was the first woman to lecture to Church of England clergy, the first officially to lead retreats, the first to make official ecumenical links between churches and one of the first recognised female theologians. She also wrote a series of notable books on spirituality, including one entitled *Worship*.

However, it is probably her significant letter to the then Archbishop of Canterbury in 1931 that has always challenged me. Reflecting then on the Church's already desperate attempts to relate to the modern world, she expressed her concern that the spiritual life of clergy and laity was being overwhelmed by the multiplicity of other concerns. For all the reasonable demands of other things, as she put it:

The real failures, difficulties and weaknesses of the Church are spiritual and can only be remedied by spiritual effort and sacrifice, and that her deepest need is a renewal... of the great Christian tradition of the inner life.

What is needed above all, she wrote, is '*a disciplined priesthood of theocentric souls.*' For 'God', she said, '*is the most interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God*' – the liberating kind. However only those who are '*soaked in prayer, sacrifice and love*' can really help others to find that God.

You may not agree, but I think Evelyn was right, and her words still ring out to me, especially when we come to Church injunctions to, and many discussions of, mission. Too often, Churches are concerned with other things, leaving prayer and worship, and theology, as mere preliminaries, when they are arguably at the very heart of things.

Instead of adding to our burdens, we might do well, as Evelyn saw it, to step back and enter more deeply into what is at the core of the life of faith. That in itself is no small task in a world and in Churches obsessed with the verbs to Want, to Have, and to Do. As Evelyn acknowledged, addressing the verb to Be, and recovering the interior life of prayer and meditation is very difficult for clergy, and laity, immersed increasingly in routine work:

It will mean for many a complete rearrangement of values and a reduction of social activities. They will not do it unless they are made to feel its crucial importance.

So how important, and why and how, is prayer and worship to us?

In the remainder of this Reflection, I want to offer up for discussion four ways in which our worship may be important to us, some of which may make more sense than others to each of us but which together we might honour and seek to nurture.

Taken as a whole, to return to the powerful Gospel metaphor today, they are part of the bending and unbending which allows us to grow and flow more freely in the liberating Spirit of God. For, in a deep sense, I would suggest that prayer and worship help constitute what we might call the '*yoga of the soul*', without which we become spiritually frozen, incapable of bending and unbending, and conjugating the verb to Be.

No wonder that the heart of Muslim prayer involves bending and unbending, or that other wisdom traditions, like yoga, value so highly the connections of body, mind, spirit, prayer and movement. Such yoga of the soul helps us integrate, as we bend and unbend in the Spirit of Love - and physical actions, including dance, can help us on that journey. We do not have to be a dancer however, or even like dance, to find prayer and worship helpful, and for some of us essential, to our bending and unbending, our release of pain and experience of joy.

The four ways I offer into our worship together, into our own bending and unbending, our own '*yoga of the soul*', are also four ways of looking at God. For if you are bent over you can only really look at what is beneath you, and immediately upon you. As the Spirit transforms us however, just as Jesus helped the woman in our story, so much else becomes possible. This is what prayer and worship can help us do, that we may more truly be.

A first way into worship might be termed **Looking Beyond**. This is what Evelyn Underhill, and all the great mystics, were most concerned to affirm. Worship is, first and foremost, not about us, or our world, as we know it now. It rather seeks to offer '*doors to the sacred*', in the words of Martos' famous book on the sacraments. Worship, in this way of looking, is about experience, or opening ourselves, to the beyond: the experience of what has variously been termed '*ultimate*' reality, '*the ground of all being*', the '*Wholly Other*', the '*mysterium tremendum*'.

This is what our first reading today is referring to. It can take many forms but is about '*ecstasy*' in its original meaning: namely '*ek*', out, and '*stasis*', standing - standing outside of our little selves so that we can enter more fully into the Spirit of all things. In this we experience the divine as rock and peace, and in other metaphors of deep strength and connection. We open ourselves to wonder and amazement, and to all that lies beyond our little lives and the limitations of our immediate circumstances. So how well are we going with that in our own prayer and worship?

The second way into worship might be termed **Looking Around**. This is about the community dimension of prayer and life. Without community of some kind, human beings are subject to loneliness, stress, meaninglessness and despair. Worship thus had a vital role to play in providing contact, identity, and purpose, as well as a place for sharing joys and cares.

