

Whole-making with the lore of love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 08 October 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 19A

**Isaiah 43: 1-2, 16-21; Contemporary Reading:
Jesus the Wholemaker by Richard Rohr**

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

Of all the critiques of the Ten Commandments I have encountered, it was that of a twelve old girl which was most powerful and poignant. This was many years ago, during a confirmation class I was running. We had looked at various aspects of Christian Faith and were exploring its living out. The Ten Commandments were an obvious element for reflection in this, especially as, like many English churches, they were displayed prominently, alongside the Apostles Creed, on either side of the altar (communion table) in our village church.

Typically, they did not evoke much reaction from young people seeking to be confirmed: either because many of the components (such as 'do not murder') were fairly easily agreed, or, most often, because confirmands were shy about entering into religious debate with older people. There are ways of changing that, and perhaps today younger people may be more self-assertive, but in general my experience is that confirmation classes can sometimes be hard going for all concerned!

Consider my surprise then, when this twelve year old girl, who, even in other contexts, hardly ever said a word in public, suddenly launched an outburst, full of both vehemence and reason. *'This is shocking, and abusive'*, she said, *'how can this be in the Bible? I cannot accept it.'* Her protest was about a number of things but especially the fifth commandment: *'honour your father and your mother'*. *'How on earth can I do that?'* she said, *'when my father so mistreated my mother and left myself and my family when I was so tiny'...*

Our young confirmand had cogency as well as passion on her side. We do have to interpret the Ten Commandments in their context. Many Christian leaders and traditions in history have argued that the moral law, seen as above all manifest in the Ten Commandments, is essential for spiritual life. John Wesley, one of the great forbears of the Uniting Church, thus wrote in his Sermons that:

*Every part of this law must remain in force upon all mankind in all ages, as not depending either on time or place, nor on any other circumstances liable to change; but on the nature of God and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.*¹

¹ Wesley's Sermons, Vol. I, Sermon 25

However, as aspects of that language reflect, the application of divine moral law has to be made applicable to time and place. Wesley himself, like our young confirmand, would, for example, certainly not have agreed with slavery, which is mentioned in the tenth commandment. Indeed, Wesley wrote a notable anti-slave trade pamphlet: *Thoughts upon Slavery*, which, among other things, can be seen as an example of the prophetic public theology which the Uniting Church has inherited through Methodism. That dynamic would also agree with our young confirmand that the tenth commandment is also deeply sexist, reflecting ancient patriarchal ideas of women as property, like slaves.

As Jewish and Christian traditions also amply demonstrate, including in Jesus' own debates with others, other commandments also need some interpretation in precise application. All the world's great wisdom traditions are, for example, united in agreeing that unlawful killing, stealing, and misuse of sexuality, are destructive.

Yet Christian, and other, theologians continue to disagree about how such injunctions are to be applied to certain situations, such as war and civil resistance, abortion and end of life issues. Nonetheless, such moral law – what we might call the '*lore*' of love - is still understood to be helpful and to have common resonance across the bulk of humanity. As our confirmation group found all those years ago, it can certainly help open up deep feelings and lively discussion!

All of that, I hope, is part of what our prospective new Pitt Street Uniting Church members can help contribute also. As I have indicated, to do so is to reflect the heart of prophetic faith, not least as it comes to us in the Uniting Church through our Methodist heritage. May our new members therefore continue to enrich us with their own gifts, experiences and insights which they have brought to us.

As most of you know, I had a go earlier this year at reframing the inspiration and purpose of the Ten Commandments for our own times. I have included this in the liturgy today, in the form of what I have named as Ten Affirmations, or, an alternative '*lore of love*'. For, rather than putting things negatively, with prohibitions – don'ts – I have tried to offer some positive invitations, namely to:

Rejoice that God is Love

Delight that we are fearfully and wonderfully made

Honour our diverse identities

Acknowledge the sacredness of life and share it with others

Treasure good friends, loving families and healthy communities

Nurture life-giving joy and hope

Cultivate trust and appropriate relationships

Act justly

Love mercy

(&) Walk gently on the earth

Maybe others of us here would like to amend these, or create other versions? If so, feel free. For the point of the moral law, like the rest of our Faith, is to make it our own and live it out. This is indeed at the heart of what we seek to do, and be, as we journey onwards together in the Uniting Church, as part of the wider universal Church, and wider family of Creation.

One way of expressing this purpose and journey is that offered to us by Richard Rohr in our contemporary reading *Jesus Is a Wholemaker*² this morning. This is based on the reflections of Ilia Delio, who offers to us this positive metaphor of Jesus as 'Wholemaker', gathering and healing the disconnected parts of not only individuals and communities but creation as a whole.

Making whole: isn't that a beautiful contemporary way of approaching faith and spirituality? After all, that much used Christian word 'salvation' has Latin derivation with close associations to 'salving', healing of wounds and life. Making whole does not avoid the genuinely difficult things in our lives and world, which Christians have traditionally named as 'sin', but it does address them in the context of seeking reconciliation and flourishing, on the basis of positives rather than negatives.

Again, I like to think that my Ten Affirmations are in that sense naming of positive pathways for this process of making whole, salving, in which we are all engaged, as individuals, as a community, and with others beyond our immediate lives.

I do not know exactly how that young female confirmand of many years ago has travelled in her own journey of faith. I feel however that she certainly had the depth of spirit, insight and courage to grow into wholeness of being, and to share in Wholemaking with others.

What I do know is that those becoming members of our community today most certainly demonstrate those qualities and purpose. May they, and all of us, therefore be richly blessed on the next steps of their, and our, journeys, and may they, and we, always know that '*deep centre of love*' to which Ilia Delio and Richard Rohr rightly point us as the centre of all flourishing faith and life.

In the name and inspiration of Jesus the Wholemaker, the embodiment of the lore of love.

Amen.

² <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jesus-is-a-wholemaker/>