

Christmas – Putting the pieces together. (Ourselves)

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 December, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Jason John

Christmas 1A

Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 2:13-23; Luke 1:39-56

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCtKqkV3tVU&t=1s>

So I see some kind-of-happy smiling faces, so at least some people's Christmases were quite satisfactory by the sound of it.

The difficulty, I guess though, is I'm assuming that for anyone who worships here at Pitt Street pretty regularly - and really, pretty much any adult - on our Christmas list as we get older, we start to add things like, you know, World Peace, action on climate change, justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people an end to domestic violence, a better policy for asylum seekers and so on.

So, as you become an adult, Christmas gets kind of disappointing - like it might be good on the day, but the big picture - you know the things we really want to see happen - don't tend to happen. Christmas has always been disappointing; we're part of a long tradition, dating back at least 2,000 years, of disappointing Christmases.

The first Christmas was super disappointing. Actually, nobody in the story gets what they want. There's Mary with the great poem that we just read. Then, talking about the Kingdom of God coming. God is scattering the haughty tearing down rulers from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, sending the rich away empty and filling the poor with good things; delivering Jerusalem from foreign rule.

But when Mary died, the rich were still rich and the hungry were still hungry and the Romans were still in charge.

Simeon was so happy to see the baby Jesus that he said to God: *I'm happy for you to kill me on the spot because now I've seen the one who will bring glory to our people Israel.* Had he lived another 70 years what he would have actually seen was the Romans completely destroying the temple and trouncing Jerusalem and scattering his people to the winds.

And if you remember what he said to Mary about Jesus and Jesus' future - and the sword that was going to pierce her own heart - that was a pretty average Christmas present as well.

Mary wouldn't be the first of us to hope for a life of happiness and joy and peace for our children. You know, wanting them to be special but also protected from harm. She wasn't the first and she certainly hasn't been the last mother to watch her child suffer unjustly.

And then there's Anna, who proclaims Jesus as the promised deliverance and redemption of Israel - by which she probably didn't mean the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

And how devastated was Mary, who proclaimed this god of might and power, when she and her family then had to flee to Egypt; and when they heard about what happened to all the children who were left behind. When she watched, some years later, Herod, not Jesus, coming out on top.

And between that flight to Egypt and the crucifixion, we have all the other characters - like John the Baptist who was waiting for his Christmas present. The Messiah is coming! Christ Mass! Christ with us, his winnowing fork is in his hand to thrash all you vipers and liars and schemers and wicked rulers - and to burn with an unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist was really disappointed when Jesus started his ministry. So much so that he sent his disciples to ask if Jesus was really the one that they were waiting for - or should they go look for someone else!

Ouch!

If you've ever been really disappointed in a leader that you had high hopes for, then you know how John was feeling. And, of course, the Messiah didn't bring Herod crashing down. Herod brought John's head tumbling.

Isaiah gets quoted a lot at Christmas time and we had one of those quotes just now. We also had a bunch that Warren put together at Christmas Eve - with his hope that there will be no harm and no destruction anywhere in God's holy mountain. Of course, that Christmas present didn't arrive - any more for the Christians who were quoting it than it did for Isaiah.

All through the Bible we have Paul, probably the first author, sure that any day now the second Christmas was going to happen. Christ was going to return!

The Bible closes with Revelation repeating over and over again that any day now the Lamb of God will return. The New Jerusalem will descend and all the tears will be wiped from our eyes.

And in the middle, we have the Gospels promising that that generation would live to see the Son of Man coming on the clouds. All of these people have three things in common.

One they were super disappointed - or they would have been if they lived long enough.

Two, they expected God to fix their problems. The divine, all-powerful rescuer would eventually get over his anger towards Israel and turn around and redeem them. That was what they believed was happening then and there.

And thirdly, they were on the right track. A pretty pithy summary of Jesus ministry is another quote from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. To proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind; to release the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

It's a pretty good summary of the call to discipleship. Christians believe it's a pretty good summary of what God is on about. Even pithier is just: *love God with all your heart mind soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself* - remembering that your neighbour includes your bitter enemy, because God loves everyone and sends rain even on the unjust and the wicked.

So they were all right about what God was on about and what God wanted. And they were all right to want those things to happen even if they were a bit focused on Israel.

But a few thousand years of history suggests very strongly that no big-sky daddy is coming to deliver it - and not even the big-sky daddy's son. God's not coming to just make the kingdom for us!

