

Loosing the Tongue, to Speak of Peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 December 2024

A Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Advent 2 C

Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 1: 68-79; A contemporary poem by Jan Richardson

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

We are very disappointed that Stephanie Dowrick cannot be with us today after being severely injured in a fall. She has written and spoken extensively on peace-making and written perceptively about specific conflicts in the world today. I know she is also very disappointed that she can't be here.

When Cathy and I were brain-storming themes for this Advent service, we focused on peace. We started with Act for Peace and it's a wonderful flow on from having Act for Peace and the Christmas Bowl last week. We talked about finding peace within, in a time of conflict and sharing peace. Jan Richardson gives us a clue, in her prayer, of the kind of inner work we need to do to achieve peace in our individual lives and as a society. We need to understand our fears and our sorrows in order to create the paths of peace.

I decided to call this reflection *Loosing the Tongue, to Speak of Peace*, as a reference to the wonderful story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, whose tongue is loosened at his son's naming. In his prophecy he gives a profound picture of a pathway to peace in the passage from the gospel of Luke. More on this later!

So I invite you to come with me on an exploration of the inner world of feeling and dilemmas. It won't be a smooth ride, I'll be jumping around from ideas and experiences but I hope you can find resonances in your own heart. So jumping right in -

This year I experienced in a way, that I can't remember ever experiencing with such intensity before, the lift of spirits, with the coming of Spring. In the shared garden in Bundanoon, I firstly, was aware of the newly bright light and warm rays of the sun in the cool air and the incredible energy of nature bursting into bud and blossom all around me. I profoundly experienced the sense of the spirit in the world of nature which was exhilarating. It was a conscious moment of connection, of peace, joy, love and hope. In the back of my mind the thought occurred to me – *is this fair, to be in such a blissful space, while people are suffering and dying in Gaza and Ukraine?*

So that's my first dilemma – is it ok to be seeking inner personal peace with violent conflict raging all around? I remembered vaguely the teaching of Rumi (I think) which Stephanie often repeated and I'm paraphrasing, that you can't have peace in the world without having peace in your own heart and wishing peace for others, even our enemies. We know there is no peace without love.

I thought back to this time the previous year, October 7 with the horror of the Hamas rampage, killing women and children in the kibbutzim near Gaza and indiscriminately killing and grabbing hostages at the music festival, which then provoked the disproportionate response from Israel.

It was then that the Uniting Church members of the group which had been dialoguing with the Jewish community for several years started receiving emails which expressed the Jewish disappointment with us. That after years of developing friendships and understanding with them that we had remained silent, that we hadn't expressed support for them in their existential crisis. We rather weakly responded that we had been praying for peace. Similar emails came from members of the Council of Christians and Jews, saying that we had expressed no empathy knowing that they had close family members in danger in Israel and the Israeli military. I discussed this with the catholic president of the council and we agreed that we could not take an overt stand on either side of the conflict seeing daily the horrendous humanitarian crisis in Gaza in the news reports.

The dialogue group had had an incredibly successful fact-finding trip to Israel/Palestine in 2017, interviewing leaders and organizations on both sides and had come back with an optimistic idea of a way forward; seeing people-to-people projects, grassroots cooperation on initiatives like restoring the River Jordan and communities intentionally living together. At a deeper level, we knew there can be no peace without self-determination.

One of these initiatives was Wahat Al-salam/Neve Shalom, which means "*Oasis of Peace*" in Arabic and Hebrew, a community of Jews and Palestinians living intentionally side by side, making community decisions by consensus and educating their children on site in Hebrew and Arabic so they would be bilingual. It was initiated by a Dominican priest who leased land from a Trappist monastery in the middle of Israel (they have since been given the land). We visited this community and witnessed their School for Peace which runs workshops for professionals, academics, activists and government officials which are highly respected; at least 80,000 people have done their courses. It's a beautiful place, surrounded by gentle green slopes and productive gardens. It's been going since 1970 and many Jewish and Palestinian leaders have emerged from the community.

Cathy alerted me to an article she saw about this community in a recent New Yorker magazine, called *A Semblance of Peace*. Indeed, it was as we feared. The Gaza war has put these kinds of initiatives under incredible stress, the implication from the article being that it is now just a semblance, not a real place of peace. The point here is that conflict puts even established relationships under pressure.

Now doing a huge jump to the conflict in Ukraine. I have a very lovely Russian friend that I go to concerts and the theatre with. He's been here many years and loves living in Sydney but I've never discussed Putin or Russian politics with him. One day recently over lunch he made a brief comment about how the US should stop meddling in other countries' business.

Immediately, I realised he was referring to support for Ukraine, that it should have been absorbed back into the Russian empire with the minimum of conflict. Thinking about it later, I wondered, can I continue a relationship with someone so at odds with my values? I decided, yes; I can shut the door that leads to that space and keep it tightly shut but open numerous other doors where we relate meaningfully and respectfully.

Then again, last Tuesday night at the Council of Christians and Jews there was a presentation about the silence of Christian leaders after the October 7 events. Why were Christians silent about growing anti-Semitism? Why were we so lacking in empathy? I piped up and said we were empathetic to suffering on both sides, to Palestinians too. The reply was that Palestinians are getting plenty of empathy. Later, informally over dinner some Jews expressed their horror at the destruction and suffering in Gaza. And we Christians said: *there is a silence because nobody, particularly church leaders, wants to be seen condoning atrocities on either side.* In the same way the government walks a tightrope on this issue.

Now, another massive leap to the gospel passage about loosening the tongue and speaking out. There is a wonderful story here which is not often explored. Zechariah's prophecy seems so out of an Old Testament consciousness. Do you remember this story? It's another miracle birth story, reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah. It's a masterful bridge of story-telling by the writer of Luke between the prophets of old and the new Christian story.

Zechariah is a priest married to Mary's cousin Elizabeth. He has a turn to enter the Holy of Holy's in the temple to offer incense - and encounters the presence of an angelic being, identified as Gabriel (who also visited Mary). He is told that despite their age the barren Elizabeth will conceive a child. Zechariah expresses skepticism and is struck dumb. He emerges from the sanctuary and cannot speak. A son is born and there is controversy over his name which Elisabeth says is John. Zechariah's tongue is loosened and he confirms the name and launches into the marvellous prophecy about his son as the messenger of the Holy One, preparing the way for the one who will bring peace.

Perhaps it is a prophecy that we need to hear today in the midst of horrifying conflicts?

*The dawn from on high, will break upon us
To give light to those who sit in darkness, in the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.*

To speak in modern terms in the words of Jan Richardson :

*And when we learn to read
The landscape of our fears
And when we come to know
The terrain of every sorrow,
Then we will turn
Our fences into bridges
And our borders
into paths of peace.*

To speak of peace, to act for peace, to share peace!

It needs to come from the universal heart of love, in other words, from the Christ forces within.

Salam, Shalom, Peace for all!

Amen