

Witness by Warren Talbot

God, laughter and justice

(Scriptures: Isaiah 65: 17-25, Isaiah 12, Luke 21: 5-19)

A few weeks back, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, announced his retirement from public life, at the age of 79. A good innings.

Tutu had stood down as the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, some years earlier. In retirement he headed up one of the most remarkable achievements in post-apartheid South Africa – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Whereas we might have expected justifiable payback for the extremes of the apartheid regime, Tutu led a process which combined both an honest accounting for past behaviours (the Truth) and forgiving the unforgivable (Reconciliation).

Speaking to Time magazine in October, Tutu said:

“The texture of our universe
is one where there is no question at all
but that good and laughter and justice
will prevail.”

This is a profound statement of spirituality, and, to use Tillich’s term, faith as ultimate concern.

In spite of everything, whether it be racism or violence,

extreme poverty or global warming, HIV/AIDS or homophobia, Tutu declares that “there is no question at all” that justice will prevail.

Tutu’s vision is remarkably similar to the one we heard from Third Isaiah this morning.

The circumstances facing this particular prophetic tradition were no less dramatic than the often perilous world in which we live.

Having been in exile in Babylon, the Jewish people have finally returned to Jerusalem, to find the City and the Temple in ruins.

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You will notice I refer to “Third Isaiah”. Let me explain, and remind you about the structure and multiple authorship of the book of Isaiah.

In the single edited collection we know as “Isaiah”, there are three main sections, each broadly reflecting different points in Jewish history and prophetic responses.

First Isaiah, seen in chapters 1 – 39, was mainly reflecting on the experience of the Assyrian Exile – the one which changed the nature of the Jewish people forever, by virtue of the Diaspora. Put simply, many of the Exiles did not return.

This year during Advent, on each Sunday, we will be hearing from First Isaiah.

Second Isaiah, which, thanks to Handel, is most well known, is seen in chapters 40 – 55. The Christic figure of the Suffering Servant emerges here. Second Isaiah is reflecting on the Babylonian Exile, about 140 years after the Assyrian Exile.

And Third Isaiah, from which we heard this morning, are chapters 56 and following. The contributors to this section are mostly reflecting after the return from Babylon, that is, the second or third generation post-exile.

The reason why the three Isaiah traditions fit so well into a single book is because of the similarities of their experiences and the responses of their faith journeys.

The vision of a rebuilt Jerusalem, metaphor and symbol of a new heaven and a new earth, is common to the hopes and aspirations of all three prophetic traditions. Effectively, the tradition is one.

The people of Jerusalem remember the famed glory of Solomon’s Temple, yet they are walking around rubble.

According to the scribe and priest Ezra, rarely heard in the Lectionary, even the Dung Gate in Jerusalem is broken.

Re-building a city, *like re-building any dashed dream*, is tough work.

The enthusiasm of the first generation has waned. *How often do we see that in many of the projects we embrace?*

Third Isaiah brings poetic and hopeful words. Yahweh will create a new heaven and a new earth. In verse 18, Yahweh speaks as follows:

“For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy ... and its people as a delight!”

Consider some of the details of this new creation:

- no more premature deaths of infants,
- workers will not labour in vain,
- housing will be both built and lived in, and
- creation will be in such harmony that predators will live with their prey, carnivore becoming herbivore.

All this vision is because the remarkable people of faith we describe as “Third Isaiah” can see beyond the debris in the streets of the city.

When I read that list about the new creation, a second or third time, I thought of the Millenium Development Goals, the vision behind the Goals, and the numerous practical impediments to achieving them.

Much closer to home, as the Sydney Alliance evolves, I am sure there will be efforts to improve Sydney, as a city, consistent with social justice principles.

It will be interesting to hear what Isobel and the children learn during their social justice walk in the city this morning.

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Third Isaiah presents us with a Sacred vision. God’s dreaming. Can it be ours? Or are we so hemmed in with the pragmatic demands of the present, that we don’t have the energy or the courage to allow ourselves to join in.

If so, what do we fear? What would it mean to respond to the Divine dreaming with ... love?

Typing these words I had to pause. The other side to a life of do-nothing pragmatism might be a counter-productive utopianism.

I don’t know about you, but I’m capable of both. I can be torn between the safety of doing nothing -- and the risk of doing something, quote, “visionary”.

I am also very conscious of any suggestion which papers over the realities and the cracks in people’s lives -- whether individual lives or our life together as a community.

Visions are put to death. Dreams do fade.

How much more difficult to re-build a dream that has already been dashed. When was the last time you tried?

We all know there are days when the best we can do is just turn up. Just turn up. And, if at all possible ... do no harm.

But what saves Third Isaiah, what saves Tutu, and ultimately what saves us, is that the visions and the dreams:

- arise from the rubble in Jerusalem, not some other city.
- they arise from the experiences of apartheid and prejudice, not somewhere else.
- and they arise from our very humanity lived day by day. Not someone else's humanity, but your authentic Self. Your Sacred Self.

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In the old common lectionary, Isaiah 65 used to be read on Easter Sunday, and you can see the logic behind that. The vision of a new heaven and a new earth is certainly the stuff of ... resurrection.

But the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary, which we follow in the Uniting Church, thought that was too easy.

Instead, on the same day we hear Third Isaiah stoking our visions, we have the Lukan Jesus predicting the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and an apocalypse of famine, plagues, earthquakes and wars.

It's the lectionary equivalent of shock therapy.

Third Isaiah is about dreaming the future. The Lukan text, in chapter 21, is about the pain of the present.

Remember that Luke was writing after the fall of Jerusalem in the 70th year of the Common Era. The Roman occupation of Palestine had killed an estimated one million people and exiled 70,000 more.

Think Rwanda. Think Bosnia. Think...Auschwitz.

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The Lukan writer and listeners would have been well aware that the Temple, the symbol of their hopes and dreams, had been destroyed yet again.

The text is not about Jesus and his crystal ball, but the Lukan community comforting itself in the face of devastation -- and in the process giving some practical advice.

"Flee to the hills!" the writer advises in verse 21, and that's probably what many of them had done.

There is no need for heroics. *Survival begets its own nobility.*

“By patient endurance”, Luke writes in verse 19, “you’ll save your lives”.

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So our Scripture readings this morning present us with life and faith in all their complexity.

Distress, pain and suffering.

Hope, joy and new possibilities.

Both are part of the journey of faith – along the way we have our shared stories and experiences to disturb and nurture us.

We can hold and shake each other by the shoulders, and offer the possibility that the Loving and Gracious Reality we name as ... “God” ... remains with us – in our city, in our communities, and in this congregation.

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In conclusion, you may recall the quote from Tutu I commenced with. Here it is again:

“The texture of our universe
is one where there is no question at all
but that good and laughter and justice
will prevail.”

I like the fact that Tutu adds laughter to that which will prevail. *Time* magazine referred to Tutu as “the laughing bishop”.

This is not necessarily belly laughs all round, though perhaps the Pitt Street Worship Committee could organize a bit of liturgical laughter.

Third Isaiah writes about joy and delight in the new Jerusalem.
Or in the words of the old protest song, the people need bread ...
and ... roses.

Seeking justice is a serious matter.

But Tutu reminds us that laughter will be a part of the new heaven and the new earth.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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