

Awakening in Advent

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 3 December 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 1B

**Contemporary Reading: *Awakening to Our True Self* by Richard Rohr;
Mark 13:24-37**

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

Wake up!

Keep awake!

These are familiar injunctions in Advent. What however do they mean to us today? What are we to wake up to? And for what is it that we are to keep awake? At the heart of the Advent and Christmas mysteries, is a call to transformation: an invitation to awaken, to recognise what is really going on in ourselves and in the wider world; an invitation to respond, to wake up, to the divine possibilities latent, or birthing, within us. Whether it be through stories and images of wonder and imagination, as in the Christmas angels and the Magi, or in today's Gospel challenge to see beneath the changes and chances of our immediate existence, we are invited into transformation: the ever-transforming power of divine love and awakening.

In a moment I will come to today's Gospel passage. However, as we continue to journey in this Advent season with Kerry Holland's exhibition in our midst, I also want to reflect a little more on the journey of Mary and Elizabeth in the transformative time they spent together during pregnancy. This has made me wonder: who have each of us walked with, during transformative times – good and not so good - in our lives? Who are the people who have been, like Elizabeth to Mary and vice versa, our companions in times of joyful and/or difficult times - of pregnancy and new birth? It is good to reflect and give thanks for them at this time.

One of my companions in recent years is a wonderful fellow transgender friend from Melbourne. We met when, as it were, we were pregnant with our gender affirmations, in a process of giving birth to new life and potential within each of us. We have since travelled together through the highs and lows of living as transgender people in our world today, including being involved in supporting others in our various spaces, and, as earlier this year in a radio broadcast together, sharing in seeking to bring light– and maybe a wee bit of challenge!

I have thought of my friend particularly this week, partly as we have been able to spend a little time together here in Sydney, but also because they have helped teach me something about the gifts of their own Buddhist tradition, and how it may help shed light, and accompany, my own Christian tradition.

One aspect of my friend's spiritual gifting to me is represented in the picture on the front of our liturgy sheet today. This is a composite of two figures, one a European Christian and one a Chinese Buddhist statue, yet both from a similar era, and each now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I know my friend's spiritual practice has found the Guanyin figure (pronounced G(w)ūn Yām in Cantonese) particularly helpful. For, in Buddhist wisdom, as an embodiment of compassion, Guanyin is a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who remains on earth to model compassion and support others on their journeys of awakening to love and truth.

Interestingly, particularly for transgender people, Guanyin is able to take on many different manifestations, and, whilst initially presenting as male, or gender-neutral, effectively 'transitions' into a representation of female divine compassion. For the reality is, in all of the world's great culture and wisdom traditions, the queerness of divine love will always break through!

We could reflect further on such things at other times. However, as we enter the Christian season of Advent, my main point is to draw attention to the key theme of waking up, and staying awake, at the heart of all deep human spiritual experience. Both Mary and her child Jesus, and Guanyin, and other icons of awakening, are expressions of this journey and invitations to share in it more deeply. That is what the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr was saying in the contemporary reading *'Awakening to Our True Self'*¹ which we also read just now. When we hear passages like that from Mark 13 today, we are invited into this transformative journey which is both highly particular to each of us, and also shared by so many, in different, and sometimes quite surprising, ways.

Let us be clear. I, like Richard Rohr, am certainly not saying that all wisdom traditions are the same: any more than Mary and Guanyin, as embodiments of compassion, are the same. We do not help ourselves by trying to conflate faith traditions, or by reducing them to apparent similarities. Like every human being, each great wisdom tradition is unique, and also extraordinarily multi-faceted, and each carries great strengths and potential pitfalls. Yet, where they are life-giving, they flow from the same ultimate source and enable similar deep compassion.

In that sense, each great wisdom tradition, offers a pathway, or pathways, of transformation. In Christianity, we tend to call this salvation, born of metanoia – literally changing mind - repentance, conversion, turning around: or, as in Advent, waking up, and keeping awake. In Buddhism, this pathway of transformation is more likely to be named as enlightenment, born of satori - that is awakening - in Zen Buddhism, kenshō, seeing into our true nature: that is, as Richard Rohr puts it, awakening to our true self.

That is the Advent call: that we may be birthed, and give birth, as a new creation. It may not be entirely comfortable, but this is our calling and pathway of transformation: as it was, and is, that of Mary, and Jesus, and of Guanyin, and the Buddha, and anything and everything that points us to the deepest mysteries of being and becoming.

