

Smelling the roses: honouring God in different guises

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 2 October 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

St Francis Tide - Creation 5C

Galatians 6: 12-18; Contemporary Reading: The Saint and the Sultan by Brother Alfred Boonkong, Society of St Francis

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.

"What's in a name?" said Juliet: "That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet."

Shakespeare's famous lines speak of the power of names and designations. He presents Juliet, on her balcony, musing on the rose as a metaphor, in the context of her love for Romeo and the intense, age-old, conflict between two tribes - the Capulets (Juliet's mob) and the Montagues (Romeo's mob). Juliet proclaims that names have no ultimate meaning, other than those which people are willing to give them. As she puts it, in reference to Romeo: *"Tis but thy name that is my enemy.... What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot/ Nor arm, nor face. O be some other name/ Belonging to a man."* We do not, says Juliet here, have to be controlled by our names, by our tribes. We can choose how to live with them, and, in love, transcend them.

Of course, Shakespeare's story of the young lovers ends in tragedy. It is challenging to live with, and beyond, our names, our tribal identities. It can bring misunderstanding, opposition, and much worse. Yet is this not the path of true love, in the fullest dimensions of those words?

Certainly, as we come today to bless our beautiful new interfaith banner, we do so in awareness of that same call to honour the different names of God, and not to let them control and divide us. For in the depth of all the world's great wisdom traditions, true love, divine love, is not simply about reaffirming what is valuable in our tribal identities. True love is also about walking paths of inner and outer transformation together...

Personally, I have walked many paths with people of other faiths for decades. However, over the last five years this has not been so very often, as other pressing concerns have dominated my life. It was therefore a particular delight to be part of hosting our recent International Day of Peace interfaith event. One consequence was that I was also asked to be part of a recording of the SBS Insight program - to be screened on the evening of Tuesday 11 October - on what Australians are feeling about religion today. That covered many things and many people's diverse views and experiences.

It also included some footage from our interfaith gathering, and the inevitable question to me: 'so, if Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the one Way to God, how do you reconcile this with other faiths?' Well, as I tried briefly to say, that begs a number of questions – not least about what we mean by Christ, the Way, and God; and about how we use the Bible and its many different words and stories which relate to people of diverse faith and cultural backgrounds.

Above all however, it brings us back to the nature of love, and to Jesus and his teaching - not least his use of the Samaritan, a person of very different and detested faith, as a model of how we are to live and relate to others. For what is Samaritan, or Jew, or Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, Jain, Wiccan, or any other name? Should not such roses, to a follower of Christ, smell just as sweet?

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not saying that our names for God do not matter at all, nor that all pathways to the divine are equally healthy. Our Buddhist speaker the other evening rightly encouraged us not to attempt to dispense with our particular tribes, or simply try to transcend them. The particular matters. Naivety about that, as Romeo and Juliet discovered, ends in illusion and tragedy. Nor, in my view, can we simply jump out of our particular experiences of love and truth to affirm that everyone else's divine pathways are the same, or even equal.

In that sense, like many Christian theologians today, I would call myself a committed, not a total, pluralist. For surely it is impossible for any of us really to understand much more than some aspects of our own tribal tradition, and perhaps one or two more in which we grow or relate. As a Christian, what I can say is that I do experience and grow in true love in Christ – above all, my Way, Truth and Life, which I commend to others.

Yet I do also see similar true love in people of other faiths, in other roses with other names, and I can therefore learn and grow, in Christ, in relationship with them also. The Uniting Church's main image for relationships with other faiths, as with other aspects of life, is of course that of being '*Pilgrims on the Way*'. Our interfaith banner picks this up beautifully with its central feature. For the different great Faith pathways into God are represented by key symbols of each.

Vitally, these are also woven into the Aboriginal fabrics which surround and host them, representing the foundational spiritualities of the lands, seas and peoples of what we now call Australia. For until all our Faith traditions are truly woven into just relationships with First Nations peoples and spiritualities, all of them will continue to be not only alien in various ways, but they will dry up, as we already see so often around us.

How then, as '*pilgrims on the way*', do we move forward? The symbol in the centre of the banner guides us in this. For, in the figures in the boat on the sea, with the dove as the Spirit of God, it expresses the great vision and calling of *oikumene* – the Greek word which means '*the whole inhabited world*'. The journey of true love may not always be easy, as we may indeed encounter storms and other challenges on the sea of faith together. Yet, in faith, whatever roses we may be, with our particular names, we can travel on, into the wider wholeness of God and the one world, and one true love, that God invites us to share.

How fitting it is to dedicate this banner to that continuing journey as we come to the end of our Season of Creation at St Francis-tide. For, as we heard, from Brother Alfred, in our second, contemporary, reading today, Francis of Assisi was a pioneer in what we now call the interfaith journey, not least in his encounter with the Sultan in 1219.

