

# “The Veil Opens”

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 January 2023

A Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Epiphany 1 A

**Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 3: 13-17; Contemporary Reading:  
“The Veil Opens” by Charles Anthony Silvestri.**

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

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## Introduction

I had intended starting this reflection on a lighter note but Silvestri's poem immediately takes us into sensitive areas of human experience. What connects the poem with the account of Jesus baptism is the experience they both describe *of the spiritual world breaking through into human consciousness at a particular time or a particular place*. As Silvestri says there are certain times in our lives, particularly associated with birth and death, when people are more responsive to the reality of the spiritual world around us. The spirit is not in some far away heaven but very close to us only separated by a veil. There are some places where this separation is very thin. They are often identified by indigenous people as sacred sites or any place where people intuitively sense a presence.

Many people describe this experience at Uluru and the Scottish island of Iona has often been described as “*a thin place*”, where the spirit within can connect with the spirit beyond us. This is the deep longing of our true self.

There are other times when we sense the spirit in other people or there is a collective experience of the presence as in worship.

## The Baptism

So with this particular lens of the veil opening I want to look at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. It is a profound moment – this is when Jesus of Nazareth becomes the Christ, the “*anointed one*”. The wonderful image on the front of your liturgy sheet brilliantly captures the significance of this moment. This reproduction is from a window in St George's cathedral in Jerusalem. It communicates a sense of the cosmic Christ, the intense white light resting on him and the great cosmos arching around. The scripture says it was the Holy Spirit descending like a dove (it's a simile; we don't need to take it too literally). His outstretched arms foreshadow the crucifixion.

This is one of those moments when the veil opens and we get a glimpse into the spiritual world. The scripture says that “*just as he was coming up out of the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him.*” Jesus saw the spirit and heard the voice but there is no mention that it was apparent to anyone else who may have been present. In the Gospel of John the account is a little different it is much more focused on the experience of John the Baptist.

It is he who sees the spirit descending and hears the voice from heaven assuring him that this is the one who was expected, who will baptise, not with water but the Holy Spirit. This is the moment John is convinced that Jesus is the messiah.

When I went to Israel/Palestine in 2017 with the UCA /Jewish Board of Deputies study tour we had a trip to the Jordan River to the purported site of Jesus' baptism. There was an open air chapel with an altar and steps leading down to a very sad looking creek. At this point the river is terribly degraded and highly polluted by run-off and sewage from the villages along its banks. The flows are hugely diminished by Israelis extracting water for agriculture further north. Nevertheless, there was a religious community gathered on the steps preparing for baptisms in a little area marked out by floating buoys. Apparently, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes in full immersion baptism. The river was a far different scene from the photographs of the Australian Light Horse crossing the Jordan on pontoon bridges and occupying the valley in 1918.

However, we had a rendezvous there with a young Australian, Gidon Bromberg, the founder of Ecopeace (an off-shoot of Friends of the Earth). His purpose was to clean-up and restore the river, in the process building constructive working relations between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanian authorities on the other side of the river. Already considerable progress had been made. We had been in touch with him by zoom for about a year.

Gidon arrived with a group of Palestinian teenager volunteers from the nearby town of Jericho. The spirit shone through in their youthful enthusiasm for the project and inspired us as well! This meeting was a special moment where past, present and future meet. The veil opens in unexpected ways. Those hopes and aspirations have continued. Recent updates indicate water-harvesting has reduced, water flows have increased and water toxicity has decreased. A little glimmer of hope in an intractable situation which is set to get worse with this new Israeli government - with members who believe Jews are entitled to all the land from the Jordan to the sea.

## The Veil Opens

We do a big jump now to the poem "The Veil Opens". There's an important background story to this. Just a few weeks ago a friend rang me to enthusiastically share her experience of a concert by the Sydney Philharmonia Choir. A new work by American composer Eric Whitaker who was actually present to conduct the performance of "*The Sacred Veil*". She sent me a copy of the poem by Charles Antony Silvestri, which is the opening section of the work.

It was written in response to the death of Silvestri's 35 year old wife, Julie, from cancer leaving two young children. He sent the poem to his friend Eric Whitaker who immediately sensed that he could set it to music and it could be the seed for a full-length work. It could be a therapeutic activity to work on this project together.

The result is "*The Sacred Veil*" for choir, piano and cello. A work of immense mystical intensity. (I haven't experienced the power of a live performance but I have found various versions on YouTube. Whitaker himself says it's important to follow the words with the music.)

It explores, through several sections the transcendent journey of Silvestri's relationship, the feelings and spiritual insights the poet gains accompanying his wife to the moment of letting go. The central image of the whole work is the separating veil between the physical and spiritual worlds. He proposes that the spiritual world is very close but we don't know it unless something specifically points us to it.

*Whenever there is birth or death,  
The sacred veil between the worlds  
Grows thin and opens slightly up,*

It's very hard for us to conceive of the spiritual world. We have images of heaven as gardens and cities of gold; we tend to think of it in physical terms but it has no substance, not bound by time or space. For Silvestri the other side of the veil is simply "*Eternity*". Our loved ones who have crossed the threshold are simply there in "*rapt anticipation*", or "*in weary gratitude*" they stand so close, right here."

We can't pretend to know the reality of the spiritual world. Words can only take us so far but music can take us further. Perhaps music can give us a taste, or even an actual experience' of the spiritual world in a transcendent, uplifting moment. There are long traditions of heavenly choirs of angels and the music of the spheres on the other side. By contrast we live in "*a fragile fleeting world*". The mystics affirm that the spiritual world is our true home; it's where we have come from and where we will return. We have a short span in this body. As Wordsworth says in one of my favourite poems:

*Not in entire forgetfulness  
And not in utter nakedness  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God who is our home.*

As Matthew Fox and other spiritual teachers have said – we are spiritual beings having a physical experience. What we do with this earthly life is up to us, we have the freedom to choose. We're only here for a short time, so we need to be focused here, present in this world to make the most of it but we also need the refreshing, strengthening connection with spirit.

Experience of letting go.

Silvestri's words and Whitaker's music take us into the deeply human experience of letting go. Towards the end of the work is a section called "*You rise, I fall*" – "*Your struggle ends as mine begins*". Then the final lyrical section – Child of Wonder:

*Child of wonder, child of sky  
Time to end your voyage, time to die  
Child of sorrow, child of rain  
There is no tomorrow, no more pain.  
Child of mourning, child of night  
Turn your silvered sail towards the light.  
Welcome home my child, welcome home.*

Accompanying someone close through this time of transition is something I know many of us have experienced. I had the privilege of being with my soul mate and his two sisters through the final weeks and last days of terminal cancer, he was heavily medicated and semi-conscious most of the time. We took turns being with him; but one morning we were all there when he woke with unusual lucidity, very excited, his eyes bright and shining. He insisted we get pen and paper to write down what he wanted to tell us. There was something he wanted us to know. We got pen and paper and stood in rapt attention around the bed ready to write.

He couldn't put the experience into words. He simply said – "*the gate*" and that was all. We questioned him, trying to draw it out but he retreated and lapsed back into semi-consciousness. The veil closed!

The main point today is that the spirit is always there, always available, very close even when we don't know it, when our focus is intently on earthly things.

There are special places and times when the veil is thin and we sense the spiritual world close.

We are privileged to share special moments in life like someone close crossing the threshold or the wondrous birth of a child "*trailing clouds of glory*".

We are blessed with special moments of insight and deep connection which we can hold onto in the rhythms of daily life.