

Let go, let grow, let glitter

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 29 January 2023

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones and Rev Dr Josephine Inkpın

Epiphany 4A

Contemporary Reading: from *Do I Stay Christian?* By Brian McLaren;
Matthew 5:1-12

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

PENNY

I have to say, after that reading from Brian McClaren, I am relieved to see most of us are still here and not already out the door! As Jo mentioned last week, the colonising roots of Christianity run deep, and there are many reasons for feeling it might be better not to start from here. Yet here we are, and today with perhaps the kernel of Jesus's own teaching, the so-called Beatitudes – some of the best known and loved words of Jesus, which Gandhi used in his community every day. Why was that Jo?

JOSEPHINE

Well, I understand that Gandhi read from the whole *Sermon on the Mount* morning and evening for forty years, because he found there an attitude of love and non-violence that resonated with his own life and practice. The words had contemporary relevance for him, as they answered a hunger for spiritual pathways that made sense of political realities and helped nourishing his longing for what Jesus called 'righteousness'.

PENNY

Faith, theology, spiritual practice that feeds our hunger – now that interests me, and lies behind our Pathways Plan's core emphasis on faith, specifically contemporary faith. Some conservatives say that liberals and progressives are too defensive and reductionist in this: asking, as it were, the question 'what will Jones (the so-called average person) – what will Jones – swallow?' Well, my name is Jones, so I think I can say this with authority: my issue is actually that *'I am Jones and I want to know what is there to eat.'*

Isn't that really the question of so many of us in this country, and the wider world today? We want to know what there is to eat: what can feed us spiritually. For, as you were saying last week Jo, a great deal of what came to Sydney on those boats in 1788 was the stale bread of European Christianity.

So, as Brian McLaren asks, what's next for us? Or shall we just join the general exodus from the churches?

JOSEPHINE

No, we don't have to do that! But staying must mean growing into something new. That is Brian McLaren's invitation to us, following Jesus, who also called the people of his day to a deeper spirituality:

Rather than leaving Christianity, we can stay defiantly, intentionally, consciously, and resolutely refuse to leave—and with equal intention and resolution, we can refuse to comply with the status quo. We can occupy Christianity with a different way of being Christian.ⁱ

'Occupying Christianity with a different way of being Christian.' How might we do that? Well, it certainly requires resources - and we are in the middle of a planned giving campaign that can help with some of that - but it also requires giving of things like intellect and energy and time by all of us. It is also about much permission giving at various levels - an allowing if you like; a letting be, that gives some space for the largeness of God.

PENNY

'*The largeness of God*' - that is what Jesus was all about, wasn't it? Too much religion has been about making God small, cutting life and its mystery down to a manageable size. Yet, Jesus, as in the Beatitudes today, seems to be about a spacious overturning of expectations, making room for a bigger vision of life. So what do the Beatitudes mean to us today? I suggest we might explore them under three headings: Letting Go, Letting Grow and Letting Glitter! I know you'll like the sound of the last of those Jo...

JOSEPHINE

I do like the sound of that! Actually all three headings - but I'm glad you're beginning with letting go, because that is a vital key. For developing contemporary faith certainly runs hand in hand with seeking justice, which we are also emphasising in our Pathways Plan. Indeed, if we had read the Beatitudes in Luke's version today, we would have heard Jesus say, '*blessed are the poor*'. I don't think we should dodge the priorities of justice to which that points us. Yet, in Matthew's version, Jesus' words '*blessed are the poor in spirit*', adds another dimension. That is surely something to do with letting go of our inner need to have things as I or we want them. If we can do that, then as individuals, and as a community together, we open up much more space for new things to emerge. For example, some of us may sometimes see ourselves as 'ageing' in Brian McLaren's terms, but that's definitely not a reason to be 'regressive'. Is that what you had in mind in suggesting 'Letting go' as a key Jesus message for today?

PENNY

Yes, I think three of the beatitudes - the blessing of the poor in spirit, the merciful and the peacemakers - all have in common an invitation to let go of seeking to be right, and creating more room for the in-filling of the Spirit. So, when it comes to travelling new pathways, I think that means making intentional changes to our lives, to our spiritual practices, to our church building, in order to make more space for that. It seems to me, for example, that one aspect of this is that, when our doors are open during the week, most of the spiritually hungry people who come in are looking, above all, for space - somewhere that is quiet, comfortable (Des's armchairs have been so appreciated!) and empty of clutter so they can attend to their soul. That is a little like the way many younger people furnish their homes.

