

Finding Gratitude & Hope in the Darkness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 18 August 2024

A Reflection by Rev Suzanne Stanton

Pentecost 13B

Contemporary Reading: *Compelled by Hope* by Joe Primo; John 6: 51-58

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

Gracious and loving God,
through the reading of holy Scripture,
feed us with your living Word
and reveal to us the way of life in all its fullness.
Amen.

Nagganbi, good morning.ⁱ

I begin by acknowledging the first people of this place, the Gadigal, and their Elders of the past, and of the present. And I also give grateful thanks for emerging leaders of First Nations people throughout this land now called Australia.

In this season of gratitude, it is good to remember and acknowledge the care and nurture of this land through generation upon generation before the colonisers arrived; and to give thanks for the store of wisdom about how we can live in this place that remains there for us - if we would take the time and humble ourselves to hear truth and story from First Nations people.

We hope, pray and work for a more just settlement for First Nations people here and for indigenous people throughout the world.

The texts for today have provided me with the opportunity for rich reflection and deep thinking and I express my gratitude for them and the opportunity to ponder what they might be saying to me and to us all.

I often find preparing to preach or lead a reflection to be a time of struggle – it takes time to clearly articulate something from texts often unclear and mysterious, to draw meaning from sources diverse and ancient and rich in imagery and metaphor.

There can be a wrestling and challenge to hold faith that the right words will emerge and that time spent in contemplating the text and the world into which these words will be spoken and heard will be fruitful.

It is just one example of where rich rewards can be found from a journey through moments where there is no clarity, where things are hard to see. And sometimes there isn't clarity at the end of the journey and the pondering – just more questions...

I sometimes wish for myself that I found it as simple as it seems to be for some to state it all with absolute certainty and clarity.

In these texts I have drawn out three key themes: the theme of gratitude, that you are dwelling upon for a season here at Pitt Street, and the theme of hope - and then bringing these two themes together with how we encounter the darkness or the times in our lives that we might describe as dark or difficult.

Often in Biblical texts we hear reference to darkness in the negative; likewise in other writing and thought. Often a service of worship will begin with the lighting of a candle, and the statement that Jesus is the light of the world that the darkness will not overcome.

It is less common to instead state that Christ might be with us in the darkness as we begin a service of worship, and even rarer to give thanks for the darkness.

In my correspondence with Rev. Josephine before today, as she shared with me the readings and themes, I was immediately drawn to return to a book I read a few years ago – *“Learning to Walk in the Dark”* by Barbara Brown Taylor ⁱⁱ. I thought its first chapter particularly worth reflecting on in the context of this congregation and the PRIDE network that I hold in my heart as part of my role in Uniting. In her book, Barbara Brown Taylor ⁱⁱⁱ explores why many Christians seem to make everything very binary and oppositional – good versus evil, spirit against flesh, church versus world, sacred against profane.

And, of course, light against darkness.

In her book Barbara Brown Taylor journals about her experiences and leads us into her experience of learning to walk in the dark, with an encouragement to do so ourselves.

From her writing I draw a sense that liberation comes when we recognise that these binary divisions, this creating of divisions, is not accurate or helpful. For most often it is not one or the other, it is both/and, perhaps a gentle blurring between, or maybe better described as a spectrum of colour and light of variable intensity.

Barbara Brown Taylor, for example, shares of her realisation that it is not in fact correct to say that something is *“as clear as night and day”*. In fact between those two is the twilight and even within the twilight there are stages and subtlety as those stages move from one to the other. It is hard to know when the day has ended and the night has come.

And although the darkness has often been characterised as scary and to be avoided, as the darkness falls the moon and the stars emerge in all their mystery and beauty. There is light, a softer gentler light where everything looks different and things can be seen in new ways.

I also look to the world around me, and like the quote in the contemporary reading today, I see around me that much happens in the dark, darkness is not a negative force or a place where nothing happens. Where I live it is very evident that we are emerging from the shorter days of winter into the longer days of spring. Plants that rely on the changing day lengths for the next stages of their life are blooming after the shorter days which have allowed them to store up their energies, and to be transformed and renewed underground where we cannot see. As spring arrives that internal transformation will become evident in visible new growth and new life.

I arrived late in my life to the church and I would describe myself as a practical theologian who finds deepest spirituality grounded in action and connection to the land. This fits well for me as a great deal of the work of Uniting, where I am called to be in ministry placement, is to provide practical care and assistance, encouragement, support and the opportunity for meaning making and faith for many people whose bodies, minds and experiences make them vulnerable - and sadly sometimes unseen and forgotten by others.

