

# Blessed with tears

1 Peter:1-6; Acts 17:22-28; Matthew 7:24-28 and 1 Samuel 2:4-8

Rev Jean Shannon

I've heard a lot of stories about the wonderful old church that was once on this land. I heard about the generosity of one family and a Bendigo Church community. I heard how the bell was donated and then donated again. I heard about how sad, sorry and kind the Wyndham community was to the man (and his family) behind the destruction. I heard the stories of the night, the horror and the shadows on the wall. I heard about the grief of coming together at the ashes for their Christmas celebration and it reminded me of Sarah Bessey's phrase about people who find themselves at the campfire in the wilderness<sup>1</sup>. I heard about the pride of place and space to cry. If tears were holy water, the old church was baptised in its leaving.

But a church is not a place – it is a people. A church is not just a temple but a space<sup>2</sup>. A church building can be like a soul – a space to spend time with God. The soul is a space where your sacred-self lives. It is a space for prayer and where your honest self meets the Divine. “When we yearn to hear from God, the soul is where the whispers of the spirit reverberate.”<sup>3</sup>

As I stand here in the replacement – the community centre for worship, like Paul, I can see that you are a religious people...but each person in this room is 'religious' in their own way, in their own tradition – and to their own degree.

In this room, we bless those whose faith is deep. We bless those who 'don't know anymore'. We bless those nourished by their church and those who were hurt by their churches. We bless those who know silence is prayer and those who know dancing is worship and those who can shout “hallelujah, I've been saved.” A building can never contain God.

Faith was never meant to be stagnant. It is movement. We grow towards and we grow away. In European Christian practice, faith has always been seen as a journey. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Theology tries to explain what we *know* about God. Spirituality is what we experience as/of God. In the east and in first people's faith, it has always been a circle. In creation it is a circle: Birth, growth, death, and repeat endlessly. The seasons are a circle. The weather from rain to drought. From night to day – all are revolving patterns etched in the roundness of the earth, the orbit of the moon.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Bessey, A Blessing for your evolving faith

<sup>2</sup> A temple is built to celebrate God but it should never contain or limit God

<sup>3</sup> Cindy S Lee, Our un-forming p.5

Every time we move away from our faith, we may be actually moving closer. We may be going deeper into ourselves, wondering, questioning, doubting, discovering and growing. For a resurrection people, this makes sense to me. The end is not the end. The ashes are a sign on our foreheads. Christ died and rose again.

This church speaks of radical love. Their response to the tragedy was as clear as the radical love God feels for us. It is the love that calls us to care for the least of us, to speak truth to power and to embody justice and mercy in the world. May you never lose sight of that radical love.

The space rose out of the ashes. It was built on the rock of this community's dreams, and it was offered as a gift for all. 20 years ago, this building opened its arms to nurture community. It has welcomed everyone and very quickly became a heart within the town. Let us celebrate 20 years of graciousness and welcome. What a joy to see so many come to rejoice the gift of community embedded in these walls and in the people here with us today.

The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in temples made by human hands. He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, but rather He gives everyone life and breath and everything else.<sup>4</sup>

This building is already blessed so I leave you with a blessing for the community.

“May your evolving faith be a beacon of hope in the midst of the world's dark night of the soul.

May you be open to the diversity of beliefs and experiences that enrich the tapestry of faith.

May your faith be a wellspring of compassion, justice and love, flowing out to those in need and nourishing parched souls – including your own.”<sup>5</sup>

May you experience unexpected healing even as you map the scars you own. May you never lose your grip on the transformative power of grace as you have shown before and no doubt, will show again. May you be able to offer that grace to yourself as well.

You have been wise builders. The rafters will not last forever but they too are part of the cycle that is life. God is bigger than our plans or even us... but 20 years ago, you had the imagination to make a space like a soul – with room for everyone. May the cycle continue. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 17:24-25

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Bessey's Field Notes September 12, 2023, A blessing for evolving faith