



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 25th February, 2024

"Harmony-making and Hope"

A reflection for the Second Sunday of Lent.

"Living in Harmony" is this year's Lenten theme.

Witness to the Word

Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Psalm 27:1, 11-14

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold^[a] of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written,
"For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of GOD in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Contemporary Reading of Grace

Sister Mary Scanlon (A member of the Little Company of Mary in Aotearoa New Zealand, who died last year aged 93, in the 72nd year of her Religious Profession)

We humans are built to be resilient; when disaster or crisis strikes, we can make choices: to react (negative) or to respond (positive). And so many people step up and respond! Ordinary women and men marshal themselves and others to do simply what needs to be done, to help both neighbours and strangers in their needs of the time. These superb acts of selflessness restore **hope**, bring comfort and even some healing to those injured and frightened. It's the relief from "being frightened" that is so crucial, as I'm sure you all know. Please join me in thanking the countless ordinary people who do extraordinary things, often without being asked.

Finally, let us remember and take to heart that Hope is a spiritual virtue, bequeathed to us by our GOD of Compassion, to fill our souls with beauty even in the ugliness of disaster. We cannot "create" it ourselves, it is a gift from our gifting GOD. In order to grow and cultivate it, like my rose; we must pray for it constantly, and water it with acts of hopeful kindness to our neighbours.

Was Paul **'woke'**, do you think? I think so... Jesus too. It's an interesting word, that: "woke".

I used to think that 'woke' was what I did before getting out of bed in the morning. It was actually necessary pre-condition for getting out of bed, if you like, simply the past tense of "to wake". Silly old me!

It means something quite different these days, quite often: several things actually, depending on who's saying it.

If we look in a dictionary - as I did- it says this: 'woke' (informal, often disapproving) aware of social and political issues, especially racism".

(The reference to "especially racism" reflects that the term was often used in connection with the Black Lives Matter movement, calling for people to 'wake up' to what was happening.)

The Oxford definition continues: *"This word is often used in a disapproving way, by people who think that some other people are too easily upset about these issues, or talk too much about them in a way that does not change anything"*.

It's the *"often disapproving"* part that particularly interests me. It does so because it's a massive understatement - 'woke' has become an insult!

It has become a 'catch all' word that gets used to dismiss social awareness, to play down calls for justice, or even requests for treating other people with common kindness.

It operates in the same way as comments like

- *"I was just having a joke, you silly woman, don't get all precious on me",* or
- *"gees mate, you're a bit sensitive aren't you",* or
- *"come on fellas, you're playing like a bunch of girls!".* Or
- *"All this 'woke' carrying on about 'Kunanyi' – It's always been called Mt Wellington",*
(insert local placenames here)

There's an indignance when such statements are challenged:

"What are you, the 'woke police'? I can say what I like and if others don't like it that's their problem, not mine."

The trouble is, it's actually everyone's problem. It's everyone's problem when we don't care about the impact of our words, attitudes, and actions, on other people.

It's a problem, because the same kind of mindset that dismisses the need for social awareness and the awareness of how we treat others, leads to the kind of mindset we see in Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. An extreme version, yes, but it's the same mindset.

Netanyahu can speak and act as he does against Palestinians, because of lifetime of being taught by the politics of secular Israel that Palestinians are lesser beings, of which Israelis should be afraid.
(Note carefully please, I say *"secular Israel"*, not *"Judaism"*)

Donald Trump has become way beyond popular, because he is a master of manipulating people's dissatisfaction with the present and fears for the future, into demonising anyone who disagrees or criticises him – or isn't him, for that matter.

And, let's remember, that same mindset enabled the doctrine of *'Terra Nullius'*, which rendered indigenous Australlians legally invisible in colonial Australia, right up until our life times.

It's a mindest that essentially dismisses the humanity or another person. - makes them into an object... or a nothing. What's more, it's a mindset that not only gnores that humanity, but can't understand why others get upset about it!

And 'woke' has become the insult of choice, for many, to use against anyone who challenges that mindset.

So where am I going with all this?

Well, as I said last week, I'm using the Lenten theme *"Living in Harmony"*, over the next few weeks, and sitting it alongside the themes more commonly associated with Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. I'm also drawing on the statement we saw last week, which talked about 'harmony' as a disipline, a spiritual practice.

As you see from my title today, we're thinking particularly about harmony-making and hope.

And how does 'woke-ness' come into that? It comes into it because I have been very interested to see that what gets attacked as 'woke-ness' is usually described through attributes like: social awareness, empathy, compassion, political accountability, a commitment to challenging injustices and systems of oppression, language that affirms rather than harming, freedom from religious or social vilification, concern for the environment over power and profit. Hmmmmm...

Fundamentally, the attacks are often about fear of the other... fear that there's not enough of the social 'good' to go around... fear that 'different' means 'dangerous' (or not worth thinking about)... and fear that others might stand in the way of us getting what we want, or believe we deserve.

Such fear can overwhelm hope. Harmony-making can be part of hope restored!

Harmony as a practice can bring together different stories (songlines, perhaps) to undermine fear of the 'other': recognising that each can offer something of our humanity to the other, and receive theirs in return.

It might seem that story-sharing is a pretty small act: I think it's actually a pretty big one. If we can see difference as something to be heard and seen, to be celebrated, to be learned from, rather than to be feared... well that has to be worthwhile!

It's an expression of hope that the polarisation, the knocking down of straw figures, the personal attacks, and all the rest that we see around us, aren't the only story, and might not have the last word!

So yes, I believe Paul was 'woke'. Jesus too. Within their time and culture, they were woke in the name of GOD, in the name of holiness, "*in the name of the sacred presence in whom we live and move and have our being*".

They were 'woke' in the name of sacred harmony: harmony much greater than 'simply smoothing over the cracks', or adopting a 'smile and wave' stance over disagreement. I'm not sure what the Hebrew and Greek equivalents of 'woke' might have been, but I'm sure that both Jesus and Paul were familiar with them!

Both of them had ways of dealing with that, of being true to their calling, and of holding their hope in the goodness and compassion of GOD in the midst of it all. That passage from Romans 8 – probably Paul's last letter that we have – reminds us of that.

In the midst of anything and everything that comes our way, we remain held in sacred grace and love from which nothing will separate us! (Another reading which shouldn't only be read at funerals – it's a whole of life promise.)

I don't know about you, but I'm a bit of a 'smile and wave' operator. Talking with my Supervisor on Friday, reminded me that harmony-making can involve taking up our cross, if we're serious about following in Jesus' footsteps. So part of my discipline, in Lent and beyond, is to sit what what this means for my life and calling to follow.

Writing these words has been challenging, as well as interesting and curious. I wasn't really sure where I was going when I started, so I dare to hope that my thoughts and words are helpful to you as they are to me.

May this Witness to the Word of life in Jesus the Christ enrich us all. Amen