

CHRISTMAS MORNING 25-12-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 62.6-12; Psalm 97; Luke 2:1-20

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!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

If I ask you what Christmas means to you, what would you say? If I ask my friends the same question, the women will talk about shopping and cooking and present-wrapping and card-writing and meal-planning and all the work that goes into 'just having a quiet Christmas this year...!' The men might grumble about all the freeloaders who'll turn up to eat all the food and drink the place dry. And if I ask my grandchildren what Christmas is about, their eyes light up and they say, 'PRESENTS!'

Of course, most of us- if prompted- will add hurriedly that Christmas is really about the birth of Jesus; but it can be so easy to lose sight of that truth as we race around the shopping centre or stay up late icing the cake. But even with the commercialism, crass advertising and cringe-worthy carols playing in the shops from way before Advent begins- even with all that, most of us love Christmas.

If we are fortunate enough to have family and good friends around us, to share meals and gifts, Christmas can be a joyful time, a time to escape from work or worry and the everyday grind. For many Australians Christmas marks the beginning of holidays, when people head off to enjoy a nice long break.

So Christmas can become associated with escape: escape from the ordinary, escape from the world of coronavirus and politics, escape from the worry of rising unemployment and climate change just for a few days.

This year, many- perhaps the majority- of people in the world have had their plans for Christmas disrupted. Even here in Australia, where we have escaped the worst impacts of the global pandemic, many are unable to be with family and loved ones and have had travel plans suddenly cancelled. Christmas looks different this year.

For those of us who identify ourselves as Christians, the significance of Christmas as the celebration of the Messiah's birth may still be our focus. But perhaps we need to ask ourselves if we are looking at Christmas through a lens of sentimentality and wishful thinking rather than reality. When we listen to today's Gospel and imagine the nativity, we can easily see it in soft-focus, as if the picture has been touched-up or photo-shopped.

We see a gentle, smiling mother, gazing adoringly at a chubby, contented baby, while the proud father looks on; shimmering angels shed a golden light on the peaceful scene, and even the animals look clean and obedient.

All this comes from a couple of lines in Luke's gospel; there is much more in his telling of the birth story but we always like to concentrate on the baby in the manger. Is it because we are all so stressed and worried and fearful and anxious about our troubled world that we can't take any more 'reality'? We all long for what is pure and beautiful and good; so we are drawn to this picture of domestic simplicity that comforts us with its promise of love and new life, personified in a baby.

But Jesus didn't come to make us all feel better, or to make the world a bit nicer or more bearable. Jesus came to turn the world upside down, to show us that there is another way to be, to challenge the accepted norms and re-create them.

Jesus was born into a world of enforced peace, a world rigidly controlled by the ruthless suppression of people's rights. Caesar was called a son of God, and Luke wants us to know that Jesus- as The Son of God- is quite different and brings a radically different kind of peace. Jesus was born to ordinary people- peasants, really- not to the wealthy ruling class. He came as one of the powerless, one of the oppressed, and so we know that he stands in solidarity with all people who are poor and downtrodden.

The beginning of Jesus' life was like its end; he came into a world of hardship and fear, in the company of shepherds and common people.

He died at the hands of the powerful, in the company of rebels and criminals. It doesn't sound like much of a life, but we know that he changed the world, and continues to change the world as his Spirit inspires and empowers his people.

God speaks to us through the blood, pain and tears of childbirth, coming to show us that we are worthy of love. That's why Christmas is important: not because it allows us to escape from the gritty reality of life for a while, but because it shows us that God's love is real and comes through and into that reality.

This week, even though the TV news tries to give us little snippets of 'good news' stories, most of what we are hearing about is bad news. People are suffering all over the world, as wars continue, natural and human-made disasters leave a trail of destruction, and Covid-19 infection increases exponentially.

The world seems to be going down the gurgler; so no wonder we're attracted to something that promises some hope, some relief from the anxiety, and Christmas might just fit the bill.

While we enjoy all that is lovely about this celebration today, and as we treasure the time we spend with family and friends, let's not forget that Christmas is about much more than a respite from reality. Just as Jesus the baby grew into maturity- full of grace and truth- may our faith grow into maturity, as we pray and work for God's world in all its brokenness and beauty.