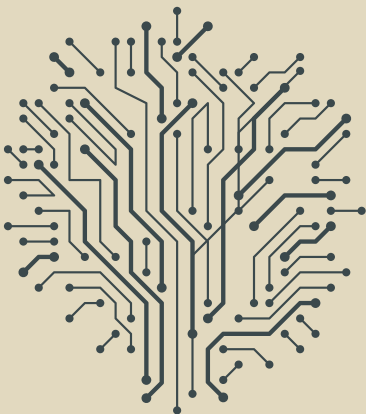


Winter 2022

# DEATH



SALTBUSH  
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

# Ruminations

**Ruminations** is brought to you as part of **Saltbush – Uniting the Scattered Community**. The Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT oversees this work as an encouragement to all rural Christian communities and their leaders, irrespective of size or location. You are invited to share this issue of Ruminations with others.

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**Rev. Dr. Sarah Agnew** is storyteller, poet and Uniting Church Minister living in South Australia. Sarah is passionate about exploring faith and Christian community in diverse and creative ways.

**Rev. Alexandra Sangster** is the Minister at St. Kilda Uniting Church – community based – passionate – focused on the challenge of being Christian community for and with others. Alexandra is creative, artistic and grounded in the Gospel.

**Margaret Reeson** lives in Canberra and has been a lay leader within her own congregation and the wider church throughout her life. Margaret is a past Moderator, author and historian.

**Rev. Rose Broadstock** lives in Victoria and is a Uniting Church Minister. Rose has been adventurous in encouraging Christian community both in urban and rural settings. Rose has been a part of the Saltbush conversation

**Rev. Dr. Peter Walker** is the Principal of United Theological College in Sydney. Peter brings amongst his deep theological reflection and historical knowledge brings a grounded reflection on life lived within the Christian faith.



# Editorial - Death and Life

**Rev. Peter Overton** | Saltbush Regional Minister for the Far North Coast

The past years have been a time of uncertainty and exile. Like the first testament people of God, we have been exiled from a place where life was comfortable and certain into a wilderness where there are no maps. A death in many different ways that calls us to rely on God for the "Mana and the quail." It is no longer relying upon what we have done before, rather navigating without a map into an uncertain future.

We have all experienced this in different ways.

We are living in a different world, a world that will keep changing and morphing. It has placed us in a season of wilderness, exile and death of what once was. This is true for all the corners of our world, communities and as families and individuals.

How do we learn to live in this land, a world that has moved on and is not going back?

How do we lead in this season of uncertainty where we have had the death of what was known to us as a Church?

What should we leave behind, keep, and embrace in this transition?

This brings us to our theme for this edition of Ruminations – Death!

The Saltbush Team have chosen the theme of "Death" for this edition of Ruminations because it is always a theme that touches life, church, community, faith and humanity.

In this edition we are thankful for our contributors who have helped us all reflect on diverse aspects of our theme: Natasha He, Rev. Dr Sarah Agnew, Rev. Alexandra Sangster, Margaret Reeson, Rose Broadstock and Rev. Dr Peter Walker. Each have responded to the invitation to write in different ways and we invite you, through them, to ponder life, death and faith together.

*Peter*

# A word from the Moderator

**Rev. Simon Hansford** | Moderator of the Synod of NSW & ACT

When Mark mentioned the theme for this edition of Ruminations, my first thoughts turned to scripture, then to poetry. Verses about death, and the wondering which surrounds it; the beauty and the sorrow and the ruminating, as poets and theologians seek both to express their feelings and to plumb the depths of something which comes to each and all.

Death, and birth, are the most common things among us, we humans. Thus, we write and theologise, we compose and wonder, we rage against the dying of the light,<sup>i</sup> while some of us spend some portion of our lives always glancing behind.  
ii

There are those of us try to airbrush death from our language altogether, by using phrases which attempt to hold it at arm's length; people no longer die, they simply "pass" as if they have mystically moved into the next room or graduated in some ghastly exam.

These euphemisms are an attempt to lessen our fear, or our loss. They do neither. Our grief reflects our joy and love and lives shared; it not a problem, but rather, a gift. Our fears reflect a measure of what we don't know, and of what we do; we need each other for this journey.

Much of our writing and praying reflects us trying to make sense of the lives we lead, as we face suffering on a personal level, and a global one. As we struggle to know what – and how – to pray for our friend who is facing their own death, we are confronted by the immensity of Ukraine's invasion and the deaths which accompany it. At that moment, words can seem almost irrelevant, perhaps we fall to weeping.

Across our communities and our world, we have been immersed in conversations, even protest, about voluntary assisted dying and in these last few weeks, about abortion. How we engage - in all ways - reflects our fear, our anger, our experience and our hope.

As we speak of birth, life and death, we speak inherently of our faith. As disciples of Jesus, we approach dying and death with caution; our fear and our concern are seasoned with hope. Our hope neither makes death a minor problem, nor an easy path, but it addresses the depth of our life with more than poetry.

I have often pondered whether we are less fearful of death than we are of resurrection. How might our hope, in Christ, be realised? When we affirm our Easter faith, what do we imagine we are, in fact, affirming?

Our hope lies in Jesus Christ. Our affirmation begins, and is complete, in Christ, crucified and risen. We begin, in faith, to make sense of our lives and our suffering, our fear and our weeping, because we name Jesus as the hope in which we locate ourselves.

This story is neither easy, nor untroubled. We need our poets and our scriptures to speak when we cannot; we need our siblings with us, to remind us of the God who has expended everything to seek us out and find us.

Death is not the last word. Life is, in Christ.

To each and all of us, "I wish you God." <sup>iii</sup>

*Simon*

<sup>i</sup>Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night"

<sup>ii</sup>John Foulcher, "Death"

<sup>iii</sup>Les Murray, "The Last Hellos"

# Words without knowledge - facing both death and mystery in the Book of Job!

**Rev. Mark Faulkner** | Director of Rural and Remote Ministry Initiatives.

Humans actually think and believe we are the centre of all things. It is perfectly understandable that humans believed the earth was the centre of the universe up until recently – the last 500 years! However, even ignoring the science and the location of the earth, we still believe we sit at the centre of creation. Humans also believe that with a little knowledge we can know all things. We don't actually like to be confronted with the fact that there are some things we cannot grasp, control, or even eventually knowingly understand. We are in ways so proudly anthropocentric, that when confronted by mystery, we ignore it, dismiss it, give it some simplistic answer or even make something up.

•The book of Job from the Old Testament is one of the great combinations of both the human mind and the inspiration of God. It is a book that is not history, but an exploration of humanity, mystery and God. It is a difficult and confronting ancient piece of writing raising difficult questions that touch humanity globally and timelessly. It is the book of suffering, loss and of course death, and while it doesn't explain the mystery of suffering or even justify God, it does explore faith within the reality of suffering and death.

In this book the story is told of a "blameless and upright" man whose name was Job and whose life is overwhelmed and overtaken by calamity and trouble. He is stripped of his health, his wife and family, his wealth and his livelihood and is then faced with the question of "why?".

There are three friends who come to console him in the midst of his pain and they all have a long discussion and make long speeches, eventually pinning Job's troubles on his sinfulness; that is, because of his sin, Job has been plagued. Job however rejects the advice of his three friends insisting on his own innocence and questions the justice of what is happening to him.

