

The flower of a newborn hand

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 10 December 2023

A Reflection by Warren Talbot

Advent 2b; Human Rights Day

Isaiah 40: 1-11; Contemporary Reading: *Advent*, by Pamela Cranston; Mark 1: 1-8

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

This morning we lit the second Advent candle, which is the candle of peace. And we have been reminded that today is, literally, the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Universal Declaration was signed by Australia, and 192 other nations, on 10 December 1948.

Yet, as we observe the world, we are all too conscious of the lack of peace, and the violation of human rights. The two invariably go hand in hand.

During the week we witnessed what some described as a race to the bottom in our national Parliament on the matter of people who are not Australian citizens but cannot be removed to another country. I don't have the expertise to comment on the technical and legal aspects of the High Court's unanimous ruling. What concerned me this week was the language used by MPs which did not seem to respect the fundamental dignity of all human persons – including, we have to say, those who seek asylum, and, we have to say, those who have a criminal record.

Article One of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights boldly asserts that:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood [and sisterhood].”

The 30 articles of the Universal Declaration are worth reading and re-reading. They resonate with people of all faiths and none. For those of us in the Judeo-Christian traditions they echo the wisdom of Genesis 1, namely that all human beings are made in the image of God and therefore are deserving of dignity and respect.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote that Judaism was the religion of slaves. For Nietzsche this statement was an anti-Semitic trope. The founding narrative is about some Hebrews in slavery in Egypt. They named God as the Holy One who rescued them from slavery and led them on the exodus to the Promised Land. In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures some Israelites are in slavery in Babylon. As we know, later on Palestine was occupied by first the Greeks, then the Romans in the time of Jesus. Slavery and the longing for rescue and liberation is a fundamental theme in Judaism.

The Book of Isaiah is one of the most significant texts in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. At various times in church history Isaiah, or at least chapters 40 – 55, have been referred to as the “fifth gospel”. The themes in Isaiah resonated with the early Christ communities, especially the figure of the suffering servant in chapter 53 who was the bringer of messianic hope, healing and liberation.

Many scholars recognise that there are three major literary units in Isaiah spanning a period of 300-400 years. Chapters 1 – 39 (first Isaiah) cover the period of the exile of some tribes to the Assyrian empire in the eighth century BCE. Chapters 40 – 55 (second Isaiah) were written from the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, and chapters 56 to the end (third Isaiah) reflect the return of some or many of the exiles to Jerusalem, to rebuild the city and the temple.

One reason this is important is that as we listen to the words of Isaiah it’s valuable to recall the historical, political and religious context. The prophets were not predicting the future – but addressing their own context. It was while in exile in Babylon that the thinking behind second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) developed.

Despite the span of time which the text covers, there is a deep commonality of themes – about God, a new exodus and messianic (ie to say Christic) hope. Thus the final redaction of Isaiah presents a coherent single volume.

Isaiah is, by far, the most quoted of the Hebrew Scriptures in the second or Christian testament. The earliest, shortest and starkest of the canonical Gospels, namely Mark, which we heard from this morning, launches into their account of the Good News of Christ Jesus with a reference to Isaiah in the second verse. This is the well-known reference to a voice crying in the wilderness. We heard that in the reading this morning from Isaiah 40.

The Markan community is not interested in the mythological paraphernalia of angels, shepherds and wise ones from the East. Referencing Isaiah, the writer moves immediately to the one who is preparing the way of the Messiah, the Christ. All Christians, by definition, confess that Jesus is the Christ. Progressive Christians also affirm that the messianic hope and liberation seen in the person of Jesus is also seen in other faiths and cultures – both before and after the birth of Jesus. In this sense the gulf between people of Jewish and Christian faith is perhaps not as wide as many believe.

Returning to second Isaiah, some Jewish people, mainly political and religious leaders in Jerusalem, were taken into exile in Babylon. It was in exile that they were able to develop and radically rethink their approach to life and faith.

The Isaiah text reflects a longing for a saviour to liberate the exiles. The answer comes not from a supernatural being but from Cyrus the ruler of the emerging Persian empire. Cyrus defeats the Babylonian empire and the Jewish exiles, among others, are allowed to return to their homelands. Although contested, Cyrus is included by many scholars in the genealogy of human rights.

Just as Isaiah does not predict the birth of the baby Jesus, there is no direct path from Isaiah or any Scriptural texts to the many challenges of peace, human rights, justice and climate in our time. In Advent the world is waiting. As Pamela Cranston expresses it in the poem we heard earlier, the world is “*locked in its lonely cell, guilty as a prisoner*”.

During Advent we wait for the birth of the promised Messiah. Yet, we know, that on Christmas Day, Israel and Hamas will still be at war, and the Russian Government's invasion of Ukraine will continue. This is not a Reflection with a happy ending.

Sometimes and somewhere in the chaos of it all, we dare to have faith that a newborn child, in all their fragility and innocence, symbolises our hopes for a world living together in peace. In so doing, we are bearing witness to the vision of Isaiah that swords will be turned into ploughshares.

To conclude, I quote Pamela Cranston again:

*"Who could believe the latch
would be turned by the flower
of a newborn hand?"*

Amen.

References

Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Restored: Biblical Imagination against Empire*, (Westminster John Knox Press).
https://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com/Content/Site115/FilesSamples/404601HopeResto_0000034651.pdf

Pamela Cranston, Advent (On a theme by Dietrich Bonhoeffer),
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/529-pamela-cranston-advent>

Giles Fraser, On the Genealogy of Morals,
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2008/nov/03/nietzsche-slave-morality-religion>

Universal Declaration on Human Rights, with Biblical texts and Reflections, Carter Center,
https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/human_rights/universal-declaration-human-rights-scripturally-annotated.pdf

UDHR

30 articles, 10 December 1948

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood [and sisterhood].

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 14. 1.

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.