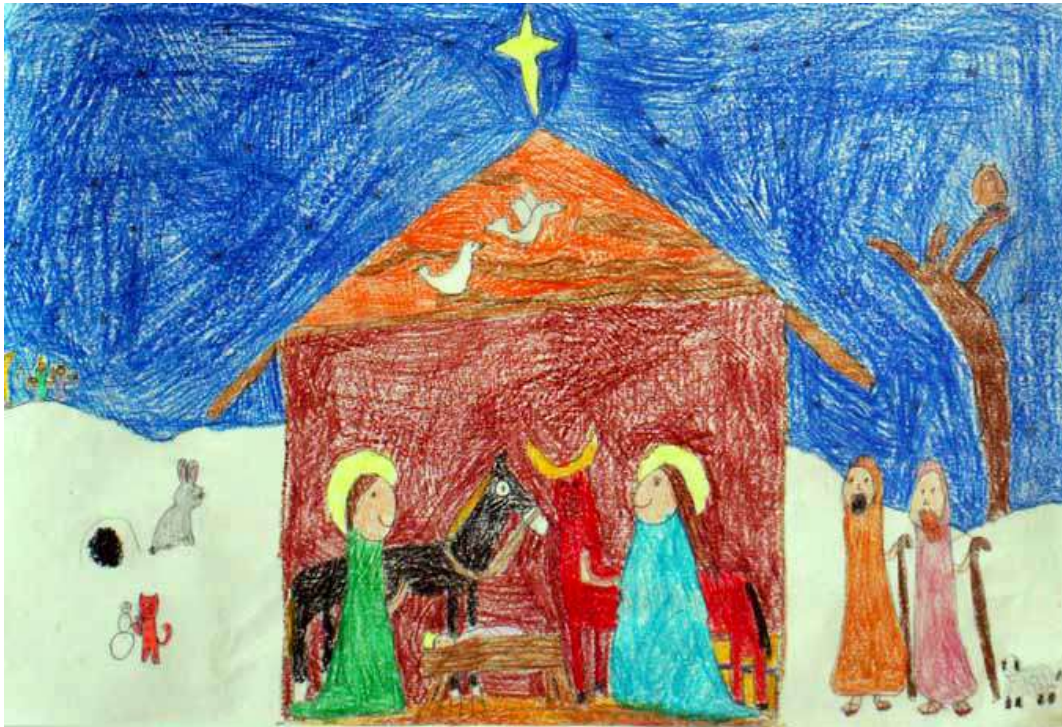


Sermon Preached on Christmas Eve 2021

St Mark's Anglican Church, Casino NSW

Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



A little girl was drawing a picture. Her mother asked her, *“what is it going to be a picture of?”*

“I’m drawing a picture of God” said the girl.

“But nobody knows what God looks like”; said the mother.

“They will when I’m finished drawing this picture” said the girl.

We each have an image of God.

But from the very beginning, God knew that humans would need something that we could see and touch, something tangible, to help us understand God, and relate to him.

And so here we are here tonight, to celebrate the birth of the Son of God, born into human history, in a stable at Bethlehem, as one of us.

Seeable

Touchable

Knowable

Experiencing the pains and joys of human life as we do.

He is our way to know God

He is our way to God.

From our Australian context at the moment, you might well say, does it really matter, because do people even want to know?

But don't be disillusioned. Community surveys by NCLS in 2019 showed that up to 57% of Australians surveyed believed (and I quote) that "*Jesus was a real person who actually lived*"! That's pretty good! We can work with that.

And that 55% of people believed that Jesus was either "God in human form" or at least a "prophet or spiritual leader". That's pretty good too. We can work with that too.

I remember when I was a young priest in a new parish and we were planning the Christmas Eve Crib Service. I was asked by one of the older Sunday School children whether they could sing a song they had been rehearsing. They had sung it at their Sunday School breakup and wanted to offer it at the Crib Service too.

Wanting to be encouraging and affirming, and before I saw the words of the song, I said "yes, of course"! (note to self: always ask to see the words first)

It goes to the tune of Jingle Bells:

Dashing to the beach, with my boogie board and towel

Look at all the waves, see the surfers howl!

Put your sunscreen on, and don't forget your hat,

Because you will get sunburnt, if you don't remember that!

Christmas time, summer time,

Mozzies, bindis,

BBQs and sausages, tomato sauce and flies.

While it's probably not in keeping with the tone and feel of your average Crib Service in church, most Australians can probably relate to it, and it probably reflects how many Australians spend at least some of their time at Christmas.

As one elderly lady said on the way out, after all, that's probably what Jesus would be doing if he was to spend time in Australia at Christmas!

My point is that because Jesus was born a human being, God is in the midst of our human experience. Jesus is someone we can relate to, and through him, we can come to know God.

What should be our response?

I take inspiration from Carmelite Spirituality. In particular from the approach to prayer of St Therese Lisieux – also known as St Therese of the Little Flower, a Carmelite Nun who lived in the 19th Century. When she prayed she imagined Jesus sitting alongside her. She imaged simply sitting next to Jesus and enjoying his near presence. Sometimes conversing, but always feeling his close presence in her prayer time.



If Jesus was sitting alongside you, what would you say to him? What might he say to you? Or would you simply enjoy sitting there in his near presence?

Imagine Jesus as a guest in your home on Christmas Day. In the dining room with your friends and family, as a welcome guest. Or at the beach or BBQ with you. What would he say? Would he be welcome? What would you ask him?

At Christmas, each of us is the Innkeeper who decides if there is room for Jesus.

How should we respond to the news, heard once again this Christmas, of the birth of the Son of God in human form?

When the shepherds told Mary about the meaning of the child lying in the manger, St Luke writes in verse 19 that “*Mary treasured all these words, and pondered them in her heart*”.

It has always caught my attention that she pondered this *in her heart*, not in her mind. The Greek word *Kardia* is used: heart. Another translation says that Mary “took note of all these things and turned them over in her heart”.

She didn’t ponder them up here, and weigh up the logic of it, the pros and cons, the strengths and weaknesses. These events touched her very being, her soul. She pondered this news in her heart.

So if we can’t comprehend the immensity of what God has done in Jesus Christ, then we are not alone. Mary too ponders the full significance of what God has done and is doing through these events, and Mary is the model believer.

But what of our response?

At the very least, you and I should each take time to ponder these events and their meaning for each of us. Who is this Jesus for you, do you seek the personal relationship with him that he offers you, and what is he saying to you in your life right now?

The research tells us that more people than we think are open to knowing this person Jesus. What will they learn about him from the example you offer?

The little girl who was drawing a picture of God was convinced that when she had finished her drawing, people would know what God looked like.

Whether we realise it or not, we are each drawing a picture of God for others as we live our lives: others come to know God through us, through how well or how badly we imitate the example that Jesus left for us.

This Christmas may we ponder not only this wonderful gift in our hearts, but also ponder ways that we can offer this gift to others.

*God of the distant stars and of the newborn child,
help us to open our eyes and see your glory all around us.
May we live as people filled with wonder and amazement
so that we can tell others of your life and love.
Amen.*