

Beyond an Apology

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 22 October 2023

A Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Pentecost 21A (Safe Church Sunday)

Contemporary Reading: *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg; Matthew 25: 15-22

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

I invite you to hold the 10-cent coin you were given as you entered the church this morning. I wonder when the last time was that you held a coin in your hands. These days, we are more likely to wave our card, present our phone, press enter on our computer or click here on our tablet. What will future generations make of our gospel reading in years to come when coins no longer circulate? You will notice on this coin the face of Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning British monarch at the time it was minted. A few weeks ago, it was announced that the Royal Australian Mint is producing coins carrying the profile of King Charles III. I wonder what this says to our nation and the first peoples of these lands. But I digress.

The cultural contexts in which this gospel was spoken - and ours today - are vastly different. So it is not surprising that the message that Jesus, or the writer of Matthew's Gospel, may have wished to communicate could be easily lost. Responding to the devious question posed by the Pharisees, Jesus asks: "*whose head and whose inscription*" are on the coin required to pay the tax. The Pharisees reply, "*Caesar's.*" Jesus responds with the oft-quoted phrase, "*then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*"

However, if we were to hear a slightly different translation, we might hear the profound teaching of Jesus, amid the trap set by the Pharisees. As I understand it, in the Greek, we would hear, "*whose image is engraved on the coin?*" Jesus is referencing Genesis 1: 26-27: "*God said, 'let us make humankind in our image... in the Divine image God created them.'*" To spell out what would have been obvious to the hearers of Jesus' words, "*Give to Caesar the image of Caesar and to God the image of God, your whole selves.*" A sincere gift of self to God alongside a coin to Caesar.ⁱ

The Pharisees create a win-lose situation, one in which Jesus would undoubtedly lose. If Jesus agreed it was lawful to pay the imperial tax imposed only on non-Romans, he would be siding with the oppressors, thus upsetting the Jews. Answering in the negative would antagonise the Roman authorities. The Pharisees were not interested in the tax question, rather they were set on trapping Jesus. Despite this, Jesus highlights that one has different obligations to Empire and God, and the two don't need to be in conflict.

So, with this in mind, I now turn to what we are commemorating. Today, 22 October, is the 5th Anniversary of the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. This is the fourth National Apology in recent years. On 13 February 2008, the Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd offered an Apology to the Stolen Generation. 16 November 2009, again it was Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who offered a National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants.

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On 21 March 2013, the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard apologised on behalf of the Australian Government to people affected by forced adoption or removal policies and practices. On 22 October 2018, five years ago today and 10 months from the conclusion of the five-year Royal Commission, the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison offered the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse.

Eneko Sanz in examining National Apologies, argues that for a National Apology to have any validity and credibility, it needs to include an acknowledgement of the injustices committed, an expression of remorse, a guarantee of non-repetition, be complemented by reparative action and refrain from appealing for forgiveness.ⁱⁱ

The National Apology to the Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse, confesses what was done and the harm caused, expresses remorse, and commits to general actions to prevent further abuse of children, although it can't guarantee these will never happen again. The Government, through the National Redress Scheme, has taken some steps towards restitution. The Apology does not ask for forgiveness.

National Apologies may well have their role, although this is contested. However, each marks a significant moment in our Nation's history. In the case of the National Apology to the Stolen Generation, one could say a watershed moment. But, like the Pharisees, are we focusing on the wrong thing? At least in our churches? Yes, I believe that apologies are important, very important. But are we failing to do the painful and necessary work of repentance and repair? If we don't intentionally attend to making amends following wrongdoing, we engage in a form of spiritual bypassing. It is so easy, personally and publicly, to see an apology as all that needs to be done. Frequently, we jump quickly to apologise before we have done the necessary preceding work. Then, once the apology has been given, we believe that all is well. The crucial work of making amends is left undone.

We can see this clearly with the Apology to the Stolen Generation. The social and health problems in Indigenous communities, like imprisonment rates, lower levels of education, and high unemployment, result from 235 years of colonising oppressive disadvantage. Kevin Rudd, on the 15th anniversary of the apology that he offered on behalf of the nation, saw the apology as both a success and a failure. He said, "*Let us have the honesty and the courage to acknowledge both.*"ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of the apology, the government committed to decreasing social inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through the Closing the Gap initiative, but as a nation, we have failed dismally in all but two areas. And in some cases, the situation is deteriorating. Just last this week, there was another death in custody - a 16-year-old indigenous boy on remand.

Many apologies are really pseudo-apologies, they are inauthentic and cause further harm, particularly the type: "*I am sorry if my words, actions, etc, have offended you*". They perpetuate the win-lose dynamic of the Pharisees in today's Gospel. In these so-called apologies, the speaker assumes no responsibility, nor acknowledges the harm done. There is no commitment to change or consideration of what would make things better. The person offering the apology may feel that they have excused themselves from owning any wrongdoing, and the person hearing the pseudo-apology continues to feel diminished.

