

Blooming with Justice and Joy

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 December 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 3A

Contemporary Reading: “The Annunciation” by Alla Renee Bozarth; Luke 1: 39-54

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

Christmas-time is so often a confluence of loss and gain. So many of us find that good and tough memories are tangled up. My parents died a year ago this weekend, just as a new child was conceived in my immediate family: a child who will therefore be a new gift among us this Christmas. Yet it is hardly the first time that death and birthing have been entwined. Reflecting on that helps me better understand today’s Gospel and not least Mary’s extraordinary cry of justice, and of joy.

As Alla Renee Bozarth brilliantly expresses it in her poem *Annunciation*, it is a cry of subversive angelic power. No wonder the three large ‘queer’ angels we will shortly welcome from Lismore’s *LightnUp* project are entitled *Courage*, *Compassion*, and *Joy*. For, as Lismore’s wonderful community artist Jyllie Jackson has identified, *Courage*, *Compassion* and *Joy* are core life-giving elements, not only to *Queer Pride*. They also, vitally, flow out of the Gospel and *Magnificat* of Mary, and, as Jyllie suggests to us, they are at the core of what the *Way of Jesus*, and our particular community, is and can be...

I used to think of my parents as joy and justice (which is pretty much courage and compassion combined). For justice and joy, like my parents, are indeed intimately entwined. A deep concern for justice was certainly powerfully planted in me by my father. I recall one hugely formative moment in my life when I was a small child. My sister and I were taken on a shopping trip in our little rural town and became quite argumentative with one another. At one point, and not to my credit, I pushed her in frustration. She, typically, made a meal of it. Then, to try to stop her over the-top screaming, I tried to give her threepence – actually quite a large amount in those days for us little kids.

My father was absolutely furious: not that he was really bothered about that typically sibling rivalry spat. ‘*You must never, ever*’, he said, ‘*pay anyone off for their pain or frustrations – ever.*’ Those words were seared into my soul. They come out of my father’s deep experience of family struggles, not least appalling rural and working class poverty, and the influence of his sisters, my strong aunts. For full expression of pain, recognition of it, and justice, are simply non-negotiables for genuine human, never mind Christian, behaviour. Anything else is grace and reconciliation without cost, which is not really grace at all.

Of course, my father, for all his proto-feminist chivalry, did have some things to learn about justice himself, as we all do. He took a little while, for instance, to catch up with the rest of my family with issues like the ordination of women, and he probably also surprised his younger self by his heartfelt affirmation of his transgender child.

I guess my mother was an ideal balance in that, not that my father was short on playful creativity and joyfulness. In his later years, he literally let his clowning persona out. My mother however was the well of our deepest family joy. Indeed, Joy might have been her middle name. Among the many beautiful things she nurtured was a treasure house of books of spiritual delight and joy. She also loved particular posters, including one which above all reflected her life. This was a famous saying of St Francis de Sales: *'bloom where you are planted'*.

Now I used to struggle with that saying. Much as I feel deeply for the people and places I have known, I know that I am an itinerant. My favourite prayer is therefore the pilgrim prayer of Brendan the Navigator, not least perhaps because the Celtic blood in me always longs for the soil and sustenance which gave me birth.

However, in some respect, transitioning has repeatedly been a core part of my life and calling. I know that I am not alone in this. Most of us, on this continent, and in our changing capitalist world, have made and/or have to make transitions. Spiritually speaking, many of our lives involve how to give those changes meaning: becoming pilgrims, and not passengers, still less jetsam, on the way.

Of course *'bloom where you are planted'* can have potentially conservative uses: keeping people in their place so to speak. However it is actually far more radical. It certainly did not mean, for my mother, simply being content with our lot: without, for example, struggling for greater life and justice. Rather, as we see in Mary in our Gospel reading today, and in her child Jesus, it meant living into and out of justice and joy wherever we are and whatever we face.

In my mother's case, she spent decades afflicted with terrible rheumatoid arthritis, for which she tried every suggested 'cure' under the sun: an affliction which left her joints, fingers and feet permanently distorted. Eleven years ago she then had a major stroke, which left her bedbound and incapacitated down one whole side of her body, and which gradually wasted her away. Yet, throughout all that, she knew and lived joy. For through her faith she knew that deep truth, the Advent-Christmas truth, expressed by the poet-priest Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, writing out of the appalling miseries of the First World War – the abiding truth that:

*Peace does not mean the end of all our striving.
Joy does not mean the drying of our tears;
Peace is the power that comes to souls arriving.
Up to the light where God Himself appears.*

This is at the heart of our Gospel reading today, and Mary's extraordinary song, and it is a continuing, and vital, message for our times.

How many of us, I wonder, carry griefs and losses, some long lasting, and some also anticipatory, but also quite real – fears, for example, of pain, loss, and death itself. This is also a communal reality. At a recent secular conference of women in leadership, I found no one disagreed when I suggested that we were all suffering trauma as a society, on top of hideous trauma some of us bear - collective trauma from such things as the pandemic, climate change, the ravages of late capitalist economics, and collapse of faith in traditional institutions, including, in many places, democracy and international solidarity and peacemaking.

