

Bearing suffering

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Friday, 7 April 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Good Friday A

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

Bearing suffering in the personal

Readings: Luke 22: 39-46; Psalm 22 (Jim Cotter version)

Years ago I presided at many funerals at the busy Saltwell crematorium in Gateshead in my native north east of England. The bluff chief steward there used to rate clergy as either SP (short players), his favourites, or LP (long players), who would mess up his schedules by extended prayers and homilies. I was in the first group, and, like the chief steward, with a group of mourners, would therefore, sometimes be left waiting for other funerals to finish. One priest colleague was a particularly notorious LP, mainly as he would attempt to solve the problem of suffering at every funeral. Several times I would therefore be greeted warmly by the chief steward, muttering under his breath: *'we've been back in the trenches of the first world war again this morning'*!

I hope we won't feel that we are, or should be, back in the trenches this morning! Our liturgy, not least our readings, eloquently express the pain of human suffering. We can identify closely with the struggles of Jesus and the psalmist, of which we have just heard, and, in the next two readings to follow, the associated griefs of Jesus' mother, the other women, and the beloved disciple, standing near the cross. These touch our own hearts, and recall for us our own personal pain and the suffering we share in those we love or have loved.

We do not come for answers to the so-called *'problem of suffering'*, certainly not in philosophical terms. We come to name them, if only in the silence of our hearts, in prayer, perhaps in tears, and in ritual. For, as the writer Dorothy L. Sayers said, *'Christianity does not give us a supernatural explanation for suffering, but it does give us a supernatural use for suffering.'* We hang our own personal pain on the cross with Jesus and share our suffering with his companions standing by the cross, and with one another. In this, even in deep anguish, we let go, and let God.

Bearing suffering in our close relationships

Readings: John 19: 23-30; from *The Mother* by Sylvia Sands; Mark 14: 18-21 & 27-30

In recent times, we as a faith community have acknowledged the importance of our deep traumas, typically arising from various experiences of betrayal, abuse, and violence in our lives and wider communities. None of us are free from the effects of trauma, and all of us have been, or still are, in different ways, perpetrators and/or survivors of trauma. Sometimes it is those seemingly close to us who hurt us most, including those who hold silence about trauma and the need to address it. For, as Martin Luther King said about the traumas of racial and economic violence, *'in the end, we remember not the words (or actions) of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'*

Happily, albeit often pushed hard by legal and wider community pressure, Churches have done good work in recent years in addressing issues of safety, particularly for children. More slowly, Christians and others are coming to recognise the need for trauma-informed life, care and community. Part of this is simply acknowledging the pain which often can never be fixed, but which, by God's grace, can be eased and transformed. That was part of the purpose of our recent Trauma workshop, entitled *'Resurrecting Wounds'*, and this work will continue among us in the days ahead. It is also part of the reason for our Holy Saturday gathering tomorrow, when we hold a space, between violence and new life, between crucifixion and resurrection. That is part of what we are invited to share in this morning too.

Whereas the story of Peter's betrayal represents yet another aspect of the trauma endured by Christ, the story of penitent thief, crucified with Jesus, speaks to us of the possibilities of restorative justice. This is not about cheap grace and easy forgiveness, but about costly offering and honest, deep love. In this, even in the midst of our own betrayals and enduring hurts, we can find a place to be. As the poet Sylvia Sands says, *'from a place of integrity and agony'*, God will never stop loving you and me.

Bearing suffering in our nation

Readings: Luke 23: 32-43; from *The Thief* by Sylvia Sands; Mark: 14 53-65; *Bora Ring* – by Judith Wright

The recent highly publicised anti-transgender attacks have made many more people aware of the struggles of many gender diverse people in our nation. In fact, these are only the tip of the iceberg of daily rejections, lack of understanding, rights and empowerment, and marginalisation faced by too many gender diverse people. The right-wing Christian attacks upon our own community and others have also highlighted the way in which LGBTIQ+ and affirming people of faith are also vulnerable. Such pain is replicated by the experiences of others in these lands now called Australia, and especially among First Nations people. As a fine Aboriginal professor once put it, in the face of deep, entrenched and endemic violence, for First Nations people it is typically *'every day, another fight'*. Metaphorically, but in very tangible terms, crucifixion is lived out in so many communities as well as individual lives in this nation.

In her poem *Bora Ring*, Judith expresses the loss and challenges of culture and identity evocatively, and touches on their deep spiritual and theological significance. For *'the rider's heart halts'*, she says, *'at a sightless shadow, and unsaid word that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse, the fear as old as Cain.'*

This is what we wrestle with in our communal lives: far, far more than placing a tick against the proposal for a Voice to Parliament, agreement with sexual and gender diverse rights, or other vital but ultimately surface causes. We face deep down issues and forces of power, exclusion, disconnection and alienation: what the Christian tradition calls sin, so much more than individual actions, entwined in our systems of thought and perception, social and economic structures, and cultural and psychological lives.