So, how can we make amends? What would we need to do collectively and individually if we were to go beyond an apology? Here I draw on the work of Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, who we heard in our contemporary reading.^{iv} In her recently published book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, Danya develops the five steps of repentance and repair offered by the medieval Jewish theologian, philosopher and physician Moses Maimonides and invites us on the path of repentance.

Succinctly put, the five steps are confession, starting to change, restitution, apology and transformation. You may recognise most of these within a genuine National Apology.

The first step is confession. Confession is not the same as an apology, although the National Apologies do include confession. It is about acknowledging and owning the harm that has been done with a willingness to face it. It names and accepts without qualification, diminishment of responsibility or excuses. Maimonides and Ruttenberg say it should be public or at least commensurate with the publicness of the harm done. This can be hard and painful. This is the work of truth-telling.

Step two is starting to change, so as not to repeat what has been identified as wrongdoing. This might involve, for example, tending to unhealed wounds, addressing toxic behaviour, educating oneself, or implementing systemic changes so that the harm is not likely to continue. This is the work of building or rebuilding trust.

The third step is making amends—restitution and accepting the consequences resulting from the harm done. This step occurs after the steps of confession and commitment to change, thus reducing the risk of further harm. Making amends is not just about fixing but committing to making things as right as possible. Some wrongs can never be fixed. This is the work of justice.

It is only at step four that the apology occurs - after confession, beginning to change and restitution. This is the work of relationality, of building or rebuilding relationships. The aim is to foster healing and repair while avoiding further harm. The one who has been harmed must always be the centre of the process. It requires humility and vulnerability on behalf of those who have caused harm. Relationships may be renewed, and reconciliation may follow, but this should never be an expectation or demand. Relationships may need to be released. This work of apology is about prioritising relationships.

The final but ongoing step is where different choices are being consistently made. This is where life is transformed, and flourishing begins. Without doing the work of confession, commitment to change, restitution and apology, one is likely to repeat the patterns from the past. This is the work of transformation leading to flourishing.

So, confession is the work of truth-telling. Starting to change is the work of rebuilding trust. Making amends is the work of justice. Apology is a work of re-establishing or releasing relationships. Living differently, choosing differently, leading to flourishing for all.

Notice that at all times, the focus is on what the person who has caused harm is obligated to do. However, these same five elements: truth-telling, trust, justice, relationality and flourishing, or truth, faith, justice, love and hope, are vital also for those who have been harmed, particularly those who are still carrying the wounds of trauma.^v

You may notice I have not spoken of forgiveness. Deliberately so. The work of forgiveness, if it is to be done, lies with those who have been harmed, and I am very wary of someone who has caused harm asking for forgiveness. It can come across as an expectation or obligation on those who have been harmed before they are in a place, if they ever get to a place, of offering forgiveness. It can be a form of coercion or manipulation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described forgiveness without the work of repentance as cheap grace.^{vi} It is another example of spiritual bypassing, leaving the deep inner work undone. Christianity has much work to do in relation to its theology of forgiveness.

I return to the words of Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, “*We cannot undo what we have done. We can never go back in time. We write history with our decisions and our actions. But we also write history with our responses to those actions. ... Repentance ... is like the Japanese art of kintsugi, repairing broken pottery with gold. You can never unbreak what is broken. But with the sincere and deep work of transformation, acts of repair have the potential to make something new.*”^{vii}

I invite you to pause for a moment, to take the coin in your hand as we reflect on how we can move beyond glib or pseudo apologies and walk the path of repentance - in our personal relationships, our homes, our places of work, our church, country, or internationally. Thus making amends in our unapologetic world.

You may like to take the coin home with you or place it in the offertory bag as you give to God, the image of God, your whole self, the Divine image that is you. Amen.

ⁱ Paul Nuechterlein, “A Win-Win Answer to a Lose-Lose Question,” delivered at Our Savior’s Lutheran Racine, WI, October 20, 2002, accessed 21 October 2023, http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper24a_2002_ser.htm

ⁱⁱ Eneko Sanz, National Apologies: Making the Complexities of Validity. The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aaron J Hanh Taper, “The Power of Public Apology” *The Atlantic*, 7 April 2023, Accessed 21 October 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/04/australia-apology-indigenous-peoples-kevin-rudd/673640/>

^{iv} This reflection on repentance and apology is inspired and informed by Danya Ruttenberg. *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, Boston: Beacon Books, 2022, and Danya Ruttenberg “Applying Traditional Jewish Wisdom to Modern Cultural Harms” Collective Trauma Summit 2022.

^v The elements of trust, truth-telling, relationality, flourishing and the more recently added element of justice arise from my reading of feminist trauma theologians. See Elizabeth Lee, “A Trauma Sensitive Reimaging of ‘A Theological Statement’ for the *National Person of Concern Policy Framework, 2020*,” *Uniting Church Studies*, 25, No.1, 2023, 73-80.

^{vi} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Cost of Discipleship” accessed 21 October, 2023, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes>

^{vii} Ruttenberg. *On Repentance and Repair*, 45-46.