Then a fourth character comes into the story, a man named Elihu, who makes four long speeches himself which he believes will solve Job's troubles; but even these long speeches, all these words, make no difference to Job. Job still has his questions, about why such things have happened to him, and his cry to be heard, to be listened to, which we read in chapter 31 verse 35;



*"If only I had someone who would listen to me and try to see my side! Look, I will sign my name to my defense. Let the Almighty show me that I am wrong. Let my accuser write out the charges against me."*

This wonderful book, raises the complexities of human existence and suffering. It plumbs the depths of human despair, the anger of moral injustice, and the sense of desertion by God; the absence of God.

Throughout the majority of this text, God does not speak. The suffering, the loss, the disease, the pain, the friends and their discussions and speeches have taken place in the midst of the silence of God.

The book of Job is 41 chapters long, and it is not until chapter 38 that God is brought into the narrative to speak. Here Job is answered from within the whirlwind. However, the response of God to Job comes in the form of more questions.

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 2 "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? 3 Brace yourself [Job], because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

4 "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. 5 Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? 6 What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone 7 as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? 8 "Who defined the boundaries of the sea as it burst from the womb,

...and on the questions go.

It is God saying that Job's words, his questions, are words without knowledge, highlighted by the questions that God raises in the whirlwind, questions to which humans do not hold the answers, or the knowledge, and never will have even so many thousands of years after this story of Job was written. If you want a less poetic word without knowledge, simply think of infinity, eternity and the mystery of life itself.



Job's Despair – William Blake 1806/1821.

One of the aspects of life that we find hardest, is being without knowledge. Humans want to know; we want knowledge. We feel most comfortable when we can explain it, even pretend to explain it, whatever "it" is. We like lines and boxes and rules and laws. We like black and white, but not grey. We like things that can fit into our reasoning and our minds. We are like James and John in the Gospels; we want to know what is next and can we sit in places that are safe and organised for us. And we are troubled when something in life pulls us beyond the place where we are comfortable; beyond our knowledge.

At the very end of the book of Job, following the many questions from God to Job, the many searching statements, Job has a short reply, and this is what he says.

42 Then Job replied to the LORD:

*2 "I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you.3 You ask, 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?' It is I. And I was talking*

*about things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me. [words without knowledge]*

*4 "You said, 'Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.'*

*5 "I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.*

So that in the end for Job, there are many questions, there is much that is unknown, there is mystery and hiddenness, but there is God, not just the hearing about God, but there is the seeing, the experience of God.

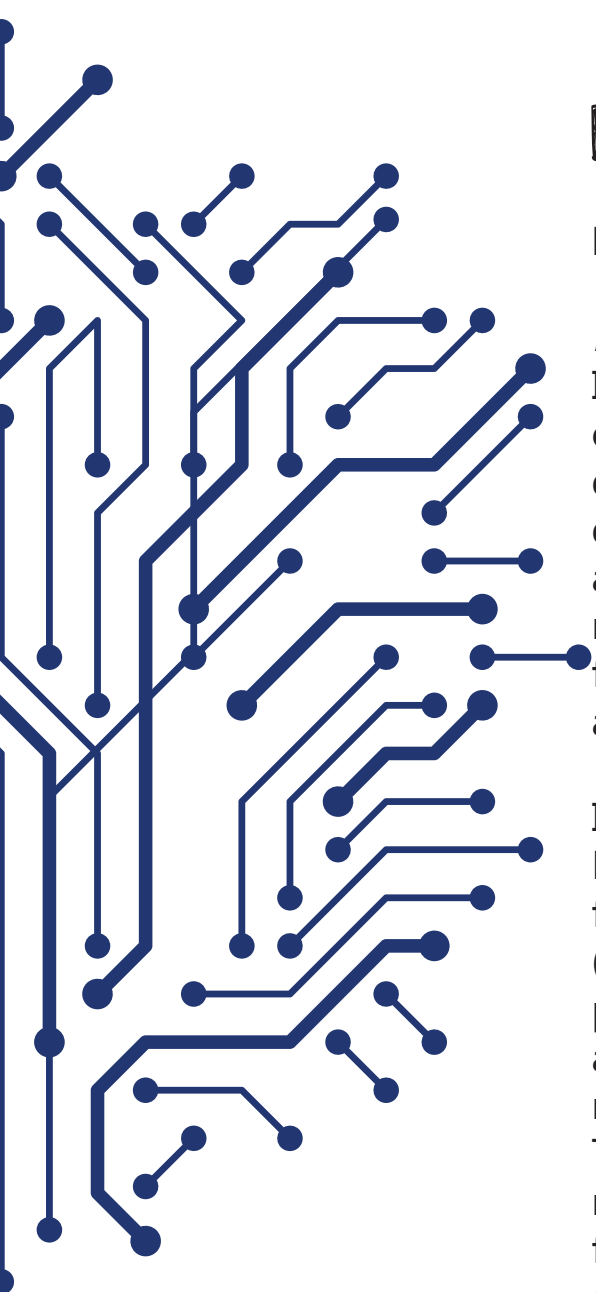
For us as humans there is complete mystery, both in the breath of life and also in the dying and death. The great circle. There are many beliefs and much speculation along with tomes of words, but still in both life and death, there are the questions without understanding and words without knowledge.

The Book of Job is not a happy ending scenario as it is often painted. Yes, Job remarries and has family, security and land again, but he is still the one who lost it all, including his family and entered into the depths of struggle and pain. That loss and death is still a part of his story... his life.

For Job, at the very end, when he also died, "old and full of days", there has been the life story, with great loss and pain, alongside the joy and hope. There has been the many unanswered questions alongside the rants and complaints, all of which sits alongside that simple openness (faith) to God. When Job says.... "I have heard you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you...." he has moved from simply hearing about God, either from his friends, or by what he has been taught, into an encounter, a personal moment with the divine.

Even with all the mystery, the words without knowledge, both the calamity and wonder of life and death, which all still exist, there is the experience (and mystery) of God.

Mark .



# Death

**Natasha He**

*Death* is usually a taboo topic in the Tongan culture. It is not discussed or likely to be a subject of an open conversation although when it happens, all family dynamics rise to the occasion, each knowing their duty and fulfilling their role. It becomes a communal affair, where loved ones come together to show their respect and love for the deceased. During this time, families gather in numbers to pray, mourn and share a meal.

In this season of death, you will witness the Tongan Faa'i Kavei Koula (four Tongan golden pillars/ four core values) which consist of: Faka'apa'apa (respect), Mamahi'i Me'a (loyalty, commitment and perseverance), Loto tō (humility and generosity), and Tauhi Va (nurturing and maintaining healthy relationships). All of these are portrayed in all Tongan functions but is most evident during the mourning process. The burden then becomes lighter for the immediate family of the deceased. There is something unique about the way that death brings

people together, where they are not just bound by relation but by the love of God. And that is what the Faa'i Kavei Koula represents, love, in all aspects and seasons. Christianity is grounded on service and compassion, which is the pure love of Christ.

Growing up, I was raised by three parents: my mother, my father and my maternal grandmother. She migrated to Australia in the late 1960's as a widow, leaving behind her children in Tonga to seek a better life and opportunities, where she settled in Sydney's Northern Beaches. She worked tirelessly to support her family along with trying to finance documentations for her children to migrate to Australia. She was successful in her hopes and hard labour, and it was a great reunion years later. My grandmother then lived on to witness all her five children marry and enjoyed all her twenty-two grandchildren and then ten great-grandchildren.

