

Reflections on Isaiah 61:1–3, 11 and John 1:19–34
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As we hope and prepare and wait in this Advent season, the anticipation of a new calendar year holds special promise. It is a marker of sorts, albeit a random one. We wish for so much to be behind us and we lean into the hope that *somehow* the future will be different.

Some are speaking into this threshold moment in profound ways, inviting us to implement the wisdom and insights of our solitude, urging us to make changes in how we live for the sake of a better future for ourselves, our neighbours, and most especially for the planet. For example, this week Australian Indy artist Missy Higgins released a single from the album she recorded during lockdown.

When the machine starts up again
Will I be spanning at its wheels?
Drinking down the voices?
Oh, and buying books on how to feel?
Will I forget what it's like to be standing here looking up, drinking in the sky?
When the machine starts
Will you remind me I saw the truth once
I saw it floating in the air.

Also, in David Attenborough's newest documentary "Extinction" which aired on the ABC last weekend, Professor Felicia Keesing of Bard University offers this observation:

The world has been on pause during the pandemic. And as we begin to move forward, we have a moment. We can change the way we're running our world and make it better. This is that moment.

Attenborough himself adds that the change needed now is a matter of survival for our children and grandchildren. Pope Francis, too, has chimed in with a book written in conversation with his biographer Austen Ivereigh titled *Let Us Dream: the path to a better future*. As a Christian leader, Pope Francis directs our eyes and hearts toward God's vision for the world and says:

One of my hopes for this crisis we are living is that we come back to contact with reality. We need to move from the virtual to the real, from the abstract to the concrete... There are so many real, "flesh-and-blood" brothers and sisters, people with names and faces, deprived in ways that we have not been able to see, listen to, or recognise because we have been so focused on ourselves. But now some of these blindfolds have fallen away, and we have a chance to see with new eyes.

Though written a millennia apart, both scripture readings today speak into the liminal space on the threshold, that moment of hope when something new and lifegiving is possible. The prophet brings good news to those who were being gathered after a generation in exile. The large task of rebuilding lay before them—not only infrastructure and economy, but the very heart and soul of a people.

Similarly, John's Gospel was written to those who were displaced. By this time, the followers of Jesus had been completely excommunicated from the synagogues and from their families within it. Like the returned exiles of Isaiah's time, they, too, were needing to rebuild... or more accurately, *build anew*, with the life, death and resurrection of Christ as the foundation.

But perhaps less obvious to our ears is the proposed nature of the Christian community which is hinted at in a small detail at the end of the gospel reading: This—that is, the conversation between John and the representatives from Jerusalem—took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, key figures—saints really—in the foundation of the gospel's Beloved Community. Bethany was a small, insignificant village with just one dusty street and a few simple houses. The name, according to local residents, means “house of the poor” or “house of poverty” and, before it joined the tourist circuit for pilgrims, it was a ramshackle village of no account.

Yet the gospel writer's tip-of-the-hat towards Bethany here in the first chapter reveals how it had come to represent the new Jerusalem, the centre and home base for the emerging Christian community. That the founders of the Beloved Community lived in Bethany was no mere coincidence.

For the remaking to which the gospel points is not a rebuilding of grand temples or houses of worship nor of the formalised, religious structures supported by them. Rather, *Christ comes alive among and is good news for the poor*—in the forlorn and forgotten places within and around us, where healing, reconciliation and ennoblement are needed most, the Spirit of Christ is seeded and grows.

A fitting image of this truth was playfully presented to me this week by Tony Issa who was introduced in the September newsletter. You might remember reading something of his journey as a refugee from Syria to Australia three years ago, the struggle he has had to provide for his family and find a sense of belonging.

Well, on Friday I asked Tony to take the wobble out of our rustic manger in preparation for Christmas Eve. True to form, Tony's technique is proving to be thorough, going above-and-beyond expectation. Consequently, when I checked on his progress after an hour, I found the manger completely dismantled, *unmade*, skeleton parts lying on tables and the floor.

I joked, "Oh no! Now where will Jesus sleep?" Tony looked at me inquisitively so I tried again. "Jesu...? Joshua...?" and I made a sleeping gesture with my hands against my head.

And without skipping a beat, Tony said, "Here," patting his heart and lowering his face in a kind of prayer, "In my heart." His cheeky grin and giggle afterwards in no way diminished the truth behind his gesture.

As we wait patiently, reflectively in this liminal season, we are invited to consider our remaking, that divine restructuring of our hearts and minds and living. The events of this year have raised our awareness that the needed remaking is entirely credible and profoundly urgent in a way that has not been so for us in many generations.

Let us contemplate the image of Christ abiding in the heart of our poverty... Christ revealed in the eyes of the poor... Christ at home in our struggle... whispering the good news that with love, a new way is possible...