

What's the story?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 22 September 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Creation 4

Contemporary Reading: from *The Great Song*

by Brother David Steindl-Rast; Mark 9:30-37

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

What's the story, morning glory?

No, this is not the start of a tribute to one of the biggest British music bands of all time! 'What's the story, morning glory' is indeed however not only a lyric and a song but the title of Oasis' somewhat overrated but undoubtedly seminal album of the 1990s. The song, 'What's the story, morning glory' is itself hardly the star of the album, but it is significant in naming our human temptations to escapism, the pursuit of transient pleasures and the will to live by a deeper meaning. For what is the story by and into which we seek to live our lives? This is at the heart of the questions posed by our two readings today. Not least in this Season of Creation, what centres and guides our lives?

Today's Gospel reading has Jesus following up with the disciples in teaching that suffering is an accompaniment of the Way of Jesus, as that is a key aspect of authentic divine love. In this story however the challenge of love is focused in the placing of a child in the midst of the gathering. For in Jesus' day, children embodied the lowest of the low, the most vulnerable, marginal, and easily discardable. All of which is vital for us to reflect upon as we consider what is marginal and central to our lives and world: at least in earthly terms. Who and what belongs at the heart of our stories?

Our contemporary reading from Brother David Steindl-Rast - 'The Great Story' - offers us another vital dimension. Indeed, arguably this is one of the most crucial dimensions to a living healthy story today. For whilst those in Jesus' world took this as read, modern people typically find it much more difficult to associate with the cosmic and the heavenly. Indeed, all the developments of modern science seem to have distanced rather than brought human beings closer to the wider cosmos of which we are a part. Core therefore to our human mental and social, as well as planetary, health must be a recovery of our sense of belonging: deep belonging, not only to our human families and connections, emotionally and practically significant as they may or may not be, but belonging to all that exists.

How do we renew this core sense of belonging? In a minute or two I will invite us to share in a meditation as one way in. Firstly however, let me say something about the healthy theology we also need. For, too often, religious practice, teaching and spirituality can become an obstacle rather than an aid. Where that is so, it is a major problem for humanity. Indeed, let us recall that the Latin derivation of the word religion is 'religio', which means 'binding' in English.

Healthy religion's purpose is thus about enabling belonging: binding us, not simply to one another and to God, but to all that exists. The heart of the challenge of the Season of Creation is therefore much more than inviting us to celebrate God in Creation and encouraging us to care and act for the Earth. We are also called to renew our theology and address how it separates - rather than binds and belongs. For sadly, Christians are all too often seeking to praise God in Creation and act environmentally with very outdated notions.

One of the contemporary theologians who offers us renewed, dynamic, theological vision is the Franciscan Ilia Delio. She names our contemporary conceptual problems and offers us ways out. For, as she says, we live in a world which is trapped in a '*cult of cosmic pessimism*':

Cosmic pessimism is the belief that nature has no purpose and that whatever meaning exists in the world is our own human creation. This belief is taken for granted by most scientific thinkers today.

In contrast, Ilia Delio encourages us to share a different approach. For, she writes:

with the aid of the new idea of an unfinished universe, theology may point out that cosmic pessimism, which is usually taken as the epitome of hard-nosed realism, is not as self-evidently justifiable as it seems to most contemporary intellectuals. Geology, evolutionary biology, and cosmology now situate Earth, life, and human existence within the framework of an immense cosmic drama of transformation that is still going on.ⁱ

Ilia Delio is not alone in such thinking. Indeed, she explicitly draws on earlier prophetic modern Christian thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton who also invited us to change our lenses of perception, and re-conceptualise how God and world, science and sacrality, live and move together. For, unless we seek to bind Christian faith to ancient categories, or simply reject that to which they sought to point, '*secularisation is not a zero-game necessitating the demise of faith*'. Despite the ideological fundamentalist rationalism of the likes of Richard Dawkins, as Ilia Delio rightly says:

Nor does the new spirituality reject science. What it rejects is scientism in which the methodology and data of natural science alone are allowed to contribute to our understanding of the world and the human condition in it. The new spirituality also calls on natural science itself as a witness against the inadequacies of a purely secularised worldview.

Ilia Delio's call to humanity is thus to share in '*co-creating an unfinished universe*'. Like great theologians down the ages, this does indeed require that we take seriously the reason and conceptual gifts of our time, letting go of what makes no sense. However, to use Ilia Delio's words again:

The discoveries of twentieth-century science, especially Big Bang cosmology ("universalism" or cosmic wholeness) and evolution (nature's openness to the future), ushered in two new dimensions of life, wholeness and futurism. Contrary to the ancient Ptolemaic cosmos of order, stasis, and hierarchy, the Big Bang cosmos was now seen in its evolving capacity for greater wholeness and openness to consummation in the future.