She was independent, gracious and lived a Christ-like life. A God-fearing woman who showed compassion to the oppressed and valued everyone that she crossed paths within her life. She was the epitome of generosity, humility and perseverance.

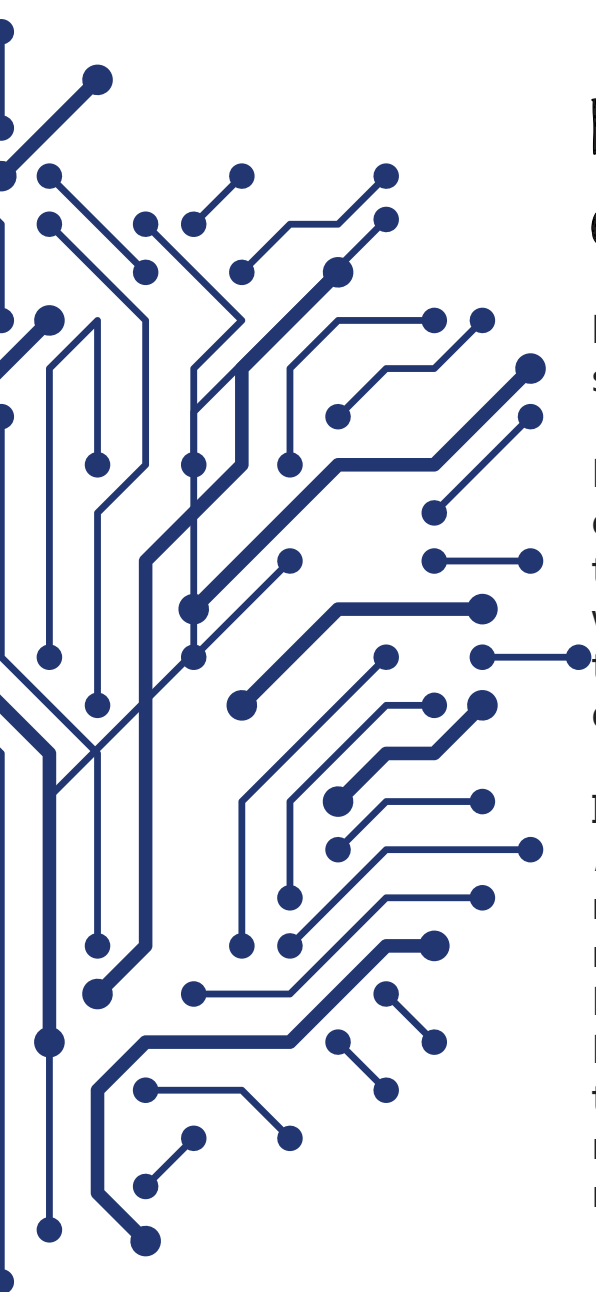
Even in her old age of 80's, she would join the church care takers on Saturday afternoons preparing for Sunday, then cooked a meal that they would enjoy afterwards. She was present at all our family milestones and we were dressed in her elite Tongan attire befitting the occasion. She was a lifelong member of my home church, Cecil Gribble Congregation- Dee Why Uniting Church. One day a minister asked her if she was interested in sharing her testimony or sharing her theological perspective from the pulpit, in which she replied "My calling in the church is to serve others through acts of service and charity. You will see me in the 4th row of pews at every service without fail. I will financially support any funding for our outreach programs, church activities or fundraisers for the disadvantaged. But I will not speak in front of the congregation, nor will I ever. Unfortunately, that is not my calling. And please do not ask me again". When the minister shared this story, he exclaimed that this is exactly what she did, for the next four decades.



or the impact it would have on our family as a whole but more importantly as individuals. But like clockwork, all family dynamics rose to the occasion knowing their role and fulfilling their duty. From the person who welcomes people as they enter the house, to the person who led prayers, to the person directing people where to park safely and so on and so on. But there was a sense of emptiness that I just could not apprehend. With everyone present and being together, I captured a glimpse of life without my beloved grandmother and I recognised the reality of life after death. The void that this created was piercing. I was heart-broken at doorstep of death but I had a desire to create a new life in Christ.

As cliché as it may be, I found solace in Psalm 23. I had to accept that I am the sheep that needed care, protection and guidance. Because only then was I able to fully allow the Shepard to provide these for me. That I am not constrained by my emotions as he restores my soul, offering healing and renewing. That through this dark time, I take comfort in knowing that He guides me even through the reality of death and not to fear. That God is worthy as he never leaves us. If I allow Him to be my shepherd, I will encounter his goodness and mercy forever.

Death was confronting for me as it is the end of mortal life but joyous at the same time as it was the beginning of eternal life with Christ. Through death, our roots are love. A Christ-like love that is translative from Tongan traditions and rituals with no barriers or restrictions. In the midst of darkness, I uncovered light by seeking the opportunity for new life. A new life in a way to honour my grandmother and all her virtuous characteristics. All of which represent the Faa'i Tongan Kavei Koula.



# Redeemed life - the courage to let things die

**Rev. Dr Sarah Agnew**

storyteller-poet-minister | [sarahagnew.com.au](http://sarahagnew.com.au)

Death takes courage. Actual death, as we've all observed for family and friends and strangers facing it through cancer, risking it to preserve life for another, with courage and grace. And we've no doubt seen the opposite, facing death with fear and denial that diminishes life before we die.

Invited to consider death for this edition of *Ruminations*, I am actually thinking more of the myriad other kinds of death we experience, and must, to truly live the transformation of resurrection. Deaths that also take courage. A friend recalled Nietzsche in conversation recently, and his claim that he would believe in redemption more if he saw more people living as if they are redeemed. Which reminded me of a Cadfael mystery I read recently – *The Heretic's Apprentice* (Ellis Peters, 2014).

Set in a Shrewsbury monastery in the 12th century, Cadfael is a warrior-turned-monk who oversees the abbey gardens and produces remedies to help heal his brothers and those in the wider community. He is also an amateur sleuth, in the great tradition of religious amateur detectives – Father Brown, is another example. Cadfael is a fierce advocate for underdogs, the unjustly accused especially, and in this story, he seeks to help and support a young man doubly accused, first of heresy, then of murder. Both accusations could lead him to an early death, but for this discussion, I'm interested in the heresy charge.

The charge of heresy in 12th century Christianity was indeed a matter of life and death. This man unwittingly puts his own life in danger by expressing his questions about redemption and baptism and the inherent good or evil of humans. His master had some years before been accused of heresy for voicing just such questions. These were not matters for the regular folk to consider or discuss – leave it to the professional Christians.

With a character as worldly wise as Cadfael, Peters explores doctrines and ideas

expansively. In his past, Cadfael has participated in battles of life and death. He has encountered people of other faiths and cultures, who have helped him find the humility to put his Christian faith and Welsh / English culture in the context of the diversity of humanity. Cadfael sits with multiple possible truths comfortable even with the dis-ease of it.

So when he is charged with the care of this young man, put into custody within the abbey for his heresy, Cadfael arranges for the abbey librarian to bring him copies of the writings of Augustine, whose doctrines are at the heart of the dispute. As he reads the breadth of those writings, the accused discovers Augustine himself changed his ideas over time. Posed questions. Wrestled with God and sin and redemption. Let go of some ideas, let ideas die, in a way, in order for new ideas to take root and grow.

