

CHRISTMAS EVE 2022 The Reverend Lorna Green

Isaiah 9.2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2.11-14; 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.

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

Our lives can be complicated and full of responsibility, and we can find ourselves longing for simpler times when all that matters is a place to rest and a contented baby.

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 Ukraine, 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- and also by climate change leading to drought and crop failures, rising sea levels and conditions that make lands uninhabitable.

We live in a world in which the top 10 percent of the highest earners in the world now own 76 percent of all wealth, while the bottom 50 percent owns just 2 percent.

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.

Here in Western Australia we face a hot summer with ever more extreme fire-risk, while many in the Eastern States have lost homes and livelihoods due to flooding. Changes to the climate leading to unprecedented disaster have become the norm.

We worry about what kind of world our children and grandchildren will live in- can what we do really make a difference? Have we left it too late?

Some might say, "If there is a God, why do these things happen? If God is all-powerful, why doesn't he make things better? Why would a loving God allow people to suffer?"

These are good question, big questions, and there are no simple or easy answers; although it begs the question that if we humans have stuffed things up, surely we have a responsibility to try to put things right. 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 just 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."

It seems to me the most important thing that people need to know is that they are loved- that we 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.

Christina Rossetti wrote a poem, published in 1885, which has become a hymn:

Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.

The Christmas story is a love story, a story of God's love for all humanity and for all of creation. As we allow this story to warm our hearts, giving us hope and joy, we remember that with God there is always more- more love than we can imagine.