This brings us to today's Gospel reading, which, at first, may seem, for some, to be at a distance from the images of compassion embodied in such figures as Mary and Jesus, Guanyin and the Buddha. That however is not helped by some Christians seeking to interpret such Gospel passages within restrictive, and even judgmental, frameworks. This sometimes involves seeking to read predictions of the end of the world into such verses, as well as justifications of their own moral and cultural stances.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/awakening-to-our-true-self-2018-07-31/>

Instead, we are best to read this as a different way of encouraging us to wake up to life's realities and to focusing on compassion, not fearful reaction.

Today's passage is drawn from the chapter of Mark's Gospel sometimes known as '*the little apocalypse*'. It has a particular context in its own time and place and can easily be misused. Some have, for example, developed quite extraordinary ideas such as '*the rapture*': a quite recent idea in Christian history, from about the 1830s, promoted by some elements of American evangelicalism, in which the '*second coming*' of Christ will be ushered in by various disasters, and the godly will be taken up into heavenly bliss from among the rest of Creation.

Now, admittedly, that is one way of calling people to wake up and make a choice about how they want to live their lives! Thankfully, mainstream Christianity has resisted going down that particular rabbit hole, and indeed the supposed doctrine of '*the rapture*' was, for example, officially condemned by the Church of England shortly after it emerged. It is not that the theological concept of Christ's '*second coming*' is not relevant to us today. It is that, on biblical as well as other spiritual grounds, we do well to resist proclaiming specifics. For, as this text explicitly says, in verse 32, about that time '*no one knows*', not the angels, and not even the Son of God! Only the Father, the hidden source, and mystery of all. The point of these verses is not to frighten us into 'fear of God', but to awaken us to trust and to compassion.

Mark chapter 13 is certainly more than problematic as an interpretation, never mind a prediction, of human history. For it offers us inconsistent messages. Some verses, for example, appear to warn Jesus' early followers to prepare for an imminent apocalypse. Others offer a different counsel: encouraging followers to stay faithful, dig in, and prepare for the long haul in the face of adversity. Some scholars have proposed that this reflects a combining by the writer of Mark's Gospel of two earlier texts with different emphases: one reflecting an early Christian expectation of an impending end of the world, and the other reinforcing other early, and continuing, Christian emphases on holding faith in God, whatever life brings us.

Arguably, the latter emphases are also more consistent with Jesus himself. Quite probably, Jesus perceived that there would be coming catastrophes in his homeland – what we currently call Israel-Palestine. Jesus may well have seen that the occupiers' oppression would lead to violent conflict, and that even the great temple itself, the symbol of God and of the people, would fall, as it indeed it did - in the great Jewish revolt against Roman rule between the years 66 and 70 CE. That struggle was truly horrendous. Estimates of numbers killed amount to as many as one third of the Judaeen population, with others dying from famine and disease. The Romans took another tenth of the population into slavery, with many others Jews forced into exile.²

Right up to very recent decades, Jewish history of course then involved threats and attempts at extinguishment for century after century. In the face of such existential pain, and genocidal horror, what are people to do? This is the context, and real question, of today's Gospel passage.

What are we to do? Today's context is not that in which today's Gospel reading came into being. Yet that Gospel speaks into a world with similar realities: including deep oppression, repressive authorities, occupying forces, systemic and other forms of violence, and attempts at resistance: in Palestine-Israel, and in many other lands. It speaks into a world similarly vulnerable to sudden disasters and destruction, not least environmental.

² Herr, Moshe David (1984). Shtern, Menahem (ed.). *The History of Eretz Israel: The Roman Byzantine period: the Roman period from the conquest to the Ben Kozba War (63 B.C.E-135 C.E.)*. Jerusalem:

It challenges us to wake up to what is going on, to look more deeply into our lives and world, and to respond, accordingly, with faith and active compassion.

As with other parts of the Bible, and other religious aids, we need to be wary of drawing straightforward 'lessons' and messages from today's text, or using it to promote our own particular personal or tribal concerns, fears and fantasies. Yet, like Mary and Guanjin, it is also a pathway to transformation, through awakening. When we experience terrible things in the outer world, whether fresh violence and oppression as we have seen in Palestine-Israel recently, we can simply react or retreat, or we can awaken to the need for deeper understanding and active compassion.

Similarly, in our individual lives, when suffering, and even terror, strikes, we can simply recoil, or we can find ways to enable even those things to be transformed by love and grace. That, after all, is at the heart of what Christians call the paschal mystery of Christ, and Buddhists call the overcoming of samsara, the cycle of suffering in existence.

May we therefore find good companions in our own journeys, and wake up to the deeper meaning and mysteries of life, so that we may hold faith and grow in compassion together, being ever more transformed and sharing in the transformation of the world.

Even in the midst of great trials, may love be nurtured and born afresh in us and in our world this Advent and into the future: a future which remains uncertain but which is always accompanied, and underpinned, by divine love.

In the name of Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, born among us in Mary, in all that bears divine compassion. Amen.