Our accused had been wondering aloud with friends about whether redemption rests, as certain doctrines profess, solely on God's action to redeem us, or whether our actions are necessary to fulfill redemption. He wonders, too, whether humanity is so very, inherently evil, as some of the early church fathers have claimed, or whether, as stories in the Bible show, God created us and saw us as good and that's the thing to cling to. This character embodies having 'the courage of one's convictions', as he refuses to tow the line of church doctrine even to save his life, in favour of trust in doubt and question and the gift of ideas as faithfulness to God.

Which reminds me of another story, the 1990s film *Dogma*, starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. The 'Thirteenth Apostle', played by Chris Rock, encourages *having ideas* rather than *adhering to doctrines*. Perhaps because ideas have a fluidity to them, a more natural process of death and resurrection into new ideas; doctrines die much harder, they risk holding *us* captive in death, rather than releasing us into resurrection.

I begin to think I, too, would believe in redemption more if I saw more of the so-called redeemed living as if we are so.

How enticing certainty is, what is known, those doctrines, or practices, or ideologies of past seasons. The ones we're comfortable with, so we feel safe, so we don't have to undergo the hard uncomfortable work of change. The ones that told us who we are, so we don't have to acknowledge that the world is changing, and we might also have changed. It takes courage to acknowledge that part of us – our ideas, beliefs, story, has died, and courage to live redeemed.

That question about whether redemption is all on God, or in part our responsibility is an interesting one. I wonder if it's both. We cannot save, or redeem, ourselves.



Release from what holds us captive, and renewal back into life, is God's gift.

When someone hands you a gift, your part is to accept, to receive it, unwrap it, and choose to put it to use, yes? So God offers us the gift of resurrection life. And just as Jesus came to resurrection through death, so too do we. When we accept that gift, we can only do so by putting down – by letting die – the former way of being that was not God's way. We must let die what is not part of the life of redemption – our self-interest, arrogance, fear, greed, prejudice, hate, disdain and diminishing of the humanity of others. In short, if we say we have accepted the gift of redemption God offers, we must live as if we *are* redeemed. Or what we've done is taken a gift and left it on the shelf, unwrapped, and unused. And what sort of witness is that?

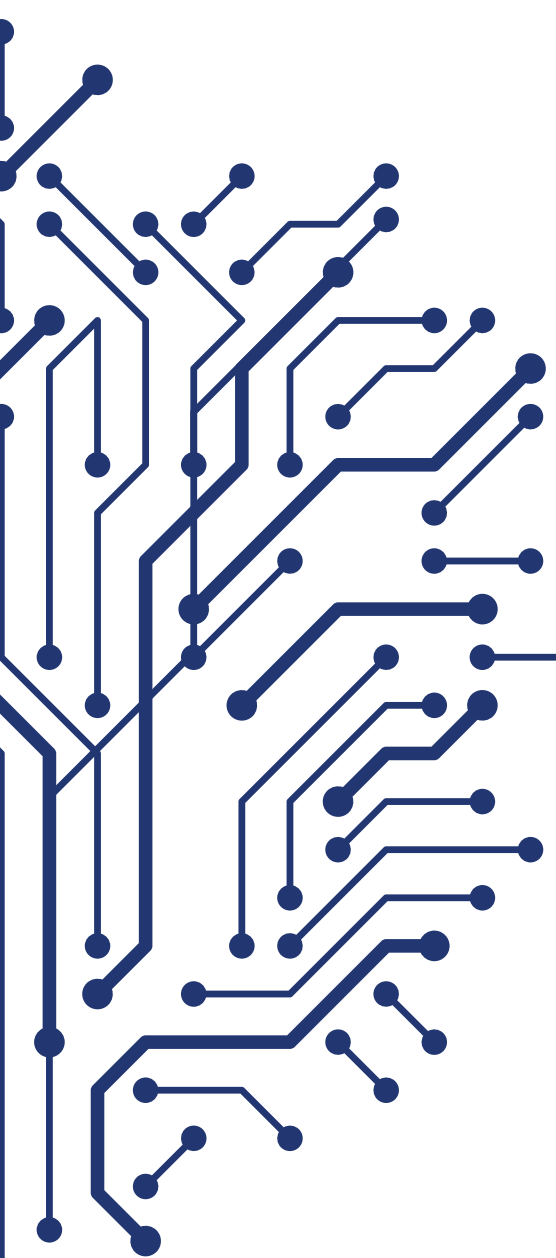




# Reverberation

When all the lights are out  
the stories of the day begin to echo  
in the empty space, to awaken  
stories held within and  
then – then – the pieces of me pull  
away from their rough patches  
to be gathered in the shroud  
around my being.

[Sarah Agnew, *Whisper on My Palm*, Resource, 2022 - available from [sarahagnew.com.au](http://sarahagnew.com.au) and MediaCom Education]



# Death

Rev. Alexandra Sangster

**Jesus of the Sorrows.  
who knows the solitary space of loss,  
be our companion as we gather in our  
heartbreak.  
Breathe your gentle presence into us.**

There is a service that I do.  
It is a service of anointing.  
I do it when someone is dying.  
I do it with oil. I do it because the bible tells me so

Exodus 29:7

*Then you shall take the anointing oil and pour it  
on his head and anoint him.*

"Isaiah 61:1

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
Because the Lord has anointed me  
To bring good news to the afflicted;*

*He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to captives  
And freedom to prisoners;*

Luke 10:34

*and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them;  
and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of  
him.*

And of course...

Mark 14:8

*She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the  
burial.*

**God who weeps, Comfort her  
who is dying  
May she die without fear.  
God who in Jesus, stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart;  
carry her in your arms as she departs,  
rock her now,  
be her boat,  
carry her safe over this sea of fear.**

*Speed Bonney boat like bird on the wing*

Mostly when I have carried out this ritual it has been in a hospital,  
it has been in a room with one or two others  
Usually family  
holding the hands  
and the feet of the person  
who is dying.

*'Hold their feet I say  
Hold on  
They know you are here'*

Over the last few years we have all usually been wearing PPE  
and we are meant to be wearing masks  
but by this point in someone's journey,  
nothing can really  
harm them anymore,  
so the masks are taken off  
and the families mouths kiss faces,  
wet with tears.

***And so my love I anoint you now with the sign of the cross,  
remember in this moment that you are a child of God,  
beloved and precious in God's eyes.  
And remember too, that though you walk in the valley of the shadow  
You do not walk alone  
And that God is with you  
To carry you home***

The church has been anointing with oil for a very long time  
and many of us  
perhaps  
Are unclear as to why.

Winter 2022

Certainly oil can have healing and medicinal qualities,  
certainly oil is hard to make,

its expensive,

so to pour it upon someone's head or hands  
or feet is like a great pouring of generosity  
and certainly,

If your skin is dry,

because you have been working hard

or because you are not well

or maybe

because you very old

and your skin has become like thin parchment,

soft with bruises

and astonishing for you to see

Then oil

is a balm

'Look at these'

( my grandma used to say to me )

'look at these'

and she would hold out her hands,

hands that had held 10 babies

and bottled orchards of fruit with her fowlers bottling kit

and hands that had boiled the washing in the tub and lit the fire

and swept and scrubbed

and brushed my hair so hard

I felt like my scalp would lift,

'Look at these'

and together we would gaze at her fragile fingers,

blue with bruises

and dry to the touch.

