

# Peace in wild things

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 21 July 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 9B

Contemporary Reading: from *The Peace of Wild Things*<sup>i</sup>

by Wendell Berry; Mark 6: 30-34 and 53-56

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

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One of my favourite stories is of a young and very incapacitated teenager who goes into hospital for significant treatment for a serious affliction. Understandably, he is very anxious and fearful, and this is expressed in considerable frustration and anger towards himself and others. In hospital, he is then admitted to a small children's ward, which only has one other patient, another, even younger, child.

Instantly, he is not happy with them, as he quickly resents the fact that they have a bed near the only window in the ward. How come they get extra light and a view, he complains to himself, and to nurses and his parents. When left alone, he even starts to pick a fight with the younger child. As the day draws on however, he doesn't have the energy to be angry anymore, and instead, feeling very sorry for himself, starts collapsing into tears. Then he hears the younger child speaking gently. 'Would you like me to tell you what I can see out of this window?', they say, 'it is quite wonderful'. They speak about the beautiful garden they can see outside, with flowers and a delightful pond, and about two children they can see playing, birds and animals passing by, and how the light is beginning to change as the day is coming towards an end.

As they speak, the boy gradually grows calmer and begins to share the wonder of what is being shared. Indeed, he becomes enchanted and starts asking about more details and the two become friends. And then, with all the challenges of the day and the day to come, and after all the negative energy he has spent, the boy falls asleep. When he wakes, the other child is gone. For, as he comes later to learn, after his own successful operation, they have died in the night. When he returns from surgery however, his own bed is then moved nearer to the window. When he is able to look out, he sees a scrap metal yard and a brick wall.

As Jesus said, unless we receive the kin-dom of God like a child, we will never enter. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

I love that story, so poignant though it is, because it speaks of the kind of peace of which the Gospel speaks: the peace that passes all understanding, lying within and beyond the struggles and the sufferings of our lives. This is at the heart of our readings this morning. For it is possible to overstate some elements of these texts. A preacher, for example, may be tempted to home in, somewhat exclusively, on the beguiling invitation of Jesus to 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' This is vital. Without such refreshment, we struggle.

Indeed, Jesus also shows the way in today's reading by going up a mountain alone to pray. Today is therefore a day when we can rightly reflect upon what kind of spiritual rest and refreshment we are finding in our own journeys of faith. We can also share together those avenues which we find helpful and we might encourage one another into deeper contemplative response, retreat, meditative practice and quiet prayerfulness. We can together also give thanks for how this is present in this place and our community's offering to others, and ponder how this might be nurtured and developed. All of this is vital and pertinent, and it is reflected in the choice of our hymns and songs this morning. Yet there is more to our readings than this.

One of the welcome aspects of Jesus' invitation to '*come away... and rest*', and their modelling of it, is that it is a refreshing complement to the intense activity of the Gospel stories, not least in Mark's Gospel. However, do we see that, despite Jesus' best endeavours, these aspects of peace seeking are most certainly not only not separated from the divine work of healing and justice but are also constantly challenged? For, despite such contemplative features being integral and foundational to Jesus-shaped living, they do not exactly correspond with many elements in other movements which stress rest and refreshment. Certainly, Mark's Gospel is not inviting us into uncritical affirmation of contemporary 'wellness' movements, much though they may contribute to human flourishing: including helping address negative body, and self, talk in some influential inherited spirituality. The context, and reality, of the peace of Jesus, is often somewhat different, in at least three ways: in terms of time, social location, and cost.

Firstly, in terms of time, the peace, salvation, or, perhaps we might say, the 'wellness' movement of Jesus is not easily defined by specific places or practices. Whilst we might adduce that Jesus, like Wendell Berry, drew profoundly on the wider 'natural', world - a very 'rural' world of seeds and harvests, trees, birds, mountains, and waterways - we have no obvious spiritual routines directly commended by Jesus, apart from the invitation to what some of us now call 'the holy sacraments', and the injunction to '*come apart... and rest*'.

We may also, quite legitimately, question whether Jesus had any intention of dismissing institutional religion as such, as some today might suggest. Jesus' participation in the religious forms of their day suggests that rather than seeking abolition, Jesus sought renewal of depth and transformation of meaning. Yet, despite the best efforts of various types of Christianity down the ages, there is no obvious blueprint provided by Jesus.

Jesus in the Gospels does not, for example, despise the temple or traditional practices as such, any more than they provide us with alternatives, beyond the sacraments and what has traditionally been known as the Lord's Prayer. As the great Cappadocian theologians warned, in regard to the growth of pilgrimages and 'holy places' in the early Church, we are therefore not overly to elevate particular means of coming apart and resting.

