

Word out of junk

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 December 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Advent 4B; Christmas Eve; 10 am

Contemporary Readings: from *Darkness is where incarnation begins* by Jan Richardson; *On the Mystery of the Incarnation* by Denise Levertov; John 1: 1-14

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

One of the most memorable set of Christmas services I helped arrange involved what I was brought up to call a dustbin, though others call it by other names, including (as in the USA) a trash can. This garbage icon was placed at the crossing point of the nave of St Luke, Toowoomba. For that church building is very much like a cathedral in design, so that it was unmissable and full and centre throughout worship. Indeed, at Midnight Mass, the choir had to part to walk around it in their processions, and everyone coming up for, and returning from, communion. The dustbin/trash can lid was put upside down on the top of the bin, so that a figure representing the Christ child could be placed upon it.

The point was not to undermine the beauty of other aspects of worship or of Christmas – for, as you may have gathered by now, despite the many virtues of the Congregationalist tradition which established this building, I am definitely not a Puritan when it comes to Christmas worship! For one thing, I am too queer a person not to revel in the extraordinary queer elements of Christmas. Rather, the point of the dustbin was to recall us to the heart of the Incarnation of Christ, to where all the beauty and the joy and the utter transformative power of this season arises.

Like the great queer poet and playwright Oscar Wilde, I believe profoundly that, in so many ways, in our struggles and human troubles, '*we are all in the gutter, but*', as he put it, and this is the queerness and liberation of Christ-centred faith, '*some of us are looking at the stars.*' Christmas is indeed about looking at the stars, and covering ourselves again with stardust, and all kinds of glitter – for, truly, we too are stardust, made of stardust, and we are meant to glitter. For the Word is indeed made flesh, formed and re-formed out of junk...

Forming and re-forming out of junk, turning our perspectives and expectations upside down, in challenging and imaginative ways, sometimes most disturbingly as well as amusingly so: that is part of the gift of the radical Australian queer artist Paul Yore. The child of a Franciscan priest who met his mother who was working as a missionary in Papua New Guinea, Paul let go of his Catholic allegiance as he was coming out as a teenager. However, among other things, he continues to recognise the power of religious symbolism and its potential for liberation through creative reinterpretation. As he reflects, his parents were imbued with liberation theology, which synthesised the radical message of the Gospels with Marxist philosophical insights and the struggles of the poor and outcast, and Paul Yore continues to explore the creative compatibility of the mystical with the political.¹

¹ <https://carriageworks.com.au/journal/paul-yore-word-made-flesh-interview/>

Notably for us this morning, from the point of Christmas, he created a significant exhibition for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, entitled *Word Made Flesh*. Part of that exhibition was also displayed at Carriageworks in Sydney during WorldPride this year, and a glimpse is visible in the image on our liturgy sheet this morning.²

Word Made Flesh, or Incarnation? That is of course the Christmas proclamation. Traditionally speaking, it is associated with a long history of profound reflection and symbolic expression, some of which is picked up in our own liturgies at this time. However, like Paul Yore, many people do not find that tradition particularly life-giving, as it is often presented today. For Christmas, like so much of Christianity, has often been commoditised. Its subversive aspects have typically been suppressed and suffocated. Its radical messages of the blessedness of the marginalised and the goodness of our messy flesh have been turned upside down in the interests of the rich and powerful, and by those who would subjugate and even destroy the life and desires of the queer and different.

Instead of an extraordinary feast of joyful revolution, led by those the world considers weak and weird, Christmas too easily becomes an orgy of consumption and convention, with much loneliness and family exclusion. In the face of our world's oppressions, it can become a distracting comfort blanket rather than a pathway to genuine peace.

Paul Yore's work: *Word Made Flesh* is therefore on the one hand a representation of the sheer junk created by modern culture, including religious culture. After all, so much that passes for human communication and meaning is so very shallow and polluted. For human words today often seem so conflictual, distorting, and unsatisfying. As Paul Yore puts it, we therefore experience our contemporary culture, especially online, as:

a limitless bombardment, a kind of accumulation of undifferentiated and indiscriminate images, text, and data.

Indeed, as he rightly says:

*As a form, the internet is a good image for our particular cultural moment: a sort of glowing labyrinth of half-truths and fabrications, a bottomless pit of misery and alienation... In an age of low attention spans and boredom, the device of spectacle, of misdirection and subliminal messaging are key.*³

How then do we rediscover a saving Word in our contemporary context? Paul Yore's work is extremely challenging for many in more conventional religious spaces, to hear. However, I believe it points a way, particularly in embodying how the Word can come alive for us again, and be made flesh among us, by finding renewed meaning out of the junk of our lives and culture. This is about rediscovering the saving truth of what Christians call the Incarnation in what others call trash. In doing so, today's Gospel reading (from John chapter 1) comes alive again.

