

Rejoice and Play

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 August 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 12B

Contemporary Reading: *Rejoice and Play* by Joe Primo; John 6, 31 & 41-51

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

Powerful proclamation is at the heart of today's Gospel reading. Let me therefore speak about three things in relationship to it: about Christian doctrine, chess, and two Reformed gifts; and about how they may each help us to rejoice and play in this our current season of gratefulness.

Let's begin with Christian doctrine. For the position of Doctrine lecturer in my theological college was, in my time, rather like that of the Defence against the Dark Arts teacher in the Harry Potter books: being very changeable, and involving several interesting characters, none of whom lasted very long. Some, of course, might say that that was kind of appropriate as doctrine can be used as a very dark art at times!

My first, and very capable, doctrine lecturer fell in love with another woman than his wife and went off to be a social worker. The second sadly died very suddenly. The third, a bit of a fill-in, went off to the USA to teach liturgy, his real gift. Thank goodness we then had the notable Janet Martin Soskice, later a Professor of philosophical theology at Cambridge University. Janet was definitely a star, as well as bringing new dimensions as a Catholic and a woman.

Maybe, however, it is my first doctrine lecturer I remember most, partly for particular insights he shared, including the idea that Christian doctrine is somewhat like playing chess. So, in the interest of not only doing my part to defend against today's spiritual dark arts, let me explore that metaphor a little bit this morning. For it helps shed further light on the great Johannine *Bread of Life* discourse, which itself provides an encouragement to spiritual play - which we also heard about in our contemporary reading today. All of which is also intertwined with what we might call Reformed gifts, which are most certainly a part of the Christian chess set and its potential to help us live into the playfulness of God.

Now I am not overly sold on chess analogies. However, if you are a chess player, as I was in my youth, you will know that there are a variety of different openings, gambits and permutations involved in playing. That is why chess remains so absorbing, if typically demanding at the highest levels. For whilst there are clear boundaries, there is no one way of playing, or perfect style. Rather, whilst observing the properties and balance of different pieces and possibilities, different stratagems are possible for different contexts. Indeed, the pieces themselves might be likened to different Christian types.

If, for example, we permit the king to be Christ, the ultimate focus of the game, other pieces are arguably a little symbolic of certain traditions. The most powerful piece is thus undoubtedly the Queen, a bit like Catholics in the Christian set-up: able to do many things, yet not in themselves either supremely important or able really to play effectively without others. The rooks, or castles, are a little like Lutherans and Presbyterians: also pretty effective in their own way, albeit a little restricted to one set of pathways. The bishops, well, they'd likely be Anglicans and Episcopalians: pretty handy sometimes, and also able to trace their own lines, but, in their case, with tangents, and even diamonds, on diagonals. As for the knights, with their extraordinary way of moving, well, I guess they might be Methodists at their best, and, still more, Pentecostals. This leaves us, in this analogy, with the pawns: who, like Baptists, Congregationalists, and Quakers, remind us that everyone is involved in the game, and potentially can also become queens themselves.

As I say, let's not get hung up on that analogy, especially the possible implication that the king might represent God as fragile masculinity that we might need to defend! What I'm trying to suggest is that we can approach religion more playfully, like Joe Primo in his article on the *Grateful Living* website.¹ Of course, this is not about avoiding the hard things in life. Indeed, today's Gospel not only involves controversy, but the conflict is heightened as the story proceeds, not least through Jesus' own words. For we cannot simply iron out Gospel challenge in the interest of supposed harmony. Rather, as William Countryman put it, in his book *The Mystical Way of the Fourth Gospel*, we find repeated 'obnoxious discourse' in Gospel texts. For the Gospels call for a decision about Jesus. As Jesus says, in the language of the updated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one from God; who has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.

We need to understand those words' original situation. For they reflect conflicts within Judaeon religion and the world of the first Christian decades; and, not least, they are encouragements to Jesus' early followers in the context of great struggles and persecution. Yet they also witness to the continuing challenge of Jesus down the centuries. For, from the outset of Jesus' ministry, alongside inspired teaching and actions, the question is always posed: '*but who do you say that I am?*' Note well: this is not the more limited question of who are Jesus' immediate human family, nor the question of how Jesus relates to received traditions. No, this is the much deeper question of whom Jesus is in relation to the great '*I am*', God in Godself.

Oh dear, we may say, now we are in the realm of discomfiting doctrine: indeed so. Today's Gospel reading cannot, in my view, be read fully without its context: namely the call to live out a Christ-shaped life. That is its profound value, and its limitation. If we use it to apply directly to everyone everywhere, we will be in trouble. Yet, to mix metaphors, we will truly be fed by the bread of life if we employ doctrine playfully in the game we are invited to by Jesus. This brings us to two Reformed gifts.

