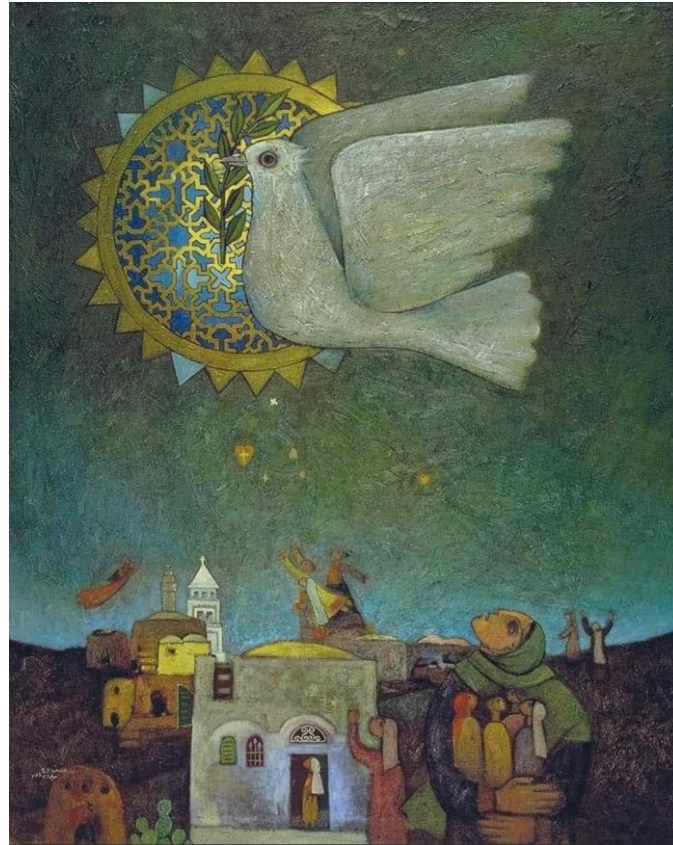


Sermon Preached on Christmas Eve Midnight and Christmas Day 2023

Christ Church Cathedral, Grafton

Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



Hope. Palestinian Artist Sliman Mansour.

*While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground,
the Angel of the Lord came down,
and glory shone around.*

Nahum Tate's hymn *Annunciation to the Shepherds* reminds us that the shepherds play a key part in the Christmas story. As soon as the angels disappear the shepherds set off to Bethlehem to look for this special child. Many years later, as an adult, Jesus uses stories about shepherds and sheep in his parables and teaching. Perhaps his mother told him how the shepherds turned up at his cradle.

So startled shepherds were there. What and who else was there?

There was a simple dwelling, shared with livestock
A feeding trough
Sheep
Straw
A carpenter, a teenage mother, and a baby, all soon to be refugees

This is the way that the divine breaks into our experience – here God enters our human world alongside the powerless.

St Luke tells us who *was* there, but *who wasn't there*? No one of “earthly importance” was there – those with any power opposed the message of peace that the Christchild brought and thought it was a threat; so the narcissistic, murderous dictator Herod wasn't there. There were no representatives of the occupying Roman Government either.

So often we are fed the worldview of the *powerful*, not the *powerless*, yet here we celebrate God entering our world in the shoes of the powerless.

The politics of fear and division that seems to dominate today says that the powerless, the marginalised, can be justifiably excluded and marginalised because we have something to fear from them. They're a threat. They might take away what we have. So we aren't given their perspective.

Yet in the Christmas story God speaks and acts through the very ones that some politicians would have us fear – refugees (such as the Holy Family), foreigners (such as the Wise Men), shepherds (at the bottom of the social scale).

“He comes (writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer) in the form of a human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbour”.

Social scientists tell us that in 2023 Social Cohesion, a key indicator of harmony and trust in human societies, is at an all-time low in our country. Apparently, in Australia, good social cohesion happens when the economy is going well. That is, if the economy is healthy then we all get on and feel connected and trust one another. But if the economy isn't booming then trust and cohesion start to disappear. I understand that if people don't have enough money, and if they

haven't got proper housing, then of course they're not going to be very happy or trustful. But it's a sad indictment on our society that we are so dependent on the economy to bind us together. In times of economic hardship we should be there for one another even more! Surely there's another fabric that can bind us together, not just the economy. What can bind us together in trust?

The Christmas story offers us a vision of radical inclusion, allows us to see the world through the experience of the powerless. Here is a vision of peace and harmony based on gentleness and love and radical inclusion, not based on people's economic value.

In the Christmas story, God's beauty, goodness and grace can be found "beyond the fence".

What can we learn from this world view of the powerless, from which this Christmas story is told?

At his birth, Jesus' parents had been dislocated from their home because of a decree of the occupying Roman government. Like millions of displaced people today, Joseph and Mary were powerless in the face of occupying military forces, yet,

- They were welcomed into a peasant home, shared with livestock
- The shepherds were welcome to see the child – the unclean were judged to be clean, outcasts became honoured guests
- The song of the angels was sung to the simplest of all
- Even foreigners were welcomed as well – the Wise Men
- Because of the narcissistic dictator Herod, the Holy Family soon became refugees. As always, families like this experience the greatest suffering in these struggles for political power and control

So despite economic hardship and social and political divisions, peace, love and inclusion were tangible and real, as they can be for us if we follow in the way of Christ.

As followers of this Christ, how can we promote trust and inclusion in our society today? Not *despite* the economic situation, but because we always

need trust, love and inclusion to bind us together through the ups and downs of the economy.

Given that God chose to enter our world in this way, what political narratives can we question today? Maybe those that demonise refugees, asylum seekers, and other minority and marginalised groups.

What can you as a disciple of this child of Bethlehem do to call out those narratives? What can the church do?

Another hymn writer, Cecil Frances Alexander, reminds us that once, in Royal David's city,

*... stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for his bed:
Mary was that Mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.*

*He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable,
And his cradle was a stall:
With the poor and mean and lowly,
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.*

Cecil Frances Alexander wrote those words to *Once in Royal David's City* for her Collection of *Hymns for Children* published in 1848. Her words are very familiar to us and don't seem radical at all, but they were in her day. She wanted to shatter sanitised, picturesque perceptions of the Nativity with the realities of Jesus' birth as a vulnerable baby in a poor community. What narratives can we challenge in our day?

Today and each year at this time we recall and celebrate Christ's birth – but of course he's already here. The Christ Child arrived in our human world 2000 years ago and invites us to come to him. He is crying to us from the refugee camp, calling to us from the voices of the poor, shouting out to us from prison

(or from indefinite detention), waiting for us to live out our faith foster relationships of trust, seeking justice and pursuing peace.

Our world today isn't all that different to the world into which Christ was born. Narcissistic dictators still seek power and peace through the annihilation of their enemies. We still have refugees and other marginalised peoples. Yet this story of Christmas is timeless in what it declares about God's love in a broken world. It allows us to dream of a world where voices of the marginalised are heard and God's truth learnt through them, and through the way of love, trust and inclusion.

May we celebrate Christmas this year with hope that God is always with us in the turmoils of the world.

Lord God of the nations, at Christmas we see the star of your glory rising in splendour: may the brightness of your incarnate Word pierce the night that covers the earth, signal the dawn of justice and peace, and beckon all nations to walk as one in your light. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.