Paul Yore's choice of title *Word Made Flesh* was not incidental. His highly colourful kitsch work is highly multi-disciplinary, involving working not least with textiles, and junk of all kinds. It is highly provocative, even shocking in some elements, and drawing, as he says, '*on the bawdy, camp kind of humour that drag queens, for example, would use.*'⁴

² See also the artist's walk through the exhibition at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifEUs-nReMg&t=9s>

³ <https://carriageworks.com.au/journal/paul-yore-word-made-flesh-interview/>

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-06/paul-yore-word-made-flesh-exhibition-acca-australianartist/101610312>

Pushing in that way against '*polite society*', Yore seeks to engage others in wrestling with the horrors and absurdities of Australia and the wider world today: shaped as they are by the destruction and detritus of colonialism, militarism, racism, capitalist economics, and climate change, queer phobia, resistance to diversity of expression, and, of course, religious oppression. This, after all, is the world in which we read the prologue to John's Gospel again today, and in which we celebrate Christmas. Yet Yore is also clear that that text, and the Christian tradition, is not only potential toxic junk but also part of rediscovering life for all.

Yore encourages us to look at John's Gospel, and indeed the whole of the Bible and our religious traditions, as textiles: as texts, threads and themes of life and culture that, like his own work, have been woven together in the past, and which can be woven afresh in the future. He thus names the famous prologue to John's Gospel, our main reading this morning, as a rich intertextual blending of Jewish mystical thought with classical Greek ideas.⁵ Yore is right, for this is part of the brilliance of this passage. It is indeed, in itself, a 'collage' of spiritual wisdom, which seeks to link together the particular with the universal. For the writer of John's Gospel is telling us that what is born in the specific flesh of Jesus is the same light and love which is to be found in everything which has life. In other words, all things are connected, and brought together in Christ.

Core to the prologue of John's Gospel is the spiritual principle of the Word, or *logos* in Greek: the word which gives rise to biology, psychology, and all the -ologies. This is understood in early Christian theology, following Heraclitus, Platonists and the Stoics, as a creative force in each of us, reflecting our divine source. For, as the great ancient theologians put it, each of us has the *logos spermatikos* in us: a divine seed, or spark of life and creativity. In other words, if, like Oscar Wilde, we may often feel ourselves to be '*in the gutter*', we can not only look at the stars, but know that we have part of the stars within us, and can accordingly grow and sparkle. That is at the heart of the Incarnation: of the Word, the *Logos*, becoming *Flesh*. For the birth and life of Jesus is to show us that the *Logos*, the creating Word, is not only with us, but in our very own flesh. For we too are wombs and sperm, words and seeds of divinity!

Wow! Imagine that, or, still better, live it: sing it, shout it, dance it; or, like Paul Yore, paint it, weave it, create and re-create it; assemble it and show it, however you will, out of the very junk that you live with. That is the invitation of Christmas: not simply to celebrate the outrageous Word of God born in the margins of the ancient world, in a very queer manner of birth among marginal people – but to celebrate outrageously the *logos spermatikos*, the creative possibilities of divinity within our very selves. You most certainly do not have to be a queer person to do that, but to miss the queering, diversely embodying, work of God at Christmas, is to miss part of its continuing meaning for us.

This brings me back, in conclusion, to the trash can with which I began. You see, the whole life of Jesus is about reclaiming the trash, just as Paul Yore does, and we are invited to do. Literally and symbolically, Jesus was born among the trash, mixed with those counted as trash, and was killed among the trash: at Golgotha, which was a local garbage dump. Yet trash is not really rubbish, but potential for reclamation, and material for resurrection. You know, I have always wanted to create a cross out of so-called junk, and use it in Holy Week and at Easter: maybe that is something we might even look into here?

In the meanwhile, whether we are drawn, like Paul Yore, to engaging with text or textile, ornament or agitprop, politics, decoration, or desire (or all of them together) or delight, or dance, silence or song – may the Word become *Flesh* within us this Christmas, and may the stars shine out, gloriously, from us.

⁵ <https://carriageworks.com.au/journal/paul-yore-word-made-flesh-interview/>