Call it what you like: today's fancy words are often intersectional solidarity. Good Friday recalls us to our one humanity. That is part of the meaning of '*the Son of Man*', or '*the truly Human One*', that elusive title Jesus uses for himself. This is about the corporate, communal, identity of the whole of humankind, represented by, and embodied in, Jesus as the Christ figure. As Christ dies, God reveals the systemic lies of power and violence. In the cross, as the poet Mary Crowther writes, Christ '*unknowing (and that is the agony)*' bears the unknown '*to the mystery at the place of prayer*', and thereby brings the promise of resurrection.

Bearing suffering in our world

Readings: *The place of prayer* by Mary Crowther; Matthew 27: 15-26 ; *The Coming* by RS Thomas

The Guardian newspaper has recently published exposés of its own historic collusion with, and considerable benefit from, slavery. This highlights much more than yet another oppressive aspect of historic British power. It also shatters the illusions of any claims to righteous purity by liberals and radicals in Britain, and by extension elsewhere. For, particularly under its earlier title of the Manchester Guardian, The Guardian has for 200 years been a vital voice of the British liberal conscience, beginning with its response to the Peterloo Massacre and anti-Corn Laws agitation. It fought hard, with others, for the end of the official slave trade, and for so many progressive causes since. Yet, for decades, its owners and its own finances were intimately entwined with slavery, particularly through the US slave based cotton industry which brought such prosperity to Manchester and elsewhere, and helped fund British progressive developments as well as the British Empire.

The Guardian's revelations illustrate the uncomfortable truth of almost all prosperous people in every society, both historically and across the world today: that our wealth and comfort, including our freedom to exercise progressive views, rests on often deeply troubling circumstances beyond us. I well remember personally for example my first trip to the Philippines, when the World Council of Churches was keen to take me with other Australians to a particularly obnoxious coal mine. For whilst it contributed to Australian national wealth, it exploited the local people and destroyed their environment. This is often the reality of much 'free' trade from whose fruits we still benefit today.

The great Christian theologians would not be surprised. Although they expressed it in words sometimes alien to us today, and also would not join all the dots, they were clear that all humanity is tied up together in sin and grace. Thus Augustine of Hippo and Jean Calvin spoke of humanity as a '*massa damnata*', or condemned crowd, because we simply cannot separate ourselves from failings and evil. Traditionally, such an understanding was framed in ways which seem to us today to be destructive. Yet the essential point remains. None of us can escape the structural sin and evils which trouble our world. All of us, in some sense, like the crucifying crowd, have blood on us or our children. Yet the even deeper, and infinitely liberating truth, is that God is in the midst of all this mess, and sets us free.

Bearing suffering of the planet

Readings: Matthew 27: 45-54; *The Anger of the Earth* by Sylvia Sands

'St Francis, they say, that intuitive dreamer, went too far.' The poet Sylvia Sands reflected in her poem *'The Anger of the Earth'* how, unlike St Francis, we typically separate the story of Christ's crucifixion from the journey of our planet Earth. Even when they/we can see social and political connections, in my experience too many, even very liberal, Christians struggle to see the person or passion of Christ in ecological terms. Yet, as Sylvia Sands affirmed, if many felt St Francis had lost the plot in believing that many caves were created by an earthquake when Jesus died, *'All lovers of the earth know Saint Francis was right.'* The suffering we recall, and offer up afresh, on Good Friday is the suffering of all creation. The redemption it is part of also involves the redemption of all creation.

St Paul expressed this powerfully in that wonderful passage at the end of chapter 8 of his letter to the Ephesians, when he spoke, in speaking of Christ's redemption, about how *'the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers the pains of labour.'* This holistic understanding of salvation and of God's grace in all of creation is vital for us to reclaim. In our Passion Gospel readings today it is also expressed so very powerfully, if somewhat melodramatically, in Matthew's account of how as Jesus died, the earth shook, rocks split, tombs opened, and other extraordinary natural and more than natural features occurred. For the ancients, and for much of Christian tradition, there was not our very modern distinction between the human and wider environment. What happens to one happens to all.

In Sylvia Sands poem, the anger and suffering we feel at the crucifixion of our planet is powerfully articulated. Yet the poet says more. As they felt the immense anger and sorrow, they readied for an explosion against humanity and its *'callous cruelty'* and reckless exploitation. Beyond crucifixion however, indeed within it, says the poet, lies redemption. In her words: *'Seven words stopped me. Seven words spoken from his cross.'*

The Earth also speaks to us, the poet says, on this and every Good Friday:

*'I, the Earth, remember.
Remember the final whisper from his dying lips,
Releasing through the world
An earthquake of love
That broke in two my mighty heart.'*

May we too remember that whisper, understand the earthquake of love which Christ released, and allow our own hearts to break and find new life.