At this time, we also remember Francis as a great inspiration to ecological praise and sensitivity. Among other elements, we therefore give thanks this morning for the continuing witness of the Franciscan orders, for the encouragement of the *Laudato Si!* movement in the Catholic Church, and for other faith initiatives, not least the work of the Relationships with Other Faiths groups in the Uniting Church and our own Earthweb group. May we continue to enrich, and be enriched by, our relationships with others and by God's Creation as a whole. Or, as Juliet might put it, may many roses bloom.

Our Bible reading today is one of those for the feast of St Francis of Assisi, and it also resonates with, and deepens, our understanding of true love in our relationships with others. It is, after all, from that great letter of St Paul to the people of Galatia which is such a powerful declaration of the freedom of the Spirit of God.

The context is the attempt by some of the earliest Christians to restrict faith to those who kept the traditional laws and expectations of their Judaeo background. It is not enough to be full of the fruits of the Spirit, they said. You may be full of love and gifted by God. You may bring new life and hope. All of that does not ultimately matter if you do not keep our laws, our styles of life, the things which work for us, even though they are alien, and even destructive, to you.

Get the picture? Sadly, we do not have to look very far in the wider Christian, or other faith, communities, to see similar injunctions today, do we? In today's scripture reading, one upfront issue is circumcision, for those assigned male. Now that may not be the main issue for conservative Christians today. Nonetheless, two thousand years on, some still seem to be more than a little hung up on what genitals should look like.

St Paul however is absolutely clear that that really does not matter to God – seriously? What kind of God is that?! Instead, Paul encourages us to see that what truly matters is living in the spirit of Jesus: not just reciting Jesus' name, still less keeping rules which may indeed have affected Jesus' own body but which are ultimately utter distractions from the path of divine true love.

What matters are not external marks of faith, says St Paul, but our participation in the Spirit of God. '*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision*', he writes, '*is anything, but a new creation is everything.*' Or, to put it in contemporary language, 'neither gay nor straight, neither trans or cis gender, is anything; but a new creation, a new set of relationships, is everything.'

Or, in interfaith terms, ultimately, neither calling on the name of Jesus, or Buddha, or Vishnu, or the Prophet, or not calling on them, or anyone else, is anything; but a new and deeper relationship with God as Love is everything.' Our prayer together this morning is therefore that, as we bless this banner, we enter more deeply into that relationship: walking, as St Paul says, in peace and mercy with all who will follow such a rule – whatever the name.

This pathway is not always easy. Those who journey must be prepared for challenge, illusion and disillusionment, conflict and even pain. That is part of what St Paul is highlighting when he writes that '*I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.*' For if we walk the way of Jesus, we walk the way of the cross. Few, if any, of us may exhibit the outward signs of crucifixion, like the famous stigmata on the body of Francis of Assisi and others. All of us however will bear such signs in some way in our lives and being, as we walk the way to resurrection, to new creation.

Let me, in closing, return to Shakespeare, and this time to Romeo. Unbeknown to Juliet at first, Romeo was listening to her words on the balcony. In a typical gesture of a romantic young man, he responds, proclaiming that:

*"I take thee at thy word
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised.
Henceforth I never will be Romeo."*

"I'll be new baptised" – ponder that.

Shakespeare is being quite deliberate in that metaphor. Later, Romeo adds that his name is *"hateful to myself"* because it is an enemy to Juliet. All of that is quite understandable. As we grow in divine love, it may be that we have to step aside, at least for a while, from the tribes, families, and other mobs, to which we are connected, and which have formed us.

That is what I see happening in terms of religion in Australia today, and part of the heart of what many contributors to the SBS Insight program shared. The different roses of received Faith traditions no longer smell so sweet to so many. They have proven full of thorns, bring such little comfort, and sometimes enhance, never mind fail to assuage, life's pain. In our own sufferings, and those of the wider world, we are also left with profound existential questions about the value of religion at all, and the meaning of God. Our spiritual journeys – personal, as a faith community, and with others – cannot be immune from such questions and struggles.

The banner we bless today is therefore no more helpful than circumcision or uncircumcision if it does not lead to new creation. If, unlike Romeo and Juliet, we are to avoid tragedy, we have, like Francis to learn from others and journey together into a deeper, fuller love than that which have so far known.

In our own day, this means not only listening, learning, and walking in love with people of other faith traditions, but also with those for whom no faith tradition means much, or what it does mean, is full of thorns and pain.

For, as St Paul proclaimed, and Francis also lived, the ultimate reality is in sharing the compassionate heart of God, in the pain-love of all Creation.

In the name of Christ, in the other names of God, and in the nameless names beyond.

Amen.