

CHRISTMAS EVE 2019 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 9.2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

The Christmas story is very familiar to those of us who have grown up with it. It is part of our heritage, our culture, our family memories.

However, for many people today the Christmas story is hardly known, or only vaguely known: parents have not learnt it, so they haven't taught it to their children, and it isn't part of the school curriculum as it once was. And of course for Australians who are of other faiths, the Christmas story may or not be familiar.

The story still holds a fascination for many of us: a baby, born in a most unusual setting, who is claimed to be the Saviour of the world.

We love all the details of the Nativity: the strange circumstances surrounding the conception of the child; angelic messengers; the tiring journey for the expectant couple; the birth in a stable. The intimacy and ordinariness of a couple having their first child resonates with us.

Then the story widens its scope, and we see dozing shepherds woken up by dazzling angels, telling them to go and visit the new baby.

Countless artists have depicted the scene in many different ways. We can imagine it easily: we can see it in our mind's eye.

We can imagine ourselves there, in the place where the animals slept, feeling the warmth of their bodies (and smelling the stable smells...).

We can see the tired but happy young mother; the awe-struck, proud father; and the tiny, warmly-wrapped newborn.

Why do we love this story so much? What is it that draws us?

I wonder if we are attracted to the Christmas story because it offers us a glimpse of a different reality.

Many of us today find life difficult, for all kinds of reasons. We might be better off than anybody living at the time when Jesus was born: we have antibiotics, education, pensions and enough to eat, for a start! But we yearn for something more.

We long for life to have meaning; we want to know that there is more to life than this. We want connection and a sense of belonging; we want to know we are loved, that we matter. The Christmas story gives us glimpses of all this. It can be a way in, a door to that deeper reality.

The Christmas story speaks of love: God's love for the world, and the love of parents for their child.

It speaks of peace: the promise given by the angels, that there will be peace on earth one day.

It can be hard to believe any promise of peace, given the state of our world today. We live with the reality of continuous war and conflict in the middle east and the African continent. We live at a time of unprecedented human migration as people are forced from their homes by violence and persecution.

We live in a world on which twenty-six of the richest people own as much as the poorest 50 per cent. Some of the leaders of the richest and most powerful nations appear to be more concerned about their own popularity and put far more energy into staying at the top than in wise, considered leadership.

Huge swathes of our country have been burnt or are still burning and summer has just begun. While our leaders argue about whether even to discuss climate change, firefighters and others have died and homes lost. We worry about what kind of world our children and grandchildren will live in.

The Christmas story tells us that God is for us, and that's why Jesus came. Whatever we face in the present or the future, God is with us. Jesus didn't come to make life a little bit better; he came to give us new life.

In the baby Jesus we see the promise of new life, new beginnings, new ways of being and thinking and doing- and a new way of knowing we are loved and valued.

For in Christ we have the promise that God will not stop until each and all of us have been embraced and caught up in God's tremendous love and have heard the good news that "to you this day is born a saviour, Christ the Lord." No wonder we sing, "Let heaven and earth rejoice!"

It seems to me the most important thing that people need to know is that they are loved. If we all truly believed that God loves us unconditionally, extravagantly, just as we are, and wants the very best for every single one of us; if we could accept that every person is of infinite value, and equally loved and cherished by God, then maybe we would see one another in a different light. Maybe we would see OURSELVES differently, and learn to love ourselves as well as others.

As we allow the Christmas story to warm our hearts, giving us hope and joy, we remember that with God there is always more.