Again, if you're a regular here at Pitt Street, I imagine that's a message that you've well and truly got your head around - at least as much as any of us can. Intellectually, it's kind of easy to accept that thousands of years of Christian tradition that saw God as all-powerful and able to fix things whenever he chose, if only he would choose to - to switch to accepting that - maybe God isn't all-powerful in that way.

It's one thing to kind of make the intellectual switch. It's another thing, I find, to make the emotional switch to deal with the grief that actually no one is coming to fix this mess!

The Kingdom of God is more like a jigsaw that hasn't come preassembled. The pieces are scattered all over the place and different people have some of them and different groups have some of them - which is why we need to build community together so that together we can overcome our differences and start to put this puzzle back in pieces.

And sometimes we just revel in the mystery of being able to be part of building something together. Many of you would have experienced that moment when things just come together and you feel that real movement of the spirit. The joy of being there when the pieces click and we see something more of the kingdom.

And sometimes, when we're putting it all together, someone comes along and gives it a big kick and scatters the pieces again - and we have to restart. Sometimes we just want to cry and have someone come and fix it for us.

Even worse, the picture on the front of the box isn't actually a photo that we can simply copy. It's more like an artist's impression or a sketch - or maybe four sketches. And the assembly instructions are pretty vague: love God, love your neighbour and love yourself. Even your enemy!

It's kind of vague, though we've probably also experienced those times when it's really specific and we know exactly which neighbour, or which enemy God is putting the finger on us to be reconciled to. And it gets all too specific and we don't want to deal with it.

Yet Jesus reckoned this thousands of years long process, this confusing and hazardous building of the kingdom was something which would make our joy complete and fill us with abundant life. And most importantly he seemed to think it was actually possible!

When I became a Christian in my 20s, for the first couple of years there, basically the way Jesus teachings were talked about was that he set us this bunch of lofty ideals that we could never possibly meet, so we would realize how incredibly pathetic and useless we all were and throw ourselves on God's mercy and beg God to save us.

It was only some years later that I dared entertain the idea that maybe Jesus actually meant what he said and thought that we might be able to do something about it. Jesus teachings were to be followed!

My Christmas present this year, which has the catchy title *Homo Deus: a Brief History of Tomorrow* - gives us some reminders of reasons to think that Jesus might be right. Most people in the world now are much less likely to die of starvation and disease and of violence than since the agricultural era and maybe even earlier.

We've shifted from thinking that those things are the result of divine punishment - to realizing that we actually have influence over them, and that we can do something about them. And a lot of good people, for a lot of years, have put a lot of time into reducing those three of the Revelation's "Horsemen of the Apocalypse", famine and disease and violence. In many parts of the world, we could add increasing gender equality; justice for LGBTIQ people and so on.

And yes, sometimes rich and powerful people - and sometimes the easily manipulated - kick over bits of the puzzle. But overall, we have evidence that we can actually build it. And that we are building it together.

We know that we can build a response to climate change. If the earth burns, it's going to be because of human action or inaction, not because of divine will. So when our political leaders make interesting comments like: *climate is controlled by a higher authority* - or call us to pray for rain instead of setting scientifically credible and morally responsible targets, more and more Australians are calling them out on it - and certainly we need to continue to.

Anyone wishing that our leaders were going to give us climate policy for Christmas has been surely as disappointed as Isaiah, Mary, Anna, Simeon, John, Paul, the gospel writers and John of Patmos.

Christmas was disappointing. Jesus gave us what we need, not what we wanted - which was to have someone fix it for us. The sketch on the puzzle box, the keys to the kingdom, the invitation to adventure - along with a great cloud of witnesses.

To play our part in sorting through the puzzle pieces and maybe sometimes being lucky enough to be one of the people that gets to put some of those pieces together and inviting others to help.

Now there's always more we could be doing. But today, I really want us to focus on what we already are doing on that jigsaw puzzle.

I'm going to give you a minute just to reflect on what part of the puzzle you're working on at the moment, or have been working on over the last year. How are you offering your gifts to the community? And it could be a part of the puzzle within yourself; it could be your family, friends, neighbourhood, this church, the nation, or the world.

What's a part of the puzzle that you're working on?

I'll just finish with a short prayer for all of us as we continue on in our worship. It's one that many of you recognize: God as we go about putting the pieces of the puzzle together, may we have the serenity to accept those things that we just can't change, the courage to change the things that we can, the wisdom to know the difference - and the humility to ask for help as we walk the way of Jesus together. Amen