

Christmas Message 2009

Hebrews 1:1-4; Psalm 98; John 1:1-14

In light of the industrial action taken by a number of unions over the past fortnight, I thought the following email that we received recently was rather amusing.

While shepherds watched their flocks by night

All seated on the ground

The angel of the Lord came down

and glory shone around.

The Union of shepherds has complained that it breaches health and safety regulations to insist that shepherds watch their flocks without appropriate seating arrangements being provided, therefore benches, stools and orthopaedic chairs must be made available. Shepherds have also requested that, due to inclement weather conditions at this time of the year, they should watch their flocks via cctv cameras from centrally heated observation huts. Please note, the angel of the Lord is reminded that before shining his/her glory all around, he/she must ascertain that all shepherds have been issued with glasses capable of filtering out the harmful effects of UVA, UVB and Glory.¹

The Christmas story that is portrayed in popular culture and on Christmas cards is filled with images of ancient shepherds, sheep grazing on lush green hills, angels with golden wings, Mary and Joseph with haloes around their heads, and a newborn baby that never cries or dirties its nappy. It is an idealised picture of the Christmas story that certainly appeals to our romantic nature, but one which, I suspect, we find difficult to ground in our everyday lives.

Here in Australia in the 21st century, the hills are brown with tinder- dry grass, sheep are rounded up by sunburnt station hands on quad bikes, first time parents are more likely to have bags under their eyes rather than haloes around their heads, and babies, as perfect and precious as they are, are also intensely demanding.

¹ Christmas Songs – politically corrected.

There's a rather noticeable incongruence between the ideal and reality.

So how can we give the Christmas story a deeper, grittier meaning for our lives in the Australian context today?

The readings we have listened to from the bible today are not about shepherds and angels, but about God becoming human, and entering the world on human terms. The apostle John talks about the Word of God taking flesh and walking among us, experiencing and sharing our joys and passions, our pain and our grief. This is not some brief, holy visitation from God, but a self-sacrificing, whole hearted commitment by God to live within and among us, to walk the earth, to engage in the rough and tumble of relationships and politics, to wrestle with the angst, the boredom, the challenge of daily life, to embrace the world and the created order from a human perspective – with all of its joy and wonder, as well as its vulnerability and fragility.

The Christmas story is the beginning of a journey in which God lives and dies with us and for us. God calls us to a new way of life, a deeper hope and joy, not from some distant heaven, but by walking beside us.

This means, then, that the child in the manger has a far greater impact and significance for our lives than we realise.

Jesus, Immanuel, God with us – God is with us always, not just at Christmas, not just when we call out in the anguish of our suffering, not just when we walk into a sacred or holy place.

God is with us in the care and generosity of our friends; God is with us in the strength and courage we find to persevere in the midst of terrible hardship.

God is present in those who work for peace and justice in the world, those who provide food and shelter for the homeless, those who give of their skills and time to set up schools for children living in poverty.

God is with us as we join together as a community to support those affected by natural disasters. God is with us as we struggle to find the way ahead in caring for our natural environment, and as we welcome the refugee in our local community.

God is with us in the silent suffering of personal grief, in the struggle to make ends meet, in the spiritual emptiness we try to fill with material possessions.

The child in the manger then, is also a symbol of hope – not the fragile, tentative hope we often verbalise when we say “I hope it will rain but I don’t think it will”, or “maybe it will happen but I don’t hold out much hope” – these sentiments are more about wishing than hope.

The hope we read about in the Bible is much more robust. People in the bible, whose lives we enter as we read the Scriptures, reveal a hope worth risking everything for, hope that leads people from the present into the future with courage, creativity and strength. A hope that enables us to live with the difficult, unanswerable questions of the human experience. This sort of hope overflows from one person into the hearts and lives of others and changes everything. Biblical hope is a powerful force for change and transformation.² The world needs people of hope.

Do we believe that God travels the journey of life with us?

Is there an emptiness or a yearning within us that we long to have filled?

Are we able to see the face of God, to recognise the presence of God, in those around us?

Are we people of hope, making a difference in the lives of those we love?

These are some of the questions we are called to reflect upon this Christmas – perhaps God has placed others in your heart.

² Redding, Mary Lou *While we Wait: Living the Questions of Advent*. Upper Room Books p14

As we gather around the manger this Christmas may we be assured, with great joy, that we are not left alone, but God is with us.

May we be reminded that we are called to a deeper, more abundant way of life than the one we often settle for.

May we seek always to ground our lives in the life-giving hope of Christ.

And may Christ bless us all in our seeking and searching for truth, joy, beauty, courage and love.