

Reflections • Wednesday 24 May 2023

Whom, or what, do we worship?



"This stencilled mural was first painted in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem in 2003, shortly after the construction of the 708km West Bank Wall that annexes Palestinian land inside the Israeli-occupied West Bank...The image infers that it is right to protest injustice, but it challenges people to protest in a way that does not create new violence," (Bishop Cam Venables)

I recently had the privilege of visiting an art exhibition in Brisbane that is currently showcasing the work of British street artist and film director, Banksy. The exhibited image I am most familiar with is *Rage, The Flower Thrower*. This stencilled mural was first painted in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem in 2003, shortly after the construction of the 708km West Bank Wall that annexes Palestinian land inside the Israeli-occupied West Bank. In this mural, a masked man is clearly protesting something, but instead of throwing a bomb, he is throwing a bunch of flowers. The image infers that it is right to protest injustice, but it challenges people to protest in a way that does not create new violence.

In many ways Banksy has, over the years, used his art to provocatively name destructive beliefs and various forms of injustice. In a picture I saw for the first time in the exhibition, Banksy places each of the main characters from Walt Disney's animated movie *The Jungle Book* on a photo of a landscape utterly stripped of trees. Each of the much loved characters – Mowgli, Baloo, Bagheera, King Louie, and Shere Khan – were gagged, blindfolded and tied up.

In another painting, *Napalm*, Banksy places the famous image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc – the nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running from her napalmed village with her back on fire – hand in hand with Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald. It is a disturbing critique of capitalism and consumerism that I'll be processing for a while.

There were moving tributes to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the invasion of Ukraine, and uncomfortable challenges to racism, each with a prophetic edge. What was named is not right – Banksy affirms! Humanity could do better – Banksy infers! More than that...humanity needs to do better. The exhibition's theme "Without Limits: There is always hope" is telling.

One of the things Banksy repeatedly challenges is the complex reality of consumerism that flourishes and perpetuates itself in our ongoing love of stuff. One image had three hunter-gatherers with spears and an axe stalking a pair of shopping trolleys! It was easy to chuckle at this one with a gentle mocking of where most people in Western society get their food. The exhibition includes an image of people crying out to God in anguish while kneeling in front of a "Sale Ends Today" sign. There is also a mural of the crucified Christ with his arms outstretched, holding overstuffed shopping bags and gift boxes.

"Whom, or what, do we worship?" the image seemed to ask. Is it the crucified Christ or is it the stuff we love to buy?

Jesus was not a street artist, but he told provocative parables that challenged people to look at their assumptions and change them. To followers of a religion that understood God to be the final judge defining who is in or out, Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son ([Luke 15.11-32](#)) in which God is a parent who welcomes and loves someone who broke every law! And, to a community that regarded Samaritan people as beyond hope, Jesus told the parable of The Good Samaritan ([Luke 10.25-37](#)).

That judgemental belief and Samaritan prejudice is not right – Jesus affirmed! Religious people could do better – Jesus inferred! More than that...religious people need to do better!

I encourage *anglican focus* readers to check out [The Art Of Banksy](#) exhibition. Please let me know what you think of it.