

# Waiting with desire

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 2 February 2025

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Feast of Candlemas)

Contemporary Reading: *Wait and See* by Richard Baulkham (from *Tumbling into Light: Collected Poems*); Luke 2: 22-40

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

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Pink Floyd surely had it right about the vocation of love, in the closing section of the rock opera *The Wall*. For the vocation of love does not belong to Christians, never mind clergy, but to all human beings, but Christians, and clergy, at our best, can help point us towards it. As Pink Floyd wrote:

*All alone, or in twos  
The ones who really love you  
Walk up and down, outside the wall  
Some hand in hand  
And some gathered together in bands  
The bleeding hearts and the artists make their stand  
And when they've given you their all  
Some stagger and fall, after all it's not easy  
Banging your heart against some mad bugger's wall.*

In my experience, ministry can certainly be like that. As it happens, the first music album I remember buying was appropriately entitled *Walls and Bridges*, by John Lennon. For core to my own ministry has been building bridges, and what the writer Ursula le Guin called the vocation of '*unbuilding walls*'. As I come to the end of my time as Minister of Pitt Street Uniting Church, I want therefore to reflect on such things, in the context of the Gospel story of the presentation of Jesus inside the temple walls. For in their own vocations of priesthood and prophetic love, waiting in holy desire, and glimpsing salvation in their own day, the old folks Simeon and Anna can still speak to us in our own spiritual journeys, now and for the days ahead...

'*All alone, or in twos.*' In Anna and Simeon's case, it is as a two, a truly biblical and feminist number. Indeed, when I was in formation, back in the early 1980s, I went with Penny to hear the great eco-feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether speak. '*If you want to help change the world positively*', she said, in words I've always remembered, '*you need to remember three things.*' '*Firstly*', she said, '*choose your battles; secondly, don't go alone; and, thirdly, don't wait for the eschaton (aka the end times).*' Well, Simeon and Anna did wait, but not for the eschaton.

They waited in divine eschatological, that is visionary, desire, and with eschatological action; for these are what priesthood and prophecy are really about, through the presence of eschatological love, which is still alive, even when, sometimes especially when, it seems most absent. For whilst we may 'stagger' in ministry, walls do fall and divine bridges can be built.

In his poem '*Wait and See*'<sup>i</sup> Richard Baulkham beautifully expresses this in Anna and Simeon's ministry. He contrasts different kinds of waiting of which we are all capable. The first is that of resignation. That is a natural in many circumstances. It is akin to the flight response, though resignation can be far more stale and static: a '*measuring out... life with coffee spoons*', as T.S. Eliot expressed it.

A second kind of waiting is that of impatience. Like the first response, there is much of this about. Modernity fuels it, feeding expectations with its media, technology, social change, and conflicts over rights discourses. This is akin to the fight response, which can too easily justify behaviour which is simply knee-jerk selfishness. In contrast, the poet offers us Simeon and Anna as another way forward, beyond resignation and impatience, flight or fight. This is the way of active prayer as waiting on desire.

The poet is not saying that it is wrong to bear up in dreadful circumstances or rage against injustice. Rather, true waiting is, as he puts it, '*pure dependence*' on love. As we see in Anna and Simeon, this is a waiting on God's presence, on Love, living in the divine eschatological vision, marking and nurturing time and space through prayer and ritual. We are not thereby so easily trapped by circumstances or triggered to knee-jerk anger. Rather, in the poet's words, we are drawn into '*circling onward, spiralling/towards a centre out ahead, seasons of revolving hope.*' '*All alone, or in twos*', those who live into the love of God, thus '*walk up and down*', outside the walls of human struggles, fear and pain, hurt and injustice, and some gather '*together in bands*', as '*the bleeding hearts and the artists make their stand.*' .

The word desire is key. For desire, in the deepest spiritual sense, is beautifully subversive, and indeed a very queer word. Desire speaks of the deepest longings for the divine consummation of true love. Desire speaks of the experience of transcendent joy, of extraordinary peace, of profound communion and complete relationship with all that is. For in waiting with desire, as Simeon and Anna show us, and as we see in Jesus and in the saints, we can both bear all things beyond mere resignation, and we can live with the kindness of divine impatience. We can thereby be more aware of, celebrate, and nurture, those tastes of divine love that we experience in the present.

Mere resignation or impatience is quite understandable, not least with world events. Yet walls do fall. Bridges are possible. Waiting with holy desire is worth it. I grew up, for example, in the British Isles, in a brutally divided Europe, in a blatantly sexist, racist, and still imperialist culture, with reminders of terror not only overseas, but on my doorstep, as the Ulster paramilitary struggle raged on, taking the lives of too many, including fellow students of mine in London's Harrods bombing. Meanwhile, in these lands, we were still legally classing its First Peoples as flora and fauna.

I therefore give thanks for so many things that seemed near miracles back then: epoch changing events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the accompanying revolutions of Eastern Europe; the Good Friday Peace Agreement in Ireland in 1998 and the end of the Balkans Wars of the 1990s. In my native and adopted countries, I have also seen profound positive changes for women and people of many different ethnicities and diverse identities, including major steps forward for LGBTIQ+ people.