Firstly, uncomfortable though it may be for some others, Lutherans are among those who continue to insist on the centrality of God in Christ and on Christ's work of saving faith. Today's text can be employed in that way, encouraging us to focus on Christ as the way to light out of darkness and to fullness of life. This is also clearly expressed in the classic Reformation theological principles known as the '*solae*', usually today affirmed by five phrases considered as foundational to salvation.

These include the two key declarations of the original Reformers: of '*sola gratia*' – that is, (salvation) by grace alone – and '*sola fide*' – by faith alone. To these are typically added other phrases: namely, '*sola scriptura*' (by scripture alone), '*solus Christus*' (Christ alone), and '*solus Deo Gloria*' (glory to God alone).

Now some may balk at such affirmations, and, like today's Gospel passage, there is no doubt that they can be used in very narrowing ways. However, like today's Gospel text, we should be careful to recognise both what they seek to do and what they are not trying to do. For they are best viewed as glorious expressions of what Martin Luther himself called 'the freedom of the Christian', not as propositional statements to confine Christians, and bully others.

In this it is helpful to note how so many Christian theologians talk of the 'sufficiency' of such 'solae', rather than seeing them as exclusive truth claims. In other words, we really do not need much at all for salvation, to know the fullness of life. Grace suffices: as does faith, Christ, scripture, and God's glory. Of course, some will insist on understanding the 'solae' as exclusive: for example, as only scripture, and only Christ, with nothing else of value.

A Gospel text like today's can similarly be used to fan flames of sectarian division. However, that is to treat theology and scripture as restrictive weapons, rather than as tools to enliven and enlarge our lives and world. For the freedom of both the Reformation 'solae', and the Gospel text, is that we do not need to complicate our lives to grow in God's love. It is not that other aspects of life and other philosophies cannot also feed us. It is that we do not need to be overwhelmed by complexity. For grace suffices, in the playfulness of God.

Another way of putting this is to say that doctrine is always analogical. Indeed, as one of her grateful students, that has been the life work of contemporary theologians like Janet Martin Soskice, who continue to explore the richness of metaphor and different models of religious language. For, like John's Gospel, doctrine is best understood as describing rather than dictating God's way, truth, and life. It does not so much give us the mind of God but expresses our experience of God: inviting us into the freedom, the creativity, of the life of Christ.

All of which brings us to a second, and lesser appreciated, Reformed gift, through the recently departed great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann is known for many vital theological contributions, including his liberation theology, profound understanding of God suffering with us, and rich and realistic theologies of hope and of God in creation.

However, one of his sadly underestimated books was entitled *Theology of Play*. For Moltmann wanted to see a paradigm shift, in both religion and life: a shift from work to play, from necessity and outcome to freedom and spontaneity, from 'adult' notions of purpose and goal to 'childlike' enjoyment of God for God's own sake.

In other words, to use the old Reformers' language, he encouraged a shift from law to gospel. For the Christian life itself, Moltmann rightly said, is ultimately about delight in God. So, '*to confuse the enjoyment of God and our existence with goals and purposes*' sacrifices the freedom of liberation that is the good news of Jesus Christ. We are therefore to learn from children and learn to play, to play without any "purpose" as such. Indeed, the very question of purpose is the '*question of the adult in the child who doesn't want to play anymore but needs goals in order to make something respectable of themselves.*'

Isn't that what has happened to much Christianity? Too often, it becomes an overly 'purpose driven life', rather than a game of delight in the God who creates and redeems the world for nothing.

So let us return, in closing, to my chess analogy. For I wonder whether part of our religious problems come from forgetting that doctrine is a form of play, in a similar way to that in which the Gospel statements of Jesus are also playful ways of encouraging us into new life. In this, as I have suggested, chess pieces might be likened to various forms of faith expression, each with particular gifts.

However, what about the board itself? What if the spaces on, in, and through which we play are much more extraordinary, and certainly not black and white binary squares? What then? Perhaps this is at the very heart of the Jesus challenge today: the challenge to how we truly find and share the bread of life.

Years ago, an Aboriginal Anglican priest helpfully said to me that Australian Christianity is like the stale bread the first colonists brought from Europe. That sounds right, sadly, doesn't it? For we have tried to share the bread of life here with the same old pieces and, ungrounded, on largely unquestioned lines.

May we therefore be open to those who ask us to ground our faith in the spiritual ground and experience of this time and place, valuing what is helpful from the old games, but actively responding to God's invitation to play afresh.

Jesus met those who would not rejoice and pray, but preferred confining doctrine rather than allowing themselves to feed afresh on the bread of life and feed others.

Let it not be so among us.

In Jesus' name and the playfulness of God. Amen.

ⁱ <https://grateful.org/resource/rejoice-and-play/>