Secular accompaniments and alternatives offer this too, whether, for example, built around national identity and myths, like those of ANZAC Day, or sporting teams and other communities. Like Churches, these can also come to be defined in narrow ways, excluding some other people or aspects of life. Worship, as a way of expressing and nurturing community therefore, needs regular reflective attention. Perhaps the best known interpretation of worship in this sense is that of the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who saw religion as a social creation, as a means of building up the social conscience and affirming certain moral and human values, allowing the individual to transcend ourselves and act for the common good.

Whilst the forms and symbols and words of such communal affirmation may change, the need for worship in that sense will never disappear. How well then does our prayer and worship express and nurture common values which will build up life in our world today?

A third way into worship might be termed **Looking Within**. For we human beings need means of processing life and what is happening to us. Worship seeks to offer that space. Traditionally speaking, I think this is part of the role of both confession and intercessory prayer. Of course, confession has often become laden down with various Church-related baggage of guilt, duty, and shame. The word 'sin' has also become incredibly narrowed in common understanding and imbued with overly oppressive connotations.

However, without an opportunity to name and honour what is happening in and to us we easily remain bent over by things that happen to us, are done by us, or done to us. We become human Wants, Havings and Doings, not human Beings.

It is not necessary to hold a traditional view of God to experience the value of this. Don Cupitt, for example, the great English non-realist theologian, used to talk about prayer and worship as a way of simply turning round – another way, perhaps of understanding the Greek word '*metanoia*', or change of mind and attitude, which is usually translated as 'repent'. Don pointed out how when we still ourselves and let go of ourselves in prayer, it is like mindfully turning ourselves around 360 degrees.

When we return to the direction we began, we have been changed and can view things afresh. What we see and experience may not have changed, but we and how we view them has, or can. As we let go in worship of our hurts, our struggles, our failings, and breathe love, peace, and faith back in, so we bend and unbend. In doing so, we also have the opportunity to encounter and imagine alternatives, and renew our connection with love afresh. How, I wonder, might that work for you, and what helps you in that process?

A fourth way into worship might be termed **Looking Out**. This is about giving expression to the experiences of wonder, community and fresh grace that comes with turning round. One of my favourite metaphors for this comes from the Catholic Modernist priest Father George Tyrrell. He said that the Church is called to be '*an art school of divine majesty*', or, if you prefer, an art school of divine love. I love that.

What Tyrrell was saying is that, like an art school, we are the inheritors of ways of seeing and expressing. Part of what we do as 'church', or divine beloved community, is to learn and live into these, just as an artist might learn from great artists who have gone before them and from others in the art school.

This, for me, means that prayer and worship is not a matter of 'anything goes', or everyone can do everything. As in music and other aspects of life, there are disciplines to be learned and wisdom and capability does not always come instantly or easily. Some are also more gifted in some respects. Yet, like an artist in an art school, our calling is not simply to learn from tradition but to help continue it, breathe new life into it, and even, at times, turn it upside down and inside out. This is also about worship as divine playtime, or even divine Mardi Gras.

Another of Don Cupitt's images for the spiritual life is helpful here I think. For he talked of spiritual life as sharing in what he called the fountain of spiritual expression which wells up in our lives and world. This involves being soaked in the rain of metaphors and symbols, myths and stories of our wisdom traditions, and helping to give new form to them. For any fountain, or well, can dry up, or fail to give life, even become toxic, where it is not renewed by the living water of the Spirit. In dancing in the fountain of the Spirit however, we can give expression to ec-static experience and embody energy and imagination for ec-static living. So how are we going with dancing in divine rain?

So how do we bend and unbend?

After today's service there will be an opportunity to share together in responding to what I have offered up, and to share other responses to the invitation to prayer and worship. My hope is that, like the woman in our Gospel story who met Jesus and was transformed, this may enable us better to bend and unbend. For prayer and worship is an invitation to spiritual depth, to the renewal of community, to turning to new life, and to fresh expression.

This is at the heart of any understanding of mission with which we may eventually emerge. For, as Evelyn Underhill put it, the world of faith:

Is no longer a concrete fact proposed for our acceptance and adoration. It is an unfathomable universe which engulfs us, and which lives its own majestic uncomprehended life: and we discover that our careful maps and cherished definitions bear little relation to its unmeasured reality.

In the name of that great mystery of Love which invites and unbends us.

Amen.

For discussion:

- How do you respond to today's Reflection, images & questions?
- With which images related to worship do you most resonate?
- Are there other important images you would want to share?
- In our worship, what encourages us to:
 - look *beyond*?
 - look *around*?
 - look *within*?
 - look *out*?