The missing word in Australian politics: love

Acts 11: 1-18, John 13:31-35

Recently my wife and I were invited to dinner by our grand-daughter to hear about her marriage plans to her partner. We enjoyed a wonderful meal and great company. Unfortunately, the next day our grand-daughter tested positive for COVID-19, and two days later my wife and I also tested positive for the virus. It is a terrible disease, which left us tired and weak, as well as leaving me feeling unmotivated and depressed about the state of the world. With the war in Ukraine, the dismal state of Australian politics, devastating floods, the chaos in Sri Lanka and its destructive impact on our friends and colleagues there, the upheaval caused by the pandemic left me feeling anxious and dispirited.

This is similar to the background mood that John’s gospel identifies as Jesus begins to speak with his disciples. He had gathered them together for the great annual Passover meal of Jewish faith and engaged in the intimate act of washing his disciples’ feet. But as chapter 13 begins a dark shadow is about to fall over this high point of Jesus’ fellowship with his disciples: ‘Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father’ (13:1). This phrase is a reference to Jesus’ impending death. Then John says at the beginning of today’s reading, ‘When Judas had gone out’ (v.31), he is referring to the man whom Jesus had just identified as the one who would betray him (v.26), and about whom the gospel says that ‘Satan entered into him’ (v.27). These are dark forces. John’s gospel knew well the evil that intrudes into the lives of so many people in our world, even in times of celebration and fellowship.

Yet against this depressing reality, John’s gospel gives voice to a new possibility. In a few verses, Jesus tells his followers that it is with the coming of ‘his hour’ that the dark forces of death, betrayal, and the powers of evil are overcome. Jesus’ ‘hour’ reveals the victorious power of God’s love, which John describes as God’s glory. Speaking first of himself, ‘Jesus said, “Now the Human One has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.’ (v.31). Jesus’ humanity embodies a glorious beauty and integrity that is the fullness of God’s love. So, for John, it is Jesus’ decision to face crucifixion rather than resort to violence himself against his enemies that reveals the glory of God’s life-giving love. The hour of Jesus’ death is both the end of Jesus’ life and the beginning of God’s new creation. Violent death is not the last word in life. But death’s reality imposes its limits on human life. Jesus tells his followers: ‘I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; … (but) now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’ (v.33).

So, while John acknowledges evil powers have lifted Jesus up on a cross to die, his gospel also declares God has conquered evil’s power of violence on the cross by lifting Jesus up to the glory of eternal life in the heart of God. John’s gospel is mocking the violence of the Roman Empire. See: your empire has less power over human life than God’s love. From the moment Jesus’ hour begins with the threat of dark forces he is embraced by the ultimate power of God’s love. God’s love is sovereign over even the violence of unjust death.

But how does that help Jesus’ followers deal with the terribly real problem of sin, evil and death that remain on earth? In the first four months of 2022, there have been over 5,200 COVID-19 deaths in Australia, more than twice as many pandemic deaths for the whole of the previous two years. Yet here we are at the last week of an Australian federal election campaign, and this fearsome reality seems to have been swept under the carpet. The Australian political debate seems to focus on who will be better at business as usual, when business as usual worldwide has given the world a global pandemic, devastating floods and bushfires, and unprecedented levels of mental illness. In March this year, the World Health Organisation reported that worldwide, anxiety and depression increased by 25 per cent in the first year of the pandemic, with the greatest mental health impact reported in numerous studies to be on young people and students. Business as usual is unhealthy for humans and for the future of our world.

The story about Peter in the Book of Acts is a full-frontal attack on the emptiness of the belief in business as usual. Business as usual in the early church was adherence to Jewish religious practices, such as kosher food laws, because all the early followers of Jesus were Jews. But in Acts, the Holy Spirit has brought Gentiles to Peter, and through a trance, the Spirit taught Peter the deeper truth that in God’s inclusive community the rules that justify keeping people divided from each other no longer apply. This is the good news Peter announced to the Church Council in Jerusalem: ‘If God gave the (Gentiles) the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ (13:17) God is about creating a new world.

So, God has called time on business as usual for Australian political parties that create division and enmity in society by their primary focus on how to win power and how to hold onto power. It seems that the Spirit of God has raised up some public-spirited individuals who are giving voice to the needs of people and the needs of our planet. Just as the Holy Spirit brought a judgement on the business-as-usual beliefs of the Jewish Christians, so the Spirit has brought God’s judgment on today’s Australian political parties, who are fixated on putting their own need for power before all else. If God Is dismantling a political system that is no longer able to respond to the needs of God’s creatures and creation, what is the Holy Spirit of inclusivity calling us to? We are not to be distracted by the noise of self-serving politics, that has turned away from serving the deepest needs of our nation. The boundaries political parties have erected to maintain separate identities to justify their lust for power are being broken down.

God’s desire for the early church was to serve all humankind and break down all self-serving hierarchies. So today as we witness the collapse of the old order of Australian politics, we may respond in a similar manner to the Jerusalem Council as they heard the stunning news that what they believed to be eternal was ended by God’s Spirit: At first ‘they were silenced. And (then) they praised God, saying, “God has given … (us) the Spirit that leads to life” (13:18). When we are called into the unity of the Spirit, we are called to be engaged in life’s fullness. Today it is the Spirit of God that is calling forth a new political order for our troubled nation where the voice of every human person has dignity and worth.

Then John points to how Jesus answers the question about how his followers will endure and flourish after his death. Jesus says, ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (11:34-35). Jesus’ followers receive this promise of his presence with them when they love each other, just as they have been loved and served by him.

I belong to a house church which used to meet once a month for a shared meal and faith reflection. When the pandemic arrived early in 2020, we began meeting on zoom, and with no opportunity to meet together in person, we decided to meet twice a month on zoom. There was a sense of fear and anxiety among us, and keeping in touch with each other became a blessing. A small group of three also had been meeting to discuss issues of justice at work. Under the constraints of lockdown, the group also began meeting on zoom. We developed a pattern of reflecting on our faith while sharing the challenges of working in the COVID environment.

Recently we invited another congregation to take part in a pilot study over six sessions based on our model of sharing experiences of justice at work. Three women from the congregation that took part in our project began meeting, and this month completed their sixth meeting. They have already agreed to keep meeting because meeting has nurtured their faith, supported their mental wellbeing, and strengthened them to face the challenges of work when issues of injustice arise. I have also found that when our group meets I am encouraged to speak about my own feelings of anxiety when life and work feels overwhelming. This has been incredibly liberating and affirming to know that my troublesome feelings are accepted by the group.

To be loved by another as Jesus loved his first disciples is to be in solidarity with Christ. It is to be empowered to live life formed by the justice and peace of God. When we love one another with the same faithfulness with which Jesus trusted his life to God’s love, that love brings new life, resurrection life. In the face of what at times is the overwhelming darkness of a violent world where self-interested politics and workplace injustice bring harm and mental distress to too many, Jesus’ promises are sure, and utterly to be trusted. May the Spirit open your hearts to the new life Christ intends for you all.