Often when we anoint, we weep.

The experience of grief is something that every single person

(and many non-human mammals) experience.

Grief hurts.

Because it hurts it is often seen as a 'problem' that needs to be fixed  
or got through

or ignored

or made to go away.

But grief is not a problem.

Writer Catherine Burns puts it like this

'grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy'

and 'Grief Walker' Steven Jenkinson says:

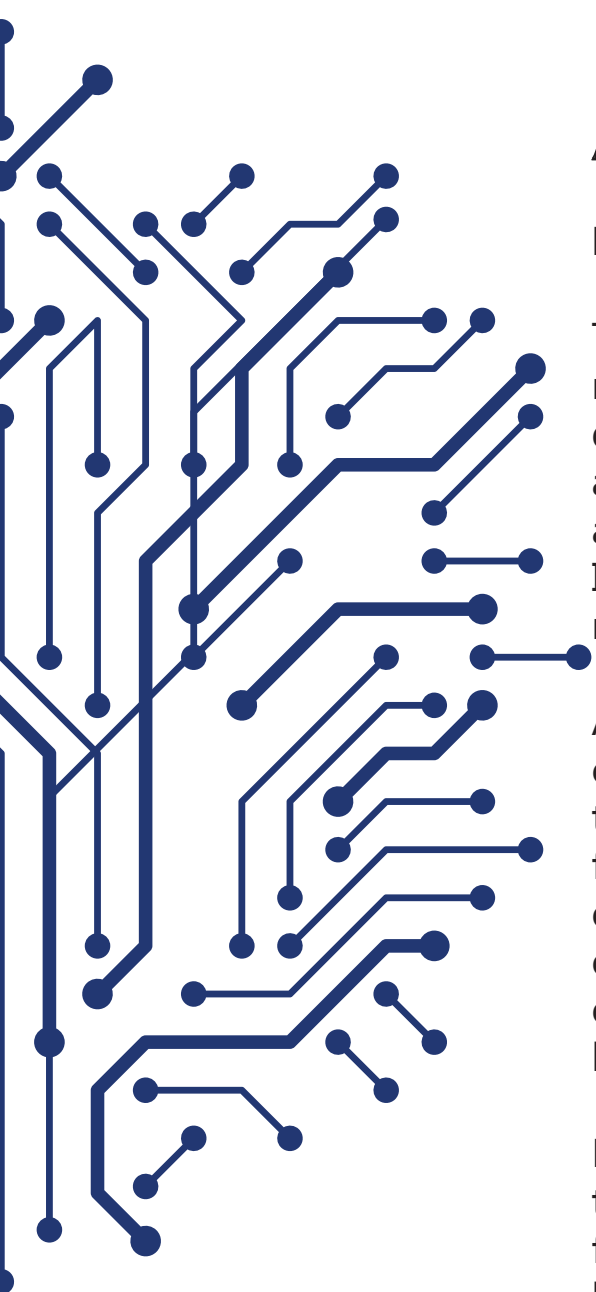
'Grief is not a feeling... if grief was a feeling it would be transitory, feelings are like weather: they are not the architecture, they come and go, even the deepest feelings are transient. But grief stays..grief is architecture, it carves you out from the inside'.

'Write something about death', said SaltBush.

So I give you oil and architecture and my grandmothers hands.  
And I give you this (because it was given to me and to us all)

'Do not be afraid, I am with you  
(sang our melancholy Jesus)  
I have called you by your name, you are mine,  
I have called you by your name, you are mine'





# A reflection

**Margaret Reeson**

The phone call startled me awake. It was after midnight and a stranger introduced herself as a doctor in ICU at the hospital. Did my husband, she asked, have an Advanced Care Plan? Should they attempt to revive him if his heart stopped? Confused, I mumbled something incoherent. 'I don't think he's ready just yet.'

Are we ever ready for dying? Whether the moment comes suddenly or after years of ill health, it is hard to face that the time for death is now. A separation from someone we love, or the time when we ourselves step on to that hidden path to the mystery of what is beyond. Our mind may tell us that dying one day is not optional. That it is happening now is hard to take.

Recent months have given me many opportunities to consider dying and death. Funerals of dear friends, the failing health of others, the death of my husband Ron in August 2021 and then the death of

one of my closest women friends only weeks later. The fragility of life and the reality of our own mortality has been very real. It has been a time of learning for me. The business of death and dying is so tightly enmeshed with the business of living.

Although we are never really ready for death, in some ways we can be preparing for it. Here are some of the things that I have been learning.

## **Preparing for the end**

In our case, Ron had been experiencing many health challenges over a number of years and so, as physical capacity decreased, we knew that time was limited. When COVID meant that we were restricted to our home, we chose to use the time to collaborate to write our own story. This became a profound time of sharing, with deep personal conversations about our memories, motivations and the ways in which God had guided us before marriage and during fifty-five years together as husband and wife. We produced a book, but the conversations

would have been worth it even if we had not achieved that. A recent *Compass* program featured the helpful work of people who listen to the memories of people who are dying and record their story; this was a way of valuing their life. *Have important conversations and capture memories while you can.*

Every family has its own questions and issues as parents age, or as family members struggle with disability or ill health. Ron and I found it very helpful to have a frank family conversation about how we and they would deal with the death or incapacity of either of us. With our adult children and their partners, we arranged for an intentional conversation together, which included my husband sharing details about our finances with two family members. We all knew that, if I were alone, I would need support with financial advice, and if he were alone, he would need other practical help. It was possible to have that conversation and then park it until needed. *Talk openly with family about death and what it will mean for those who are left.*

'You'll find my thoughts about what I'd like for my funeral in the top drawer of the filing cabinet,' he said. Not so. Despite each family member searching carefully, there was no sign and we had to use our memory of conversations and comments. There is real value in preparing notes on what is important for you as your family farewells you. Perhaps your choice of music, or someone who you would like to participate, or whether you would prefer burial or cremation, a private service or a funeral with lots of friends. It can clarify your own thoughts about how you would like to be remembered. Your family may choose to ignore your ideas, but it will give them a helpful starting point as they prepare to say goodbye. *Leave some instructions but make sure someone knows where to find them!*

There will always be those 'If only...' moments. Things you wish you had said or done - or left unsaid. Grief may be intensified by regret or bitterness. There was a period not long before my husband's final illness when we had a difficult and painful difference of opinion. Should we, or should we not, take a particular action? A decision was made which left one of us hurt, upset and withdrawn. We were both very thankful that we had been able to be at peace with each other before it was too late. The alternative is too distressing to imagine. *Don't assume there will be unlimited time to resolve differences.*

A friend in her nineties was very unwell and knew that she didn't have long. When we visited her, she was telling us enthusiastically about her plans for bequests. As a single professional woman, she had money to share. As she prepared for death, she was delightedly anticipating the moment when her gifts would bless several Christian organizations that she had been supporting. A wonderful legacy. *Consider the family of faith with which you identify, or community groups that*



*have been important to you, and be intentional about including some bequests in your will.*

If it is possible, try to find ways to say goodbye well, specially with those who are closest. I feel for those who have not had that privilege. It is a gift to be able to speak words of love at the end.