Of course, we live in troubled times today, and some challenges, not least ecological, seem even harder. Recent world order shifts bring more uncertainties. Yet we need to celebrate where we have come from and what can be achieved. For this too, is part of waiting with desire, and, like Anna and Simeon, seeing the light anew.

What of Christian faith today and in the future? The times of my ordained ministry have often been trying. This has not so much been because of the numerical and status decline of inherited Christian structures. That has certainly also had its effects. For the transformative dynamics of what Christians have called 'mission' have often recently shrunk in to institutional survival, denominational branding and self-assertion.

More soul-destroying has been the revealing of abuse, trauma, and systemic dysfunction, and the sheer weight of energy and resources put into avoidance, self-protection, and even justification of the status quo. The current publicised struggles of my home Church, the Church of England, are a case in point. The psalmist's cry '*how long, O God*' has certainly run through my ordained ministry, waiting with desire for walls to fall. In the past, I have literally stood in protest outside Church gatherings with placards saying 'waiting', and metaphorically, this has often seemed at times my life's work: in Pink Floyd's words, *banging my heart 'against some mad bugger's wall.'* Yet, thank God, walls do fall, and bridges can be built...

A few years ago, a photographer friend, Charmaine Lyons, took a photo of me (see below) as part of an exhibition to celebrate Queensland women. It pictures me in St Francis College chapel in Brisbane. It has the title of *Illuminare*, which means to illuminate, or light up. How do you react to it, I wonder? There are layers to it and much ambiguity. Charmaine, in her artist's statement, saw it reflecting my significance as a transgender priest, '*illuminating the way forward from old to new*': acting both as a 'beacon' of hope for gender diverse and other people, and also '*disrupting right-wing exploitation of God to maintain inequality.*' '*Standing*', Charmaine said, '*in an ancient tradition as a spiritual Mother, she brings new life amid stones of strength and oppression, opening a window to a more just future.*'

I hope so. For myself at least, it is certainly an image of waiting with desire. Indeed, it reminds me of one of my great English spiritual forebears, Julian of Norwich, who waited on God in her spiritual cell through the tumultuous events of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, bringing spiritual comfort and strength to others. And it speaks of Simeon and Anna, in their waiting with desire. Unlike them, my vocation has been more like another of my English forbears, John Wesley, more peripatetic and more border crossing, seeking to be faithful to the Holy Spirit despite what norms and structures might say. However, all of us who wait with holy desire are bridges to other possibilities and other worlds.

In drawing to a close, let me therefore give thanks today for all of us who seek to be faithful to holy desire, whatever traditions we are born into. Sometimes, when we've given our all, we may indeed also stagger and fall, because it is indeed not easy, banging our hearts against mad buggers' walls. After all, if we are honest, we know too that others can find it hard to bang their hearts against our own walls. To be bridges of course is a great thing, even if bridges are often walked on, and sometimes even blown up.

I rejoice therefore to have been part of building bridges, and sometimes of being a bridge, between many types of people and many types of tradition and culture, dreams and possibilities. That is at the heart of the calling of Pitt Street Uniting Church, which is why this is such a place of freedom and possibility, and why it has been such a joy to band together with others to wait with desire, to address walls, to build and be bridges, not simply '*another brick in the wall*'.

A final word: for, of course, unmaking walls and building bridges is a continuing vocation. We are reminded of this at the very end of Pink Floyd's rock opera. For as the Wall falls, children pick up debris and bricks, begin to put them upon one another, and the words are heard '*isn't this where we came in?*'

As Anna and Simeon knew well, even when we see change, it is incomplete: until, in our waiting with desire, we experience the light of Christ and its fullness. Soon, in the Gospel story, the temple walls inside which Simeon and Anna worked were literally to fall, destroyed by a merciless empire and its treatment of resistance. I think the old priest and the old prophet would have sensed that coming, and would have been deeply grieved.

Yet their faithfulness had been rewarded. For in the struggles of their day, they had seen a new and brighter light coming into being: a light that still shines and will always shine. That is part of why we bless candles today as symbols of this experience.

In like manner, during the sharing of communion, it will be lovely to share one of my favourite songs, from the English acoustic progressive medieval folk rock band Amazing Blondel, which originated in my old school. Entitled '*Safety in God*', it speaks of the need to wait with desire, lighting up all our candles as at this great feast of Candlemas, for salvation is indeed always just in sight. <sup>ii</sup>

It is part of the spirit by which I have always sought to share in ministry and part of the continuing gift we all have to offer. For when we are downhearted, as Anna and Simeon would surely have been, may we continue to wait with desire that we may see the light that is not only to come, but already present with us.

In Amazing Blondel's words:

*Light up all your candles  
Keep the vigil tonight  
Praying for salvation  
For it's always just in sight.* <sup>iii</sup>

In the name of Christ, the Light of the World. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://artandtheology.org/2021/01/27/wait-and-see-simeon-and-anna-richard-bauckham/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXm2Obz0N1c&t=36s>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://genius.com/Amazing-blondel-safety-in-god-alone-lyrics>