Whatever some Christian preachers may say, the Gospel does not have any simple answers to our traumas. Yet, like faith for my arthritic mother - and for my father in his background of poverty and marginalisation, it does offer pathways to live through them, blooming where we are planted among them. This is what Mary proclaims in her Magnificat.

Who exactly was Mary, and what kinds of challenge and trauma did she face? We do not know, but scholars and spiritual writers today continue to ask telling questions. Was she, for example, the survivor of rape and/or other abuse, perpetrated by a Roman soldier or someone powerful in Judaeon society? Does the Virgin Birth controversy, in that way, cover that up? Certainly, grouped as she is with the other women named in Jesus' genealogy, she was almost certainly someone, like those foremothers, who was sexually or racially dubious in some way.

My sense is that she was probably not so much Judaeon 'blue blood', as a woman with Samaritan and/or Syro-Phoenician, or other minority ethnic blood - which would help explain Jesus' particular strong expression of solidarity with such groups. Today, she might well be seen as an Indigenous woman of the land.

Coupled with the deeply uncertain biological circumstances of Jesus' conception, Mary can thus be seen to represent those at the worst end of many evils: racism; sexism; social, economic, and cultural oppressions; and, quite likely, sexual and other abuse and trauma. In Luke's understanding, she also had a powerful anticipatory awareness of the likely forthcoming trials her child would face, and the sufferings she would bear with him in that journey of faith. Yet, instead of being crushed or deferential to her fate and the powers that oppressed, she not only gives birth to her child but does so with incredible strength. Truly the queer angels of Courage, Compassion and Joy are powerfully manifest in her.

For Mary, '*bloom where you are planted*' certainly did not mean '*put up with your lot*'. No wonder her child, Jesus, did not behave like that either! Rather, it means give birth to God/courage-compassion-justice-joy - or as one of our Advent carols has it, give birth to your angel potential - right where you are, wherever you are. Like all of us, Mary could not go back to wherever she may have come from, or, unlike those of us who are more privileged, move to another space she could choose. She simply had to have faith and journey through that space she found herself in, empowered by the justice and joy that flows from our deepest being and from the examples of those others who live out of it and into it.

To take up the imagery of Alla Renee Bozarth's poem '*Annunciation*', Mary broke the canon laws of how she was supposed to live. She saw the angel's wings calling her beyond the frame and she began to lift her own skirts to dance and sing new life, resurrection, for herself and others. Instead of living in someone else's frame and under their law, she began to paint her own picture, and became an icon of revolutionary love for others. Literally and in other ways, she above all had faith to give birth, to the divine presence and power within her.

Alla Renee Bozarth is explicit about the transformative such angelic response and prophetic action has on others. When anyone gives birth to the divine within them, especially a person on the margins, then others dance and begin to give birth themselves, especially the marginalised and traumatised who see themselves in those who have stepped outside the frame, empowered by that release of courage, compassion and joy. That, by the way, is part of Alla Renee Bozarth's story, as one of the famous Philadelphia Eleven, in 1974 episcopally ordained beyond the then frame of patriarchal canon law, changing the Anglican Communion and wider Church and world for ever. In here, as with Mary, and my parents in their way, divine, angelic faith was not simply affirmed but embodied and lived.

So, that is our challenge – the uncomfortable call of the queer angels we will see embodied here – the challenge of Courage, Compassion (Justice) and Joy: will we go where angels fear to tread? Will we ignore the siren calls to mere comfort and respectability, or to despair and cynicism, and instead attend, like Mary, to the deepest promptings of our soul?

Will we follow the angels' wings and step outside the frame? Will we lift our literal and metaphorical skirts and dance justice and joy into our world? Will we seek, and become, kaleidoscopic icons of justice and joy, we not only speaking of God, but giving birth to divinity itself? Giving birth to the divine takes many forms, some of them yet to be unveiled, so it requires our attention, prayer and mutual support, and we will express that differently – just as Mary's song of Magnificat can be sung in different forms: as, for example, in our traditional heritage hymn with which we conclude our service today, or in the contemporary non-binary canticle version we will use next week. Yet, we are united by the angels call to justice and joy, in all our diversity of sharing, when we become with Mary, *theotokoi*, God-bearers.

A final note for today.... Receiving angels: that comes at a cost, doesn't it? - as we see with Mary, and with Jesus.

The two lights of Christmas and Easter are, after all, inextricably linked. As we see in the Bible, and experience in many different ways, there often has to be death if there is to be life through new birth. We need to bear that in mind as we seek to move forward as a community, as well as in our own lives.

Whilst we may honour our pasts, our good memories as well as griefs and losses, we must open ourselves to the future - for it is from there, and from the deepest parts of our selves, that new light breaks forth. In this, as with Mary, new life comes to birth.

In the name of the One who creates, liberates, and dances us into new life. Amen.