Secondly, in terms of social location, the Jesus salvation, or 'wellness', movement is somewhat different in origin from that of many 'wellness' movements today. For, where they are not quite exotic, taking place in far off or so-called 'idyllic', places, many spiritual retreats and refreshments tend to be somewhat distant from ordinary, and certainly very struggling people.

Of course, the history of the Church is also often a story of money, power and class taking over and distorting the life-giving spirituality of Jesus as received initially by ordinary people. Today, if we are honest, much of our own and other Church life is also very middle-class, as well as still very Western and European in its formulations. Fortunately, wellness movements which have been able to reach the masses can always re-emerge from Christianity: as, for example, with the early monastic and later Franciscan movements, and with early forms and aspects of Methodism and the Salvation Army.

Of course, it is also true to say that other modern wellness movements can also be made more accessible to the average, and poorer person: as, for example, in the example of my acupuncturist friend Kata, who offers twice monthly treatment sessions at low or no cost to the community at The Settlement neighbourhood centre in Redfern. Too often however, more well-to-do people monopolise such stress relief, post-traumatic stress and trauma care, mental and behavioural health care, and harm reduction support.

Thirdly, following on from this, the Jesus 'wellness' movement comes with different forms of cost. There is no indication in the Gospels, for example, that those who came to Jesus for healing were asked for the equivalent of today's credit card payment after a 'wellness' session, nor that they were then signed up by Jesus' disciples for the movement, other activities and sales.

On the other hand, we should note that today's Gospel reading includes Jesus doing much more than simply healing. For healing does not stand alone in Gospel 'wellness'. Teaching, as indicated by Mark, is part of the same work, and, although we leap those verses until next week, feeding and celebrating together are also integral. Truly understood, Gospel salvation, shalom - or 'wellness', or flourishing, as we might variously call it - the peace of Christ is about the whole of body and mind and soul, the whole of life. The cost is in one sense nothing, as it is a pure gift of grace. Yet it involves everything.

This brings us back both to Jesus' own experience and the story with which I began this Reflection. For, in Jesus' case, it is clear that they, and the disciples, never, or hardly ever, really find the kind of peace which is promised by all kinds of wellness movements. Even when they try to find a deserted place, the crowds follow them. Even when they seek to rest only in their own souls with God, they soon find others breaking in upon them. All of this I find quite reassuring: not that, as I said earlier, we might not seek more intentionally to take time aside and to find ways to rest and be refreshed. For is this not the situation in most of our human lives?

How many of us more ordinary folk really have the time, the luxury, or the resources, to escape to find complete peace? Do we not rather resonate with the experience of Jesus and the disciples when we try to find such elusive peace? The truth is that the peace of Christ is not an escape from ordinary life but a discovery within the heart of life, whatever life we find ourselves called to live. This is at the core of the story with which I began. For, turning common assumptions upside down, it is the child who dies who truly knows peace and it is the child who lives who needs to learn that peace from them. Of course, social, economic, physical and political pressures profoundly affect our well-being. Ultimately however, it is not our circumstances that determine whether we find peace in our lives but the way in which we view and live into them.

Let me conclude with some of my favourite words from one of my great Anglican priestly inspirations. Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy is now commemorated in the Church of England's lectionary cycle, but is best known as '*Woodbine Willie*': a moniker bestowed by soldiers in the First World War from his habit, as a chaplain, of giving out cigarettes as well as spiritual comfort in the trenches. Deeply loved as one of the few clergy who really 'got' the realities and horrors of war, he also won a Military Cross for running into no-man's land to save the wounded during an enemy attack.

Unlike too many priests and preachers down the centuries, he was well aware of the suffering, horrendous suffering, which is not easily assuaged by conventional pieties. So I have always thought that Studdert-Kennedy was nearer than most in his description of the peace of Christ: a peace which is not apart from the world but rather something, deeper and beyond, which can hold and transform its sufferings. For, as Woodbine Willie put it, from his experiences as a wartime padre:

*Peace does not mean the end of all our striving,*

*Joy does not mean the drying of our tears.*

*Peace is the power that comes to souls arriving*

*Up to the light where God Himself appears.*<sup>ii</sup>

Whether we find that peace, like Wendell Berry, or Jesus, in nature's wild things, or, as in Jesus, or the child by the window, in our own nature as divine wild things, may we know that truth, and that peace, now and always in our lives, and live it out in the world for others.

In the peace and wildness of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/peace-wild-things-0/>

<sup>ii</sup> In *The Hardest Part* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919, accessed at <https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9780334056560/the-hardest-part>