

An Unhurried Christmas

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 December, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Christmas Day B

Luke 2:1-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

This telling, from Luke, of this particular story, the nativity story, cannot be taken as strict history. The Emperors and Governors and the census are all mixed up.

Is that because Luke didn't know his history or is it because perhaps what matters most is that we understand the world into which Jesus was born?

It was the world of Pax Romana and all that meant. It was a world where people were stretched, their time, their energies, their work, their income, their loyalties, their faith. It was not an easy time.

There were the very rich, probably getting richer, and there were the extremely poor. It was a stratified social system and it seems everyone wanted a cut of the pie - always from the one just below them in the pecking order.

So, the poor workers were working harder for less and then stretched to pay more taxes not only to the temple, but also to Rome, while much of their produce was feeding Rome leaving less for the locals.

So with that in mind the scene is set.

A young woman, soon to give birth, travels with her betrothed to a small town, now crowded because of the needs of those who want more from them. The census is about getting more taxes.

As always there is no place for the poor and needy. And they are needy, Mary is about to give birth.

It is in these humble beginnings that God's presence is felt.

We are told Mary and Joseph have had forewarning that God is at work here - but I wonder what that really means? Don't all expectant parents have great dreams of the life for which they have taken some responsibility to nurture into life?

Shepherds, meagre workers on night shift, receive a message too. Something is happening. But what?

I wonder if that question, or something like it, is going through people's minds this very day, Christmas Day, with all the challenges of a Pandemic and the limits we live with as we try to eliminate it.

We are, aren't we, full of hope that there will be a better, happier future, but right now, what are the signs we look to?

The shepherds were encouraged not to be afraid. The text says they were terrified. Are we terrified, afraid?

Even around the crib (sorry, manger) cradling the child, God's creatures are there. It's as if the whole cosmos is witnessing this new life before us, a life filled with promise and hope.

So what is God doing here?

The shepherds are afraid of what God might do – perhaps, that is, until they see the child. It doesn't look too dangerous.

Mary and Joseph seem to say nothing. They're silent on what must have been anything but a silent night, what with crowds and cattle and sheep!

Forget the setting for a moment. Isn't this just another birth to a couple who are relatively poor?

These small beginnings look pretty normal really; women give birth every day. How is this any different?

Well, perhaps it really is as much about the setting as it is about the event, however distorted the details.

Here the scene is set. God is coming to us in the midst of challenge and difficulty and confusion and in human form - in a way we can understand and can relate to.

This is not a baby with magical powers.

This is a life that will grow to bless and bring about transformation. And not as any might imagine but through acts of acceptance, kindness, forgiveness, grace, respect - all based on love. I spoke about that last Sunday.

Yes, we celebrate the birth, the coming of what will be an amazing life that in some wonderfully mysterious, yet real, way is still with us always and can never leave us. And this presence is good for us!

Now a whole new story develops just as we think of this, of community, of transformation, of disciples, of healing, of grace, of arrest, trial and crucifixion ... all to be turned up-side-down with a resurrection; planting a presence within us that can never again be killed in the lives of people.

Back in the fields at work, the shepherds know something has changed. But what?

How will they recognise it?

What should they look for?

Where should they look?

Up to the heavens or into the lives of the ordinary people just as they did that night in the stable?

Take a time-leap to us now, some 2,000 years later in 2020 and we know God's presence to be real and alive around, between and even within us.

Our background story is set too, just as the nativity was set, within a story, in times of challenge, of great riches and extreme poverty, of hate and confusion, of climate change and pandemic, of finances dictating decisions of leaders and people suffering.

The need for things to change is clear.

How is Christ, present with us now, working in the world now?

What are the signs we look for?

Who are the messengers we listen too?

Where will we look?

How will we recognise it when we see it?

How will we respond?

How will we know the change needed is upon us?

Where do we fit into the scene?

Well, whatever the answer to these questions, whatever takes place - however we respond, it will need to have grown out of love, because God is love.

This whole act is about love! His act of coming to us.

I suspect, like the first sign of God coming to us in human form, it will be small, seedling beginnings, needing our love and nurture for it to grow and transform us all.

The Messengers were excited.

The Shepherds were afraid and inquisitive.

Mary was courageous and committed.

Joseph was respectful and supportive.

The crowds were all around, noisy, jostling.

Crowds do that, eager to get what they wanted.

We are told Mary, courageous, committed Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

This was not a time to get caught up in all that was taking place around, but to focus on the life that needed love and nurture.

So, for a time, for Mary and for Joseph, maybe for the shepherds too, time slowed, as this new life began to impact each of them.

This was an unhurried entrance for God to take, surely.

It would be another 30 years before we hear in any great detail of the child who had become known as Jesus the Christ.

Ours need not be a 30 year wait. But today,

just for today,

there may well be value in allowing time to slow a little,

to appreciate the signs of promise and hope within and around us,

even in the midst of challenge and difficulty,

to celebrate the many possibilities

and to ponder in our hearts

how we may lovingly nurture them to life.

God is with us.

Happy Christmas.