### **For those who are left**

Don't be surprised if you and your nearest and dearest find that a death in the family is not only sad and very emotional but also very stressful. There will be many decisions to be made and not everyone will agree. This is one reason why it can be helpful to have some instructions from your loved one about their own funeral. Of course, often circumstances will take things out of our hands. The restrictions on movement during COVID lockdowns meant that it was impossible for our family to have a funeral as we had imagined, and a delayed memorial service was held months after a small private funeral. *Expect to be stressed – and ready to forgive each other.*

What might be helpful for someone who is grieving the death of someone dear to them? We all respond in our own way. I found that I wanted to retreat into the privacy of my family, with quietness, understanding and a shared grief. Emails, cards, letters and text messages of loving sympathy were appreciated. I could read them when I was ready but I found phone calls or visitors difficult. Knowing that I was surrounded by love and prayer was very comforting, but for a while I was not ready to emerge from my private 'cave' to meet people, apart from a pastor. Another person may have needed to hear the voices of their friends or hoped that they would come to be with them. Although individuals may not respond in the same ways in the first days of grief, the love and care of their community will be very important. *Consider the individual and check whether they would prefer a visit or privacy.*

Symbols and stories can be helpful as we reflect on what has happened. A special photograph, a small display of objects that mean something to us, a candle, thoughtfully using things that had belonged to our loved one. We all need to tell the story of what has just happened. For some of us, we will need to talk about it. Others may choose to create art or make something in memory. I needed to write a detailed story, for my own sake, even if no one else ever read it. It is so sad to think that a family might never speak of that person again. *Speak to each other often about memories, and funny stories, and precious moments shared with the one who has died.*

Ritual is important. As we face planning a funeral, we are likely to feel overwhelmed.

With the guidance of your funeral director, a pastor and support from family and close friends, think about how you can honour the one who has died in ways that are authentic for you. For those of Christian faith, there are some beautiful prayers and readings that can frame a service in a helpful way. I found it helpful to gather flowers from family gardens and create something lovely for Ron's casket. Someone may choose a special song, or involve grandchildren. Our family made our own private ritual for the scattering of ashes. *Create a service that is personal and filled with meaning.*



### **And our faith?**

Death is a great mystery. Does the death of someone dear to us, or facing our own end, make us feel closer to God and more confident in our faith? Or abandoned, alone and in despair? Perhaps a mixture of both. Grief is a very deep and unsettling emotion and will go on in many forms for a very long time. Are there promises for us?

Some years ago, when I was shaken by the death of a friend, I began to ponder a verse from 2 Corinthians 5 which offered the image of a tent. Verse 1:

*1 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands...*

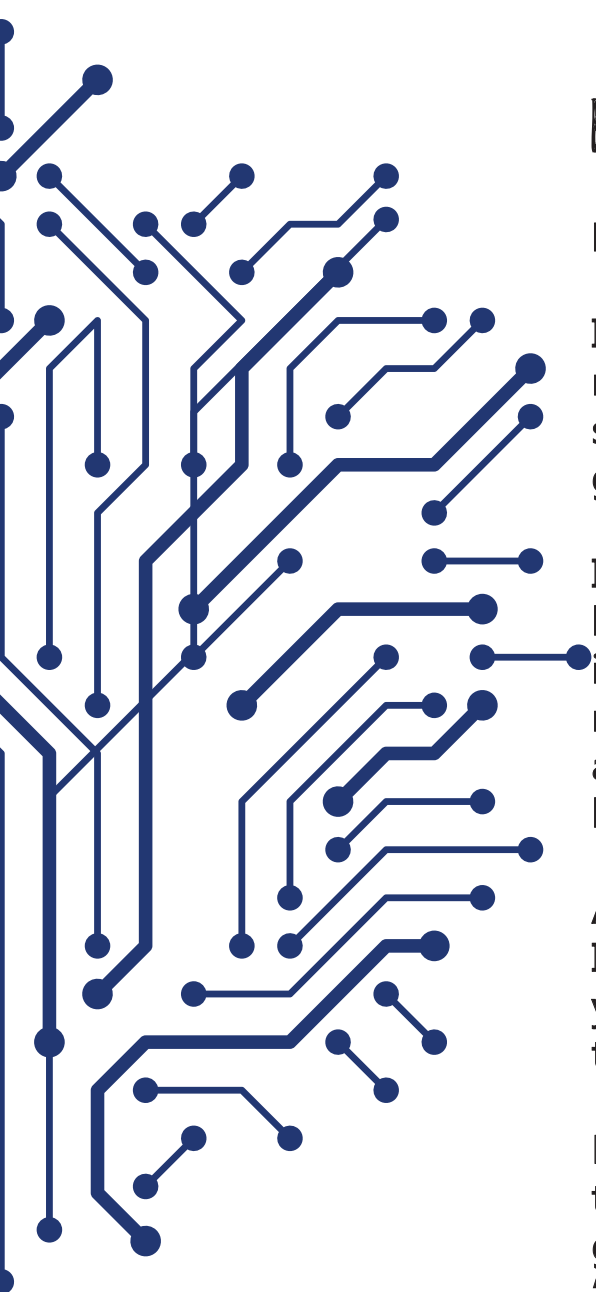
*4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be **swallowed up by life**.*

I tried to imagine a tent, past its usefulness, and what might replace it. This is a picture that helps me.

This tattered tent in which I live is showing signs of wear.  
Falling to bits, cracking up,  
Not in the shape it once was.  
It may be, by accident or disease, damaged beyond repair.  
This tent was never intended to last forever.

Where can I live now?

There is a mystery and a promise.  
When this temporary tent is no longer useful  
I need not be left exposed and bare.  
God promises to wrap me up in rainbow love  
Enfold the ruins of what once was in something far more generous  
Protect me within a more substantial dwelling  
Embrace my spirit  
So that I may be swallowed up by life.



# Lemon Tree, very tricky.

## Rose Broadstock

It was such a special birthday when my son presented me with the gift of a beautiful lemon tree. It looked so full of health, and its leaves were deep green and glossy.

I loved the tree. I also loved that for my sake he had ventured into the foreign and somewhat intimidating territory of a nursery, knowing at any minute a horticulturalist could approach him and ask him personal questions about his gardening habits.

As I looked at this beautiful gold and green tree, I imagined myself going into the garden over the years, each time reminded of him, and so I was keen to get it in the ground.

However, soon after planting there were signs of trouble. The leaves began to yellow, they lost their glossiness. I asked myself 'have I overwatered?' 'Perhaps I've underwatered. Perhaps I've overfed it.

Perhaps I've underfed it, and it's starving in the ground!

I spent many hours googling care of lemon trees, and as many dollars in gardening stores.

Interestingly at that time, the story from Luke's Gospel (Ch.13) about the unfruitful fig tree came up on the lectionary. 'Give it a bit longer' said the Gardener. 'I'll dig around it, put down some manure. Maybe we'll get figs, but if we don't, we will cut it down.'

'Give it a bit longer' he said, and so I made my last desperate attempt. I dug it up, checked the roots, and replanted with better soil and some gravel for drainage, but still it ailed. So I made the painful call, pulled it out and put it on the compost.

This experience often reminds me of what a brutal activity gardening can be. Yes there is the fertilising, the enriching, the planting. How hard it is though, to prune the luxuriant growth of the vines to just two bare canes, to cut my flourishing

raspberries to the ground.

