

*Psalm 85:8-11*

*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*

*Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

*Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
And righteousness will look down from the sky.*

Today, the second Sunday of advent, our attention is drawn to peace, and as the psalm mentions, that peace is related to the turning of hearts. In the meeting of ground and sky, earth and heaven, in harmonious and responsible relationships with each other and with God, there is the kiss of peace. Our hearts turn and God's loving peace is revealed.

We also heard from that part of Isaiah, which is often called Second Isaiah; chapter 40, which is generally understood as marking the end of exile in Babylon.

From the hope of release from exile, the prophet uses very earthy language and imagery of a desert journey; preparing the way of the LORD, requires making a straight highway, presumably from Babylonian exile to Jerusalem freedom, lifting valleys, leveling rough places, for the LORD'S triumphal entry.

Surely it relates to changing the landscape, making things smoother; I think there is also a suggestion that no matter how long and difficult life's journey, transformation is always possible, turning the environment into something more conducive to being in relationship with God.

Turning back to the comfort and compassion that is offered, is apparently our part in that relationship, God's part is the offering, the being, that comfort and compassion, steadfast love and faithfulness. God's peace close at hand. Peace, viewed in harmonious and responsible relationships, becomes known to us through the dance of separation and reconciliation: Acknowledging sin and then repenting, that is where the holy relationship is revealed.

In the gospel of Mark, there is clearly a link to this Isaiah reading. John the Baptist too 'prepares the way of the Lord.' But this time it's not YHWH but Jesus who will be given that title. Reference to wilderness, turning away from sin and back to God, and proclamation of a future where the Coming One brings something beyond anything than John's baptism can possibly offer; transforming the past, last year, last week, this morning and then moving to a new place, to life in the Spirit, life of Peace in the presence of Christ.

It all sounds very rosy, esoteric even. Something not quite real. But that's the nature of story, that's the distance we allow to come between us and the text. And maybe it's the distance, not the story, that's not quite real.

As I was meditating on this life-giving relationship, a relationship in some way built on the foundation of acknowledging past sin, (or wilderness separation) and receiving future salvation, (Christ's future coming or God's Peace present now) these words came to me in an email; "A paradox of mystical experience is that it is often in contemplating emptiness, nothingness and darkness that the seeker comes to an awareness of divine light."

These words come from Robert Adamson, a winner of the Blake Prize for Religious Art. His poem 'Via Negativa, the Divine Dark' won first prize in the poetry section in 2011 and the poem itself, well the part freely available on the Internet, speaks about paradoxical mystical experience.

It also speaks about the value of text, that poetic text points to something greater than itself, something which cannot be understood as much as it can be experienced.

Robert was born in Sydney and grew up in the affluent lower north shore region. He was both dyslexic and rebellious; he had a troubled youth and young adulthood and he spent time in prison. It was, in fact, while in jail, a wilderness experience I imagine, that he discovered poetry and his ability to write.

Adamson's poetry touched me, and I was struck by how he sought "something positive in the dark" even though his own church experience had left him feeling that "No matter what he did he was doomed". At 79 years old, Adamson would have been attending Sunday school in the forties, a time when much of the world was influenced by two world wars. My own Sunday school experiences in the late sixties, early seventies, left me with a practically opposite sense "No matter what I did Jesus loved me and I was saved". Flower power, free love, activism and freedom of speech; these would have been the influences on the church of my childhood.

Regardless of those formation differences, I too have found myself at times searching for "something positive in the dark" and I think that's where these baptisms start to make sense. We are told that John's baptism was for cleansing, dependent on repentance, but that there is a difference between that and the Baptism Jesus would bring.

In facing the reality of life, we are, all of us, a complex mixture of goodness and fragility. We make mistakes, we hurt others, and ourselves, and, we also give love. We share our time and our talents, we encourage each other, we are neither sheep nor goats, we are a cross breed. We are, mostly I guess, baptized people sinners and saints, all together, all at once.