Theologically therefore, we will have problems if we confine God to static categories, beyond the world of existence. That might indeed belong to ancient philosophy in which Christianity took early forms. Yet, seeing things afresh, the God of the Bible is surely shown to us to be deeply engaged in the life of the world; as relationship not as an abstract concept; and as constantly revealing divinity in a continuing creation in partnership with human beings and all that is created. Ilia Delio, and the best of contemporary theology about the cosmos, therefore encourages us to understand God as in the very heart of the unfolding of our evolving Creation. Science and faith are not necessarily opposed but partners in tracing, respectively, both the patterns and the meaning of life. Faith does not do well when it tries to do the job of science. However, we do not have to live with 'cosmic pessimism'. Rather, as Thomas Merton put it, faith provides us with a mystical dimension which enables us not only to describe our world, but to belong to it, profoundly. In Ilia Delio's words:

The Christian's vision of the world ought, by its very nature, to have in it something of poetic inspiration. Our faith ought to be capable of filling our hearts with a wonder and a wisdom which see beyond the surface of things and events, and grasp something of the inner and "sacred" meaning of the cosmos which, in all its movements and all its aspects, sings the praises of its Creator and Redeemer.

As a way into sharing 'The Great Story', let me therefore invite us all to share a meditative exercise (from an article, by Sheryl Chard, on David Steindl-Rast's *Grateful Living* website, entitled 'The Constellation of Your Belonging'.ⁱⁱ

For 'a constellation, as, of course, a pattern of stars is a rich metaphor for thinking about the ways we inhabit a shared orbit, even when we feel alone. When we first learn, for example, that the stars shine during the day, but we simply can't see them, it's a revelation. You may even remember when you figured this out or someone explained it to you. The stars don't actually go away during the day. It's what some scholars call a kind of threshold understanding, because once you know it, you cannot unknow it. What if it were possible to understand our own sense of belonging in this threshold understanding kind of way, in a way that we cannot unknow? This simple practice supports that, or at least plants a seed to explore it. It's a practice of naming, revealing and appreciating the sometimes invisible constellation in which we each exist. It's a practice also of re-remembering ourselves: thereby feeling, again, our membership in the cosmic family of all creation.

So to get started, I invite you, if you're comfortable, to close your eyes, and to take a few breaths that allow you to arrive to this moment with as much ease as possible in your body, in your heart...

I invite you to bring to mind a constellation. A constellation can take many, many shapes, of course, but for the purposes of this practice, imagine one that's a spiral. Imagine yourself at the centre of that spiral and around you are concentric circles of light...

As you visualise this, start at the outermost ring of this constellation and allow yourself to look back at your life and the lives that came before you, and name some of the people who paved the way for your being alive today. These might be familial ancestors or historical figures, writers, activists, leaders, who made your existence a possibility. And as you bring them to mind, take a moment to give thanks for the sacrifices, choices, and the love that they made in order for you to exist.

Following your spiral inward, in your mind's eye, bring to mind some of the people whose work in the world allows you simply to be kept alive and connected. People who grow your food, develop medicine, build roads, provide services to you. And as you think of them, offer your appreciation...

As you continue following the spiral toward the centre, name some of the friends, family, or colleagues to whom your life is linked. Include those who may be very close to you now as well as some who have been so at a different time in your life. Don't try to name everyone, but note whomever arises. And simply offer your thanks...

After naming these human connections, try bringing to mind a specific way that you are connected to and supported by all of life — the earth, the ancient trees, water and air, the faithful moon — and add these to your constellation...

I invite you to pause and take this in for a moment. Take stock of this constellation. Where are the places it's shimmering? Where are there places where there are gaps?...

Now return to the image of the constellation with you at the very centre. If your eyes are open, you might close them and re-imagine the shimmering stars that encircle you....

You are at the centre of this spiral constellation, this network of support and interconnectedness. I invite you to consider this: You live and breathe within this light; you exist in this network of interconnection; and even on your loneliest day, this constellation is alive and shimmering, as present as the stars in the daytime sky. That you belong is a fact...

Now, slowly, come back to this time and place...

What's the story in which we know ourselves to belong?

Let us give ourselves times, like this one we have just shared, to allow ourselves to enter into it and live it. Maybe then, to borrow another Oasis song title, it will truly become the Wonderwall of our lives.

In the name of Jesus, the embodiment of Wisdom, the Way of suffering Love, and the Wonderwall of all Creation, Amen.

ⁱ in From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe

ⁱⁱ <https://grateful.org/author/sheryl65607/>