For, as a spiritual director, I find that contemporary human beings tend to be seeking spaciousness rather than more information. So, maybe we need less not more in our community spaces, including some well funded changes to the interior of our building and carefully curated opportunities for spiritual care, of which something like Reflect and Connect is representative. Being a place for peacemakers – which is much more than just conflict resolution – and for those seeking to grow in mercy is also about offering opportunities for wholeness of mind, body and spirit. That also means curating space and comfort for bodies in particular to move and grow.

JOSEPHINE

That sounds like 'letting grow' too? When I hear the Beatitudes, those about pure in heart and the meek strike me strongly. Who comes to mind in that, do you think? Children and the childlike are certainly among them and that is cause for active reflection. For I am very conscious that according to our latest National Church Life Survey something like 80% or more of us agree that our present provision for children and young people is not adequate. While recognising that our city centre setting makes us a less likely setting for young families, the Synod's call for us to attend to the first third of life is therefore something we cannot ignore.

Nor should we. For as Jesus' words remind us, the pure of heart enable us to 'see God'. The capacity of the young for wonder, for optimistic engagement with the issues of the day, and their yearning for a better world, should all alert us to their enormous potential to help us grow a living faith. Younger people also have a particular care for the planet, as our engagement, for example, with the Blockade movement showed us last year. That is part of what Jesus meant by the 'meek'. Jesus wasn't talking about shrinking from challenges or being complicit with injustice. Jesus was talking about the opposite of being 'mighty'. So 'the meek' Jesus was referring to were humble in that root sense of that word. In other words, they were those who were in touch with the humus, the earth. As I remarked last week, our theology should be careful about taking us up steps towards the sky. Instead we need to attend deeply to developing practices of faith that connect us to the humble and to the humus, to the earth itself.

PENNY

Yes, that is surely about better theology and sharing ways of offering that across a broader platform. Brian McClaren is right - isn't he? - when he says: those of us who stay Christian have a phenomenal opportunity to bring the best resources of the Christian tradition to the side of those who are trying to create a new and better future. We have no control over people who will try to bend Christianity to preserve the evils of the status quo. But it's also true that no one can stop us from using the many resources of our tradition to bring the kind of change we need into our world. I guess that is part of what I mean by 'let's glitter'. We have to stop worrying about others and get on with living the change, living the life, and offering living bread.

That was what you and I discovered last year, I think, in developing Queer Theology teaching. The time for apologetics is past. If Christianity is to be meaningful, for us and for others, then those of us who still find life-giving food in Jesus have to be pro-active. We have to be on the front foot: celebrating the faith, learning, and spiritual possibilities thrown up by the diversity and energy of the contemporary world in which we live.

JOSEPHINE

All of which takes us, in conclusion, to the mourning and the persecuted among Jesus' blessed ones. As we've reflected upon a little this past week, Black Lives still do not Matter enough. We have to 'pay the rent' - for example by supporting the vital theological work of Gary Deverell and Anne Patel-Grey and the School of Indigenous Studies. Yet financial support is only a tiny part of a larger pathway that we advanced last week with our Walking Together meeting. Reading First Nations theologies, engaging with First Nations people around us, and responding to First Nations voices is fundamental to how we can transform faith today. For transformation is part of what those who struggle can offer us, as we can see also in queer theology and the voices of queer people of faith. Such struggles generate energy and oblige us to discover new ways of being and doing.

PENNY

Yes, that is indeed how one of the world's leading rainbow theologians, Patrick Cheng, describes the invitation to reshape and live a life-giving contemporary faith for all:

"It is (he says) about seeing things in a different light and reclaiming voices and sources that previously have been ignored, silenced or discarded. It is proudly asserting a worldview for which LGBT+ people have been historically taunted, condemned, beaten, tortured and killed." ⁱⁱ

And don't we all need that? Don't we all need theology that shimmers and glitters: not just for the sake of those writing from those places of mourning and persecution but for all our sakes. For that is a blessing for everyone.

JOSEPHINE

Indeed; in the coming weeks, and beyond, let's let go, and let grow, and let's glitter!

In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen

ⁱ From his book: *Do I Stay a Christian?*

ⁱⁱ 2 Patrick Cheng *Radical Love* 2011