

Sensing the Spirit

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 May 2023

A Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Easter 6 A

Acts 17: 22-31; John 14: 15-21

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

I think there are three broad groups that make up the congregation here at Pitt St Uniting Church. There are probably more than three and there are certainly subgroups. I don't see these as divisions that separate us because we can - and do - all genuinely love each other. Despite our flaws, our trespasses, we accept each other and draw everyone into the community of love. It's more a matter of perspectives – each group, and of course, each individual, brings a different way of seeing and responding to things in the life of the congregation.

- a) The first group is made up of people who have remained faithful throughout their lives. Their theology, their understanding may have evolved radically, there may have been times of doubt and struggle but the thread of faith has remained unbroken.
- b) The second group is made up of those who were brought up in the church and maybe had strong commitments and powerful experiences in their younger years but then dropped out, rejecting the church and even all things metaphysical but then re-discovered spirit, the deeper essence of the Christian path.
- c) Then there are those who have come with no background in religion or faith but have touched on something authentic and meaningful in our gatherings. People searching for something deeper, having as Wordsworth says, “*intimations of immortality*”, a sense of something beyond the physical. This group often bring an enthusiasm for spiritual experience and openness beyond traditional teaching.

It's great to have opportunities to share these perspectives in discussion and undoubtedly our background affects our attitude to various things, like clapping in the service. Perhaps we hear things differently and want to hear different things.

I'm making an assumption here, that no matter our background, no matter how we find ourselves here today, we want to go deeper. We may articulate it in different ways – deeper into the experiences of life, deeper into connection with spirit, deeper into understanding ourselves and how we relate to the wider world.

When Jesus says, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*”, I baulk a bit at commandments. I resist being commanded but I realise he is speaking in a certain context where people are conditioned into meticulously following rules. It's not a set of rules that he is giving but a general principle, to always act out of love. To find the source of love within and respond to everyone, even enemies, out of love, with compassion and selflessness. This is the principle Christ demonstrated in his own life and death.

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For me this is the heart of the Christian gospel, it's an ideal, though, few can fulfil; so we need to strive to develop, refine our Self, transform our shadow, our inner, selfish dark side. It's a life's work but we are guaranteed a helper in the Holy Spirit.

This leads me on to the main focus of this reflection – sensing the spirit, a theme emerging out of one of my favourite stories from the Book of Acts. Paul's famous preaching to the wise elders of Athens who met from ancient times on the Areopagus hill. Paul develops his argument to the intellectuals, the philosophers giving the big picture of human diversity, wherever they are, no matter ethnicity or culture, people are searching for God, groping and perhaps finding God, *“though, indeed God is not far from each one of us.”* Then we hear the oft repeated words, that are really the key point of this reflection. *“In God, we live and move and have our being.”*

Before I explore this main theme I'm asking your indulgence to go off at a tangent. At the end of the passage Vivien read today is another verse, 32, that talks about people who were converted by Paul's preaching. One character who has fascinated me for many years is Dionysius the Areopagite – I love the musical quality of the name. He is regarded as a saint in the Greek Orthodox faith. It's believed he came out of the Greek mystery tradition and established a Christian mystery school in Athens. In the early 500s C.E. extensive writings purporting to be by Dionysius appeared.

Now last week I was in Taiwan and went to the National Palace Museum. There was an exhibition of sacred texts visiting from the Vatican library. One of the first exhibits I was drawn to was a beautifully bound volume of Dionysius the Areopagite translated into Latin. This experience of synchronicity impelled me to mention him today, although I tried very hard to exclude him. I went to Google and checked out some of his content – I found a description of his process of *“mystic contemplation”*. He is known for his description of our interaction with angelic beings. He says we all have our own individual angel, the origin of the idea of a guardian angel.

From Paul's teaching we can infer that the spirit is all around us, behind all the phenomena of the physical world. God is to be found not only in the realm of ideas and inner feelings but in the outer world through all of our senses. My contention is that we can know the God within but there is also a longing to know the God beyond ourselves. The spirit within longs to connect with the spirit in the world through experiences of Nature, through the arts, through other people. The spirit is the spirit of connection.

When we experience the joy of spring or autumn leaves or the beauty of visual arts; the sound of rushing water and birdsong, the inspiration of great music; all the moments when our heart is moved, we are connecting with Spirit and our Self is strengthened.

On the cover of your liturgy booklet there is an artwork by a dear friend of mine, Julie Hamann, who recently had a successful exhibition in Sydney. She is the sort of person who is immediately attractive. She emanates a light-filled presence that draws people to her. At the opening of her exhibition she gave a surprising talk about her process. She lives on the edge of a National Park at Port Macquarie and she described how when walking in the bush she sees something that attracts her attention, that invites her to look more closely, like a bird on a branch, she is overwhelmed by a sense of love. The connection, the inspiration for her art is experienced as love.

We could dwell at length on each of the senses, we've mentioned seeing and hearing, then there is the joy of touch and the tasting of the spirit in the bread and wine of communion. So that leaves the sense of smell and that's what I want to focus on more fully.

We all have our own unique experiences of the spirit through the senses. For me the exquisite scent of the flowering daphne bush announcing the coming of Spring, followed by the sweet scent of the lilac enlivens my senses. I'll never forget my first visit to Christchurch St Laurence and getting my first whiff of incense as the thurible passed by.

In Taiwan I was struck by the devotion and reverence of people worshipping in the various temples. I have a powerful image in my mind of a woman standing deep in prayer holding 3 sticks of incense splayed out in her hand. Incense plays an important part there, in the human transaction with the spiritual world. Smoke and incense have played an important role across the nations for millenia, from the aboriginal smoking ceremonies, Hebrew burnt offerings to the Christian church today.

In a way, I'm proposing something different. The sense of smell, particularly in Nature, as a pathway to the spirit, as indeed are all the senses. We might say that uplifting experiences, whether in Nature, the arts or community feed, nourish the soul, which I'm sure is true. But I'm suggesting something more than that. These positive experiences shape our sense of self. They strengthen our "I", our unique individuality. Our responses to connecting with spirit shape who we are, our truest spiritual Self.

At every stage of life we are having to re-adjust our sense of who we are – this "I" who is perceiving. We may be set in our ways but life, the wider world is always bumping into us, with knocks and shocks, challenges to who we are and forcing us to evolve or hardening our set patterns. These times of prayer and worship, experiences of connection with spirit in whatever form they take, strengthen our sense of Self.

How do we see the world? Filled with spirit or merely dead matter.

Where do we live,

and move,

and have our being?

As the artist Julie Hamann described – the experience of connecting with spirit in nature is an encounter with love.

We love each other, not because we are commanded, but because love is the core of our true Self.

It's a great truth of the gospel and we recognise it in others even when, perhaps, they don't recognise it in themselves. Amen.

Now in your liturgy booklet there is an enigmatic heading – the **ritual of the herbal prayer**. The idea is that as we sing the chant you come forward and take a herb from one of the baskets and take it back to your seat, crush it to release the scent, breathe it in, contemplate it and use it as a stimulus for your own prayer. We know that scent can be a powerful arouser of memories.