

## **CHRISTMAS EVE, MIDNIGHT MASS, 24-12-2020** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 9.2-7; Psalm 96;

### **Luke 2.1-14**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

The story of the birth of Jesus seems so familiar to us, yet it is a story of unexpected surprises and interrupted plans.

We know it so well that it has lost its strangeness and we forget that those in the story would have felt frightened and worried as they struggled to understand what was happening to them.

Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem at the worst possible time- near the end of her first pregnancy. Giving birth was risky and frightening enough, without being away from home and family; and then they couldn't even find a room for the night.

Imagine how Mary might have felt; far from home, giving birth in a cattle-shed. Women today, in some parts of the world, are still giving birth in dreadful circumstances, and are still dying for want of proper care.

I'm sure Joseph didn't want to take his wife away from home at such a time, but the Roman Emperor said they had to go, and as they were powerless peasants they went. How many people today feel powerless to resist the demands of government or employer or Centrelink? Like the Holy Family, we can feel small and helpless.

Mary and Joseph looked for shelter and were turned away. I cannot help but see the parallels between their story and the stories of countless refugees who are turned away, when all they want is somewhere to rest.

How many families will spend Christmas Eve in refugee camps, or sleeping rough as they flee from war and the destruction of their homes?

How many in Australia are homeless tonight?

Then there were the shepherds, doing a job nobody much wanted to do, working nights in the cold. They were grubby, smelt like sheep, and would have probably preferred a job that paid more and didn't include sleeping rough with dumb animals.

How many people will go to work tomorrow- or are at work tonight- when they really don't want to be there and would far rather be home with their families? How many people really need the money, or are pressured by their employer to take the shift, so that they feel powerless to resist?

Why did the angels come to shepherds, of all people, and announce the birth of the King of Peace to them first? Why not tell the movers and shakers, the people at the top, the ones with the power? Maybe because the new king came to bring peace to all people, but especially to the poor.

Angels appeared as Jesus was born, proclaiming peace and glory. Near the end of his mission, as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, the people echoed the angel's proclamation as they shouted out that this great king brings peace and glory. So the gospel writer reminds us that the King of peace is here.

The peace that Jesus brings is more than the absence of war or violence. Peace is not passive, nor is it the absence of something; God's peace is active, present, moving and changing all who encounter it.

The shepherds were probably tired, and they were probably not waiting or praying for a messenger from God. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, God's messenger appeared- and they were terrified.

God shows up in unexpected places, while we are going about our everyday business. God takes us by surprise, appearing not as an awe-inspiring, all-powerful, majestic ruler but as a tiny, helpless baby, born in uncomfortable circumstances to an unimportant couple in an insignificant town.

The Prince of Peace comes offering peace, which is God's gracious gift, given at God's good pleasure. In the peace of this night, we pray for all who do not know peace, asking God to make us messengers of peace to a world that needs it more than ever.

God wishes us peace. To sleep in heavenly peace is a blessing longed for by new parents, as well as anyone spending sleepless nights worrying, or in pain, or grieving, or in danger.

Just as the Nativity Story contains unexpected surprises and interrupted plans for the Holy Family, the shepherds, and others, so this has been a year of unexpected surprises and interrupted plans for many of us, thanks to the global pandemic. For many in the world it has been a time of suffering and tragedy, and it is not over yet.

We hold in our hearts and pray for humanity- for all the people unable to be with their families and loved ones; for all who are ill, or grieving, or afraid, or lonely. We pray for all who will be unable to go to church to worship tonight or tomorrow.

This holy night, let us give thanks to God for blessing us with peace- even if only for this hour- and let us rejoice in the promise of peace that Jesus brings.

The Lord be with you.