This could be in the realm of disability, dementia, aging, mental illness, and also working with people whose support structures have fallen apart or in some cases never existed. As Joe Primo says, and Barbara Brown Taylor too in a different way, working in this realm and leading people to finding hope and even gratitude in these experiences and situations is not about the false illusion that all is well, or a “*solar spirituality*” where the sun always shines, or “*toxic positivity*” that says that if we just have faith, it will all be ok, there will be no darkness, and perfection of life and health will always be restored.

However in our work I see regularly that dignity is honoured and lives find meaning and purpose that hard circumstances are in some way redeemed.

We can be grateful and hopeful about this without pretending that the world is not often a difficult place, and still acknowledging that difficulty falls more heavily for some than for others, or at some times of our lives more so than others. This is what I think Joe Primo references – engaging with life in its messy fullness. As Primo writes “*this is because grateful hope shows us that there is something in the mess worth discovering. Here we disrupt the stories we’ve been told and the stories we tell ourselves about the world. We arrive without binary thinking but with deep observation that will consequently invite action*”.

So, a person becomes more than the labels they are given – more than old, or sick, or disabled and instead remains a person and our time with them may bless us with things worth discovering and lead us to compassionate action that is an act of hope, and worthy of deep gratitude, both for the giver who has the privilege to give it, and for the receiver of the gift.

Primo mentioned structures; and I think even our institutions can be seen in this light. I now work and engage in ministry in a huge organisation that is growing every day, but that is part of a church institution that often describes itself as declining and struggling. Neither of these institutions and organisations are perfect by any means, but their errors and faults also do not make them unworthy of hope or lead us to be ungrateful for them as a whole. They both bless and struggle and hurt and have more to learn and growing to do.

And yes, it is hard in both church and agency to keep going when the way ahead is not entirely clear, and the weight of our past errors may leave us ashamed and grieving, and in times when the church’s place in the world has become more uncertain and less clear. Can this be redeemed? And will the church be able to acknowledge and engage with the growth that such adversity could bring to it?

To use part of a quote by Chet Raymo in a book called “*The Soul of the Night*”^{iv} if we flee from the darkness and wilderness that the constantly ever-changing world around us may seem to be these days – if we retreat to our temples and places where we feel safe and certain – who will hear the voices crying in the wilderness and the reeds shaken by the wind?

Again, this is not to gloss over the difficulty and the wrongs – but it is a call to move beyond a sense of paralysis and frustration into living in the mess and being in the world, and finding hope, and expressing our gratitude for our precious lives through acts of compassion and mercy to other precious lives. To experience that hope and gratitude as well, to be a source of hope and gratitude as we walk with others through the mess of life, dark and light and all that is in between. As Joe Primo writes, redeeming the “...*shadows that are cast upon our hope*”.

It takes courage to stay in those spaces and not retreat.

I want to finish my reflection today by relating these themes to the passage from the Gospel of John. For those who have followed the lectionary over these last few weeks you will be familiar now with this lengthy discourse speaking of bread and life and flesh and food. It is not those themes that I will speak on today.

Instead, I want to take one line from the text, a sentence that brings me hope and for which I am grateful. First because of its incarnational sense – that Jesus is God with us through all, including our suffering, and second because Jesus is God with all of us. Jesus says “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*”

Going back to where I began my reflection around the binary way in which some Christian traditions have understood faith, and where therefore there has been a sense of the need to separate ourselves from the world, to be against, or in opposition to the world. But here Jesus makes himself available for the whole world, for all people, without division and so that they may know life. As a favourite commentary of mine^v, on the Gospel of John, puts it “...*this bread is given for the life of the world, not just for those who make confident claims about ancestry and God’s activity.*” It is life given beyond any faith tradition, community or place.

When I visit congregations like Pitt Street I always try to take the opportunity to look at the congregation’s mission statement or other statements about who they are and who they believe they are being called to be.

I also know a little of Pitt Street’s history and for this I give thanks – Pitt Street has provided a community and hope for many over decades and even centuries. It has been a place where the messy fullness of life has been recognised and where people have been welcomed as they have travelled through times of struggle whether spiritual or physical. There has been a force at work here to expand the realm of God’s love, not to limit it.

As I reflect on the work of the part of the church I am in, in Uniting, and the mission of Pitt Street I am grateful to see our shared commitment to compassion and justice.

I am also grateful to have spent this time with you today and hope to bless you all in your continuing ministry and presence in this place and beyond.

Amen

ⁱ Nagganbi is “Hello” in the Dharawal language, the language of my ancestors.

ⁱⁱ “*Learning to Walk in the Dark*” Barbara Brown Taylor © Barbara Brown Taylor 2014, Canterbury Press, London.

ⁱⁱⁱ People may also wish to watch this lecture by Barbara Brown Taylor [Learning to Walk in the Dark, 9.15.2013 on Vimeo](#)

^{iv} Quoted from its use in the book “*Learning to Walk in the Dark*” – see previous endnote.

^v Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries “John” by Karoline M. Lewis, © 2014 Fortress Press