

Christmas Day

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 December 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Christmas Day B

“Christmas Comes” by Ann Weems (adapted) in *Reaching for Rainbows*; Isaiah 52: 7-10; Luke 2: 1-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

Apart from the roof being raised by that magnificent music, Christmas in Sydney is a quiet and peaceful time. Most people, in this very secular country, are either at home or they have already travelled to join friends and family in other places to share the Christmas spirit, if not the Christmas story.

And yet here we are, gathered on Christmas morning at Pitt Street Uniting Church. This space made sacred by the human search for meaning and community for over 170 years. We are searching for the “something more” of Christmas that is still to be found in the stories of Jesus and the theological claim that the Word of God was made flesh and dwells among us.

After the busyness. After the preparations for our cultural Christmas – the work year ending, gift buying or making, family travelling and gathering, culinary planning. Some of us joyful and expectant, others unsettled and half wishing it was already over...we have gathered, together.

People of faith have other ways of preparing for Christmas that are less frantic than the patterns of our culture. In Advent’s waiting and watching. In claiming stillness in the midst of the chaos. Journeying with Mary through the expectation of new birth, new life, and a world transformed. Hearing Mary’s response to the divine entering our reality: let it be. Let this child be born. And let our world be not as it is now, let it be different. Let there be justice and peace and a welcome for all people.

The story of Jesus birth, as we’ve heard from Luke’s Gospel, was intended to be read as poetry, as story, as metaphor. The fact that for most of Christianity, it has become a requirement that we literally believe impossible things, should not distract us from the meaning at the centre of this earthy, embodied story. The story through which we can rediscover the sacred character of human existence.

Our counter-cultural choice to be together, also points to the realisation that the coming of Christ at Christmas is not just personal. It is a story that belongs in community. It is a story that belongs to the universe. To our personal world, with all our misgivings and self-doubts. To our global world, with all its conflict and injustice. Our cosmos, in its infinite, yet fragile, majesty.

For Christians, the blessing of Christmas does not depend on having our act together, like the advertising scenarios of immaculate home, happy family, gourmet dinner, and expensive gifts.

American theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote: "*God did not enter the world of our nostalgic, silent-night, snow-blanketed, peace-on-earth, suspended reality of Christmas. God slipped into the vulnerability of skin and entered our violent and disturbing world.*"

Yet God loves, and has always loved this world, through the process of creation to the fulfilling of God's dream for human flourishing and planetary justice.

The saviour comes, not to save us from hell, but to save us into life. God dwells in the universe we also inhabit, that we might experience the life of heaven here and now.

So here we are here, seeking the sacred in the midst of a secular holiday. Seeking meaning that does not depend on literal belief, or on drawing lines that divide the saved and the damned, but meaning which will instead shape the way that we live as people and who we are as a church.

Last night, when I got home from the Christmas Eve service, Clare and I had creamy blue brie on crackers and South Australian rosé (because that's a balanced meal, right?) and we talked about the day's events. About the fourth Sunday in Advent in the morning and the Christmas Eve service. Both were attended by many more people than I had expected. I remarked that at the Christmas Eve service, there were numerous people who I had not seen before, many of whom were a bit younger than me.

Then the time for Christmas Day sermon writing came...so I checked my Facebook timeline and had a look at my Twitter feed, as you do when you're procrastinating.

On Pitt Street's twitter, I saw the link to the YouTube video of the reflection I had given in the morning. Someone called Andrew, from Melbourne, who had started following us during the marriage equality debates had replied with hostility: "*We attend Christian churches, not a church that only welcomes the gay community.*"

Whoa... I had a moment of panic.

Had my leadership in the Christians for Marriage Equality campaign left people thinking we were a "gay church?" Would the straight people, who are still the vast majority of Pitt Street's congregation be distressed to know that someone thought this about us? I tweeted a response to clarify that we are in fact a gloriously diverse congregation, where everyone is welcome.

But then I overcame my internalised homophobia...and thought some more about guilt by association.

I am profoundly grateful that I belong to a community where people shaped by the stories of his Jesus, his birth, his life, his teaching, his death, respond to God's gift by seeking to love one another, to love our neighbours, to love our enemies - and to include people who have been excluded and oppressed.

This response includes advocating for indigenous Australians to have a voice in the governing of their country; release for the captives on Manus and Nauru and true welcome for refugee people who are here in Australia; advocacy for the equal sharing of the wealth of this nation; opposition to fossil fuel mining that will damage the rivers and the reef; as well as solidarity with the LGBTIQ community seeking marriage equality.

But there is danger here. If we continue to serve people who are considered outsiders, then we may become associated with them.

If we risk associating with a God who is to be found as a baby in a manger, we may, in our precarious state, find the Christ child in other places of vulnerability and exclusion.

That the more we do to care for others, the more we will be changed.

And the danger is that, as we care for the world God loves, some people may begin to call us outsiders.

Jesus came into the world so that, in God no-one should ever be considered an outsider again, that we should understand in our deepest being that we are all simply, profoundly, God's children.

So rather than being embarrassed that we might be thought of as a "gay church" I hope we can embrace our identification with the community that was vilified and rejected through the horrible postal survey. Especially when much of the vilification and rejection was done by people who claimed to speak in Jesus' name.

And now that marriage equality is finally done and dusted, at least in society if not in the church, maybe next year someone will write on Pitt Street's Twitter feed "*we go to a Christian church, not a church that welcomes only people seeking asylum and refugees...*" or "*we got to a Christian church, not a church that only loves people and land affected by climate change*" - because really, truly being a Christian church is surely risking identification, guilt by association with the outsiders among whom the God made known in Jesus is to be found.

And I remembered thinking last night, before the service, that perhaps some of the people who had gathered to be with us were in fact here because of our sign over the front door proclaiming our support for marriage equality and justice. And that this is exactly the kind of church in which they want to celebrate Christmas.

I give thanks for this world-changing, here and now Christmas, for the faith which affirms that the sacred energy of life and love, God, is with us. That God is present in the mess and complexity of the world, I am thankful. That God is redeeming and sanctifying, turning cruelty into loving-kindness, and the ordinary into the extraordinary, I am thankful.

On this Christmas Day in 2017, let us reclaim the story and allow the celebration of Christmas to reenergize our lives and heal our world.

I wish you a merry Christmas. I wish you a blessed Christmas and I also wish you courage and understanding as you make imaginative personal choices and take political action to bring about a different kind of world for everyone.

For this is why we are gathered in this sacred space, this Christmas Day.

The time is now. The day is here.

Blessed be this Christmas