Most of all, how hard it is to believe that these decisions to prune and virtually decimate, will result in extravagant new growth.

As always, gardening teaches me a lot about God's ways, and the pattern of new life out of death. Jesus saw this in the seasons, in wheatfields, fruit trees and vineyards.

So if there are divine principles observable in Creation, can these also be applied to the Church? Does that same voice of the Great Gardener also call us as Church, to nurture, to plant, but also to cut back and pull out what is no longer fruitful, even when what must go has special meaning for us, like my lemon tree?

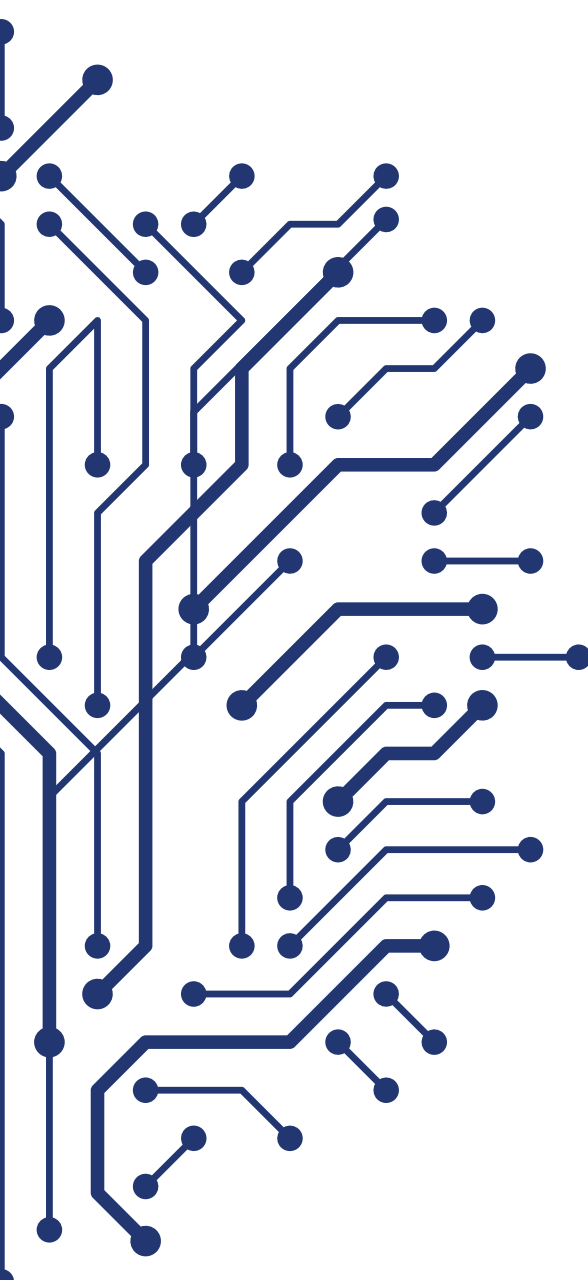
Are there signs that we may have neglected this critical task as 'gardeners' of the Church? What might we see for example, in places of church storage? Old chairs, backdrops of musicals that happened long ago, dusty Christmas decorations made by children now adults, a framed certificate of thanks from a church group who visited in 1966.

But not only possessions. We see churches built for another age, ways of worship designed for time when churches were large, and Ministers were out and about in country churches. Church leadership structures designed for churches with lots of leaders. But we can hang on to those ways of being, sometimes fight for it, because it has meant something important at the time. It reminds us of people we love, leaders of the past, times of luxuriant growth, our parents wedding. All this can burden us, particularly at a time when we need energy for our communities, who need us now more than ever.

In times of decision-making, the key question is painful, but needs to be asked – is this or that helping us produce figs – to offer life and grace and peace to each other and to our neighbours. Because sometimes asking the hard question, though it may lead to painful consequences, may also give us more freedom, less stress, less burden, and most importantly the time and energy to simply be Christian community at mission.

May we have the courage to make these days a time of sorting the garden we have been entrusted with, and may we have the wisdom to know what to conserve, what to prune, and what to pull out with grateful hearts.





# ‘Come now, highest feast on the way to everlasting freedom’

Rev. Dr Peter Walker | Principal of UTC

Your Christian faith is a faith for life and death. By that I do not mean ‘life and death’ as in ‘the stakes are high’. Rather, Christianity is a faith for life and death because these two ultimate realities are held together by One who has greater authority than either of them. Life and death are both under the command of the One who has greater power over them than they will ever have over you.

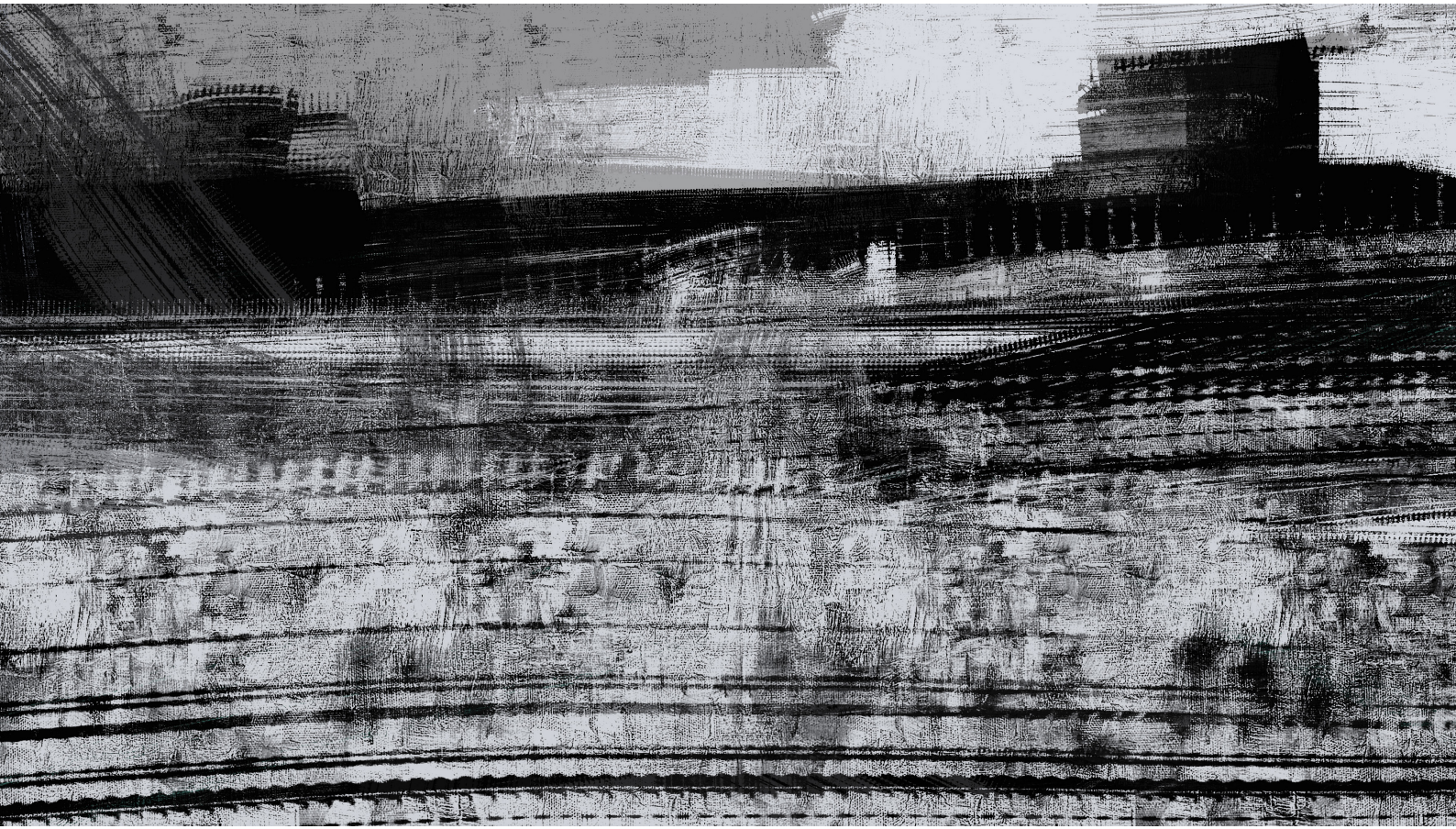
This does not mean we pretend death isn’t frightening. It is. Yet, even in the face of that sometimes frightening prospect, we are liberated by the knowledge that death has its place. Death exists, with life, under the dominion of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of death in his poem *Stations on the Road to Freedom*:

## *Death*

Come now, highest feast on the way to everlasting freedom,  
death. Lay waste to the burdens of chains and walls  
which confine our earthly bodies and blinded souls,  
that we may see at last what here we could not see.  
Freedom, we sought you long in discipline, action, and suffering.  
Dying, we recognize you now in the face of God.

We might well think that these words could easily be said from a place of comfort, but not so easily when faced by the prospect of death. Yet we recall that Bonhoeffer wrote those lines while confined in a Nazi prison camp, nearing his execution. How extraordinary was his faith, which allowed him to address death in that situation as the ‘highest feast on the way to everlasting freedom’.



I don't wish to pretend that death, especially untimely death, is not the most bitter food in life. Even less do I think we can presume to explain death except with trembling and humility. However, what we may explain, and can hold close to our hearts each day, is our Christian hope. Our hope is that God has shown us, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that 'death has lost its sting' (Isaac Watts). Death is not the final word.

When Bonhoeffer's own death came, at age 39, the prison doctor described his last moments in this way:

Through the half-open door in one room of the hut I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison clothes, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. He said, 'This is the end: for me, the beginning of life'. His death ensued after a few seconds. In almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely into the will of God.

Millions of people have died bearing witness to the God who reigns over death, yet few so movingly as this.



Another German-born theologian, Dorothee Soelle, once said that she was attracted to Christianity because it teaches that you can either win or lose your life based on the words of Jesus Christ. Not win or lose your life as in being struck down by God, like the Old Testament writers believed happened to the Hittites. Rather, win or lose your life as in: Do I really want to be *alive*? Do I want to taste *true life*? Or do I want to exist, day in and day out, simply keeping up with the news. If the answer is yes, then let us place our trust in the One who has greater authority over life and death than they will ever hold over us.

# News from Saltbush

**Rev. Tim Jensen** | Saltbush Scattered Community Minister



At St. Clements Retreat Centre, Galong.

In June the most recent statistics on the census were published revealing that Australians are less religious than ever before. It is no surprise to us as it's a statistical fact that we have known for many years. The decline of church numbers and any identification with Christian communities is something we have witnessed in the ever-increasing empty pews of our churches. Rev. Michael Jensen wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald that this is due to the exposed abuses perpetrated by church leaders alongside a general mistrust that all institutions are experiencing. Rev. Jensen (no connection to my ancestry) encouraged the church to not seek to be more secular or cool in order to be relevant but to be more like Christ.

Since its beginning Saltbush has intentionally steered our conversation and our mission to how we can be more like Christ. This has meant that we have some difficult conversations, face stark realities of where our churches are positioned in society and seek through discernment, an understanding of where the Holy Spirit is leading.

*Winter 2022*

At our gatherings we have been exploring being Intentional Christian Communities of Practice. The topics of being about justice, being inclusive, being relational and being in discipleship have provided a deep source of conversation and contemplation. In some ways these topics have been quite challenging and confronting, however we have seen with those who attend a commitment to the conversation has been encouraging and hopefully affirming of their faith journeys. Since our last Ruminations we have been at Narrandera with our next to be in Ballina on July 23rd. As with all our gatherings, if you cannot be there in person you can connect via zoom. At Ballina Rev. Dr. Peter Walker, from UTC, will be our key note speaker focussing on Intentional Christian Community.

As we continue to explore what it means to be more like Christ, we have been journeying with western presbyteries with the intention of considering how we can continue to be as real a reflection of Christ, even as our resources are diminishing. Being an effective expression of the movement of God in our particular regional contexts takes a lot of energy. We have an incredibly faithful and dedicated group of leaders and we do need to discern the Spirit of God in the best way we can be supportive of congregations, which may mean changing our established structures. In May we met in Dubbo with Presbytery leaders; we hope to meet there again in October.

When we get the opportunity, we have been taking Saltbush services in congregations as well as attending Presbytery meetings. We continue to be active walking alongside the Far North Coast in the regional partnership and exploring a new way to be a presbytery. On July 9th we will also be inducting Rev. Noel Williams into the role of bush chaplain for the Barwon Patrol alongside Frontier Services, Synod of NSW/ACT and New England North West Presbytery.

At our retreat in Galong, we gathered to the theme of 'In the time of Winter-shadows and light'. It was based around a chapter in Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak*. Palmer names certain shadows in our lives, that is what are the things that cast a shadow on our lives and how then do we move into a space of light, of renewing and healing. How is it that we hear the voice of Christ speak into our lives, amidst the shadows, knowing the light casts different shadows at different times of our lives.

We continue to offer Saltbush cafés with Wednesday nights being a regular time slot at the moment. Most recently Natasha He has been presenting a café on Women of the Gospels. Women in the New Testament seem to be overshadowed by the disciples however the women we encounter in the Gospels are strong, insightful, courageous and wise. A fact not lost on Jesus as he affirms their faith, discipleship and their belonging to the reign of God.

It is great to have Natasha joining us as Rev. Geoff Wellington is on long service leave. Natasha brings a fresh and thoughtful approach to her ministry and we are so grateful she has been able to join us.

We look forward to seeing you either in person or via zoom. Until then may you know God's blessing in and through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# Thanks for your donations to Saltbush!

Please consider financially supporting Saltbush; either as individuals or as a congregation.

Your donation will be directly used for the work of supporting Saltbush and the ways we are working to encourage congregations and people in scattered communities of faith.

You can donate generally towards Saltbush and this will include the cost of enabling the printing of Ruminations.

To donate please make a direct transfer:

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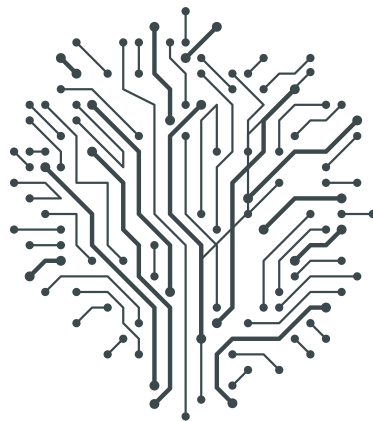
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# SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY