

Wisdom embodied

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 15 September 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Creation 3; and Faiths for Climate Justice Week of Action

Proverbs 1: 20-33; Mark 8: 27-38

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

'But who do you say that I am?' said Jesus. What a question! How do we respond? Let us explore this vital faith inquiry a little bit this morning, also asking what the figure of Wisdom in our reading from Proverbs might have to say to us. And let us further ask what the question of the identity and purpose of Christ might have to say in relation to our own identity and purpose in this Season of Creation. For how we name and understand the divine makes a big difference to how we relate not only to God, but to ourselves, and to the wider world.

'But who do you say that I am?' This question is literally and spiritually at the very heart of Mark's Gospel. For today's reading is found halfway through, and it acts as both a narrative hinge and a theological focal point for the whole of the Gospel. The identity and purpose of Jesus as the Christ is named, and, like the first disciples, those hearing the Gospel are invited to make our own response.

My guess is that, especially in this faith community, we might each respond in different ways, and that each of us might also respond in different ways at different times in the journeys of our lives. For the question *'but who do you say that I am?'* is not a once and for all question of faith, but one to which we are invited to return again and again, perhaps even daily, depending on our faith and devotional practices. That is one reason why, historically, the greater part of the Christian Church has also typically invited worshippers to affirm one of the great ecumenical creeds on a frequent, often weekly, basis. Indeed, from before I could read, saying, or rather singing, the creed was part of my own weekly faith practice.

Like the Lord's Prayer and some other key liturgical forms which have come down the centuries, the phraseology of the creeds therefore lives in my heart and consciousness, including what it says of Jesus the Christ as *'light of light, true God of true God.'* Indeed, I believe that we miss something if we forget about the ecumenical creeds, which is why they remain at the very heart of the Uniting Church's basis of faith. For the creeds remind us of the long, deep, and very rich and nuanced human exploration of that question: *'but who do you say I am?'*

Now, among some of us here, I am well aware that there is aversion, even allergic reaction, to the ecumenical creeds. Yet, like the Bible, in my view we do well to treat such weighty expressions of received faith seriously, if not always literally. For rightly understood, like the Bible, they offer us spiritual foundations and resources on which to build and grow.

Indeed, without such things, I suspect that human beings, and faith communities, easily drift, become overly anxious, and distracted. In which sense, I love the way in which Orthodox Christians speak of the creeds as symbols: as pointers to depth and meaning in and beyond ourselves, which, rather than confining us, ground us and offer us tried and tested pathways of spiritual growth. This does not have to deny fresh understanding and human creativity, but it can provide helpful substance and perspective, even if we might not use the same language terms today.

I will come back to God language, and classical gendered forms, shortly. For the moment, as an example of how the structure of the ecumenical creeds can help us, particularly in relation to today's Gospel reading, we might note the way in which the second (the Jesus Christ) stanza of the great Nicene Creed is composed. For this begins, like Peter in our story today, with a declaration about the identity of Christ: affirming the faith of the '*one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*' Church, that, whatever our different denominations:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.*

Wow! - that is cosmic stuff. Unlike Peter in today's story however, the purpose of this divine affirmation is not about power as usually understood in worldly terms. Where Peter was thinking of Jesus as 'the Christ', or Messiah, in terms of mighty human strength and political achievement, the second part of the Nicene Creed says something else. For, in its ancient language, it speaks of the letting go of power and the strength of human vulnerability through the willingness of love to be subject to the powers of this world. For Christ's identity may be divine but the purpose of Christ is not human majesty but loving transformation. As the Nicene Creed goes on to put it:

*For us and for our salvation Christ came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; suffered death and was buried.*

Properly understood, this is the very opposite of an imperial, success, or prosperity theology of the rich and powerful. This is central to Mark's message. In the Gospel, Peter is told in no uncertain terms that, even if he has affirmed the divine identity of Jesus, he has terribly misunderstood the purpose of that identity. For Jesus has not come to triumph in worldly terms but to suffer for love. This is the path of salvation.

What a hard lesson that is, not just for Peter but for all who seek to follow Jesus, including those, like us, who hear this message today! No wonder Mark has to repeat Jesus' teaching about the need for suffering twice more in his Gospel. For any 'high' language we use for Jesus the Christ has to be balanced by the 'low': as, to put it in Lutheran terms, we are being invited into sharing a '*theology of the cross*' not a theology of '*glory*'. This, as the Nicene Creed witnesses, is because there is a creative paradox of identity and purpose at the very heart of God.

The book of Proverbs also expresses this paradox. In some ways, this may indeed be more helpful for many than the ecumenical creeds, at least as they are often received today. One reason is that the naming of the divine is expressed in female terms, and, in today's passage, in a manner with which it is easy to identify. For, despite her best efforts, Woman Wisdom is deeply frustrated that she is not heard. We can surely resonate, whether it is in relation to personal, ecological, peace, or other issues. How far however do we identify this Woman Wisdom with the Christ in the Gospel that Peter names in his experience of Jesus?

I suggested last week, in speaking about the Syro-Phoenician woman, that it may indeed be helpful to see the Earth, and those who care for her, as the embodiment of divine Wisdom, otherwise known, in Greek, as Sophia. Might this also be analogous in some way with what Aboriginal peoples call Country? The book of Proverbs is certainly clear that Wisdom is akin to what our Christian Tradition calls Christ. Especially in chapters 3 and 8, Proverbs speaks of Woman Wisdom in terms similar to the Nicene Creed: namely as a partner with God and present at creation; as an embodied human figure, mediating between the human and divine, and enhancing human experience and wisdom.

What a difference it might have made, and can make, for Christians to speak of Jesus as Sophia: as the Wisdom of God rather than simply the Word of God! I guess that is part of what Pitt Street Uniting Church, as a community, seeks to do, in terms of both liturgy and life. It is now over thirty years since Elizabeth A. Johnson outlined some of the theological possibilities in her landmark book *She Who Is*.

Addressing the patriarchal inheritance of Faith, also manifest in the great creeds, she rejected the 'solutions' offered by some. These include discarding words such as 'God' entirely, or simply adding a few more 'feminine' traits to the dominant images of God. Even trying to use various gendered images equally can be problematic, she rightly said, unless we do so with due attention, seeking deeper understanding and not mere compensation.

This brings us back to our Proverbs reading today. For, like Jesus, Woman Wisdom who cries out in this passage is no theoretical idea but a divinely human figure who is deeply embodied and engaged in our world. Like Jesus in Mark's Gospel, she bursts onto the scene in Proverbs first chapter, disrupting any conventional expectations of women's behaviours in the ancient world. For hers is a prophetic voice and it is expressed in the very heart of the city. Like Jesus, her divine identity is also not only deeply down to earth but intimately entwined with her purpose: namely, the liberation and salvation of her world. As Elizabeth Stuart put it, in her article on Proverbs in the *Queer Bible Commentary*, if we therefore look for God, we will find her/him/them in '*the heart of human activity*', in life and in creation itself.

Like Mark's Christ, Sophia – Woman Wisdom - brings challenge as well as comfort. Our reading therefore speaks of the anguish of God that her message is not being heard and of the pain she feels at the consequences that will result. In the midst of the climate crisis, we can surely identify with this. We too share the divine sorrow and distress at the pain of our world, whenever and wherever we recognise and embody Wisdom/Sophia crying out to us and sharing in the world's suffering.

How then do we name and respond to Christ, to Sophia? Today's readings call us not only to identify divine light in Christ but to share that light for its true purpose: namely, witnessing for hope and healing. For it is not enough, like Peter, to utter names for the living God without living out and embodying the wisdom of God.

We might in that sense also change the language of the Christian Tradition in various ways without necessarily making a significant difference, unless that naming is embodied in the living out of suffering love: Wisdom alive in the market place, including Faiths for Climate Justice Action.

There is one more thing to be said however, as we seek to name and respond to the living God among us today. Returning to the second (the Jesus Christ) stanza of the Nicene Creed, that ancient family song of the Church, it not only speaks of the eternal light, found in Jesus-Sophia, and of his/her/their embodiment in suffering love. It also proclaims the hope in which we live and breathe as Christians, however we name that reality. For whilst Proverbs shows us God as the light of eternal Wisdom active in the heart of life, the Nicene Creed, like Mark's Gospel, speaks not only of the call to speak and act, and to suffer, but also of transcendent living hope. As the Creed puts it:

*On the third day Christ rose again in accordance with the scriptures;
ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

That is picture, rather than literal, language but its purpose, like that of Christ, is clear. We live in the power of inexhaustible love and the promise of the resurrection. So, in this Season of Creation, with whatever we say about Jesus, may we indeed, be strengthened '*to hope and to act with Creation.*'

In the name of Sophia-Jesus, holy Wisdom, embodied in Country. Amen.