In advent we look forward to the coming of Christ, we prepare ourselves, clean out the dusty corners of our lives, put out the flowers and bake the cake, we prepare, not just for the memorial celebration of the divine being born into humanity, God with us. We prepare, not just for the future hope of Christ to come, we prepare ourselves once again to participate in the mystical experience of giving birth to Christ in our own lives, accepting ourselves as both cleansed and forgiven, worthy of God's journey to be with us.

We prepare a space for the Spirit of Love, the divine life that comes forth when we accept God's presence in our messiness, the Spirit of love that accepts all our foibles and misgivings and still uses us for something positive in the world.

I, like Adamson's ministers can't tell you all about your soul, but I can tell you that I trust that Peace doesn't come because we are free of sin, because we have jumped through every conceivable hoop that we have been set or that we have set for ourselves; Peace comes in faith, faith that surely there is something "positive in the dark". That in our messy reality, God is with us.

That faith is ground in the Easter story, the story that we embrace, the good news of God's love for life itself, comes to us through the darkness of denial and death and, the positive light of resurrection that follows. For us the two are inseparable.

The paradoxical mystical experience of God, the Peace that is given as we enter into that paradox, comes in the unexplainable experience of life in Christ. There isn't either complete union with God, or complete separation, and nothing in between; there are glimpses of union, there is divinity and humanity in us; there is darkness and sin and every other conceivable thing imaginable, and there is a dance between us and God, the dance of life, a dance that we join as community, community prepared to acknowledge that sometimes we are reluctant to dance and still we are prepared to receive the invitation and enter the story of God with us.

Kerry Pierce



## **WHAT HAPPENED AT CHURCH COUNCIL?**

Church Council met on 25<sup>th</sup> November, our first face-to-face meeting after a couple of meetings on Zoom (which I am sure everyone has heard of and many have been using). Several important matters were discussed:

Church Brochure – this is now ready for us to use. It is also on our Blogspot (online). As it is a Word document, small numbers can be printed at a time. Then, if we decide on some changes, a new version can be ready quickly. It will be distributed to motels and the information centre. We are encouraged to give it to neighbours, or pop it into letterboxes in our own area.

The young children's groups have just begun meeting again, outdoors at Agnes Brereton Park. This Thursday 27 November Mainly Music met. Then on Monday 30 November the Playgroup met.

A Blue Christmas Service is being planned by Rev Kerry for our 20<sup>th</sup> December worship. This service is to provide a comforting spiritual space for people to grieve because of lost loved ones or changed circumstances. This is new for us, but particularly relevant after the long winter we have been through.

Cathy Halliwell has proposed that all churches across the Presbytery contribute items to a Virtual Carol Service. We could sing a carol or read part of the Christmas story, or read a poem. These will all be recorded and Cathy will create a consolidated version that will be available online for churches or individuals. Rev Kerry told us about this last Sunday.

Christmas Lunch – Kerryn & Ian Conabere have offered to host a lunch again on Christmas Day for those who will be on their own. Unfortunately, current Uniting Church won't allow us to use our kitchen or crockery etc, for fear of spreading Covid 19. But, not to be denied, Kerryn & Ian are working on a different way of providing for these folk. Things are still developing, but be ready to help with a donation.

Our finances have held up remarkably well this year, according to Tony Boulton. This has been greatly helped by having Supply Ministry for much of the year, and by Theresa being on JobKeeper funding. Offering have been down. It will be interesting to see if offerings "bounce back" now we are meeting again.

Cleaning of the Church – We are currently in the process of changing the contractor that cleans the Church. More will be shared in the near future.

Of course we will continue to clean after services etc ourselves, where there has been limited use.

Use of the Utility Room – The several uses of this small room for preparing of flowers, storage, preparation and disposal of cleaning chemicals, etc means that is a safety hazard. The Property Committee has been asked to investigate ways of overcoming the problem.

Meeting Together Again – All three congregations have been meeting again. Glengarry and Rosedale started a week before Traralgon (I think).

Women's World Day of Prayer 2021. Our Marilyn McKeown has been elected to be the Chair of this event on March next year. It will be held at the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Ian Leversha