

Reflection on Sunday 17 May 2026

by Maria Henriksson-Bell

Readings: Acts 1. 6-14 & John 17. 1-11

Good morning,

How are you? What is life like for you in what Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney calls, "The end of rules-based international order", and some would call the End Stage of Capitalism? We certainly live in interesting times, and we can take comfort from how we today, unlike so many other people of faith, can gather in comfort and safety.

Thank you, God, for this community.

Regardless of your political or philosophical interpretation of our current times, I know, from multiple conversations, that I am not alone in feeling like we are living through a stage of permacrisis.

Permacrisis, an extended period of instability and insecurity, was the Collins Dictionary word of the year in 2022 and describes how, when globally we are simultaneously in the midst of a climate crisis, a high number of wars and conflicts, a refugee crisis and economic instability, it comes to feel like it is permanent.

Like the early disciples did, we are also living in a world governed by systems and institutions that often don't serve the many but are set up to mostly grow the financial wealth of the few.

Last year, I supported my son studying History GCSE, in particular the rise and reality of fascism in Europe from 1918 onwards; the echoes of history are repeating in our time, and loudly: economic instability and inequality, leading to polarisation, leading to the rise of extreme opinions, only now turbocharged by modern information technology where money can buy you influence and power. Fuel for a permacrisis, indeed.

What is our role now then, as followers of Christ in this time of permacrisis?

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We can continue to do what Christians have done throughout the ages: hold on to hope, work as peacemakers, speak truth to power, defend democracy and free speech, care for the vulnerable, speak up against prejudice.

Locally, we can set an example to society in how we conduct ourselves and lead the way by modelling how to do community well and how to reconcile our differences with grace and a sense of humour. I want to share one of my favourite quotes of late: "The cost of community is annoyance." It is, to me, a liberating sentiment that acknowledges that community is messy but that doesn't mean it isn't worth it.

I would like to invite you to do a little exercise. Don't worry, it is only a mental exercise, you can remain seated. If it helps, you can close your eyes.

Think of someone you disagree with. This may be a real person or someone you imagine. They hold a range of views you disagree with or they have done things you disagree with.

Now, think of some things you both can agree are really wrong with the world.

Ask yourself what things you both fear. What things are you both worried about? It feels good to find common ground, doesn't it?

Now, think of as many everyday things as possible that you can heartily agree on. Think of someone you both care about.

If it is relevant, ask yourself if you are ready to forgive or ask forgiveness.

Finally, imagine something you would both find very funny.

How do you feel about this person now? Are you closer to being able to have a good dialogue?

Another thing we, as people of faith, can do in a time of permacrisis is to question and challenge the status quo. We can question the way things are now because we are called to build something better and have visions for the world as it should be.

Take, for instance, how we talk about how well we are doing as a nation. How is it measured? We pretty much only talk in economic terms, don't we? Gross Domestic Product (GDP),

economic growth etc. Trouble is, in the words of Robert Kennedy, "GDP measures, in short, everything except that which makes life worthwhile." There are now other ways to measure progress, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator and the Human Development Index.

We could, to paraphrase the slogan, ask ourselves, "What would Jesus prioritise in his national budget?" Imagine a world where international and national public policy is shaped primarily around the needs of the most vulnerable in our world, across borders. It would benefit us all in a similar way to how we all benefit from technical innovations initially aimed at helping the disabled.

We can imagine a world where our conflict resolution is so advanced and our powers of diplomacy are so sophisticated we have no use for weapons, where we turn our swords into plowshares. It is not a pipe dream, it is ancient prophecy. Those with the gift of this vision, who feel unable to tolerate the status quo and take action, often pay a heavy price.

For the disciples we read about in the book of Acts and the epistles, it was also costly to challenge the status quo, to challenge the norms of society, and many lost their lives. The Roman Empire was strictly patriarchal and hierarchical and here the believers preached a message of equality and lived like they meant it. As Paul writes to the believers in Galatia, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile, neither slave nor free, there is no male or female because you are all one in Jesus Christ."

As Roman citizens, women were the property of their fathers or husbands, yet among the believers they held positions of leadership. They broke bread, prayed and lived life with fellow

believers across boundaries of ethnicity, gender and social status, but it sometimes came at a cost of persecution and rejection from biological family. Junia, commended by Paul as "Outstanding among the apostles", was arrested and imprisoned alongside him.

The example set by these early disciples, and the inspiration by the Holy Spirit, helped the Gospel spread, as Jesus instructs, "to the ends of the Earth". Christians from then on have continued to take it upon themselves to lead the way in challenging injustice and being peacemakers.

The Christian faith inspired the fight against Apartheid, the rise of democracy in Eastern Europe, the abolition of slavery, the Labour movement, the fight for universal suffrage. Countless organisations to protect and care for children, animals, Creation, historic buildings, the arts, the sick, the disabled, the homeless, the impoverished and the imprisoned were founded by people inspired by the Gospel.

As people of faith, we should be proud of this heritage, but we mustn't rest on laurels. Much as we congratulate ourselves on people of faith often being on the right side of history, it ill behoves us to pretend we were, or always are, in the right.

In the words of the late theologian and author Rachel Held Evans:

"If you are looking for [Bible] verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate or honour women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to

wage war, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, you will find them. If you are looking for an out-dated, irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, believe me, you will find it. This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not, "What does it say?", but, "What am I looking for?" I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm."

We may live in "interesting" times, but we are not doomed to see history repeating, not if we choose to learn from it, the crisis does not have to be "perma" if we get serious about seeking solutions.

I want to share a verse that has been playing on my mind the last few days. It is from the letter to the Philippians:

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable – if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy – dwell on these things."

