

Tell us who we are...

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 December 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Christmas Day A

Luke 2: 1-20 7; Contemporary reading: “*Virgin Birth*” by Joy Cowley
from *Psalms Down-Under*, Catholic Supplies 1996; John 1: 1-24

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

Finally, it is Christmas morning. The day is here. The time is now. The preparation of our hearts in Advent now make room for the birth of God in our midst. This year, every year... on this liminal day we know more deeply, more intimately, more powerfully that Divine Presence dwells with us, in our human lives, in our embodied selves.

And so, while the world around us knocks off and dozes after an exhausting round of shopping and parties and travel, we are gathered together to hear an ancient story, to sing songs old and new, that bring us to the centre of meaning and the crowning of hope. Emmanuel - God with Us.

Soon, there will be time for us to join Tim Minchin drinking white wine in the sun (I love that song, even though Tim, like so many Australians, just doesn't get religion, but he does get the spirit of Christmas; the spirit of love and shared community. If you don't know that song – *Drinking white wine in the sun* – you should google it!)

But for now, we have chosen to come here, to be together with friends and strangers, to breathe deeply the breath of God, to feel the sacred blessing in our own body, our bones and our blood - as long ago the divine was born among us showing us who God is and revealing to us who we are, what it is to be truly human; truly fully human.

There are two gospel readings assigned for Christmas Day. One is the story of Jesus' birth in Luke and the other is the first chapter of John's gospel, which speaks of the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. The Luke story is always read on Christmas Eve and the John reading is an option for Christmas morning. Usually my preparation for Christmas involves a decision about which one to read on Christmas Day and usually I go for Luke because you can't really have a Christmas service without shepherds and angels, Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. This year, rather than including an obscure passage from Isaiah which the church has contorted into a prophesy about Jesus, I decided we could hear both Luke and John. They belong together.

Both stories have implications for our bodies, ourselves and the earth.

Together they tell us that the relationship between God, and Jesus, and us, is eternal and universal and yet extraordinarily intimate.

The theological word for this is incarnation. It means *to be made flesh*. It shares the same Latin root with *carne* the Italian word for meat and the English word carnal. Thinking meat and carnality keeps us in touch with the shocking aspect of this theological claim about God, Jesus, and about us.

The incarnation means that at the same time the incarnation (Jesus birth in Luke, and the word made flesh in John) - at the same time the incarnation is a revelation of God, and it is also a revelation of who we are.

We begin to realize that in God's choice to become human that our humanity matters. We begin to recognise that God's commitment to bodies means that our bodies matter. We begin to remember that in God's determination to be made known in the flesh means that doing ministry in the flesh matters.

The claim that '*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,*' is not even rational. But God's glory becoming human and dwelling with us is what incarnation means. The sacred among us, enfleshed, embodied.

It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. This God and flesh. But according to the wisdom of our faith stories, this is the way things are.

So if the Christmas revelation not only tells us who God is but who we are, surely it must change the way we live. The songs of God's justice, the promise of fullness of life, is not just for some but for everyone. For all the world God loves.

On this Christmas Day, we look back, but we strive to open our eyes, too, to the presence of God, to incarnation, to the workings of God's promises, the unfolding of God's will just as much for all of us and the world today as for one young woman, full of grace, long ago. As Mary sang the Magnificat, so God calls us and all the world, all creation, to sing a new song of peace and justice.

In a summertime Christmas, nature breaks forth in praise and a melody of its own, the calling of gulls and the breaking of waves, the music of the spheres, the hum that lies beneath all of life. Our voices raised in Christmas carols are joined with the rest of God's good and beautiful creation, opening our hearts to the One who is Gift to us all, the One John speaks of as "*the Word*", "*the life*", "*the light*."

Yes, there is much in our world that would keep us from singing. The terrible violence of wars, the frightening political shifts towards authoritarianism and xenophobia, the multitudes of people who have become refugees across the globe. And our Christmas celebration should not turn away from these realities.

The carols sung, and stories told at Christmas are not to serve a purpose of denial or refusal to see suffering. Rather they are to remind us that God is present with us in every age, no matter what the circumstances.

We cannot forget the suffering of God's children this Christmas season, in Aleppo, or the Sudan, or in refugee camps, on Manus Island and Nauru, or even in neighbourhoods in Sydney not so far from our own.

This may be the biggest challenge for us: how do we sing, and feel joy - when children are being pulled from the rubble in Aleppo, stunned and covered in blood?

The answer lies in our response: we become instruments of God's compassion and justice, and sing with our whole hearts, as we strive to put ourselves in God's service, to participate in what Divine Presence is doing.

Think about the angels singing that night that Jesus was born, even though Rome was still Rome, oppressing the Jewish people. Those angels sang anyway because they brought tidings of hope and joy, great joy.

In our own small ways, we can become "*tidings of great joy*," and a word of hope, to those we meet each day, and to those that we can reach in faraway places through other "angels" whose work we can all strengthen and support through giving to campaigns like the Christmas Bowl. That work is the kind of music, the kind of singing together, that will change the world, and it is the melody God is calling us to sing.

Christmas is about God telling us not to give up hope, telling us that we are not all on our own. While we can't do it all, we can do something, and especially if we do this together.

Our carols, our songs, our story-telling at Christmas express the inexpressible: we cannot put into words the incredible mystery of God-made-flesh, and yet we have known it in our bones, when we feel the music we sing or hear the music played for us.

We have felt God with us even when we could not explain how that could be.

Christmas is our communal recognition, our shared celebration, that God is with us still, still speaking, still present in our lives and in the lives of the world that God loves. So we celebrate, and we sing our songs this Christmas morning. And we will continue to sing these songs in the days ahead.

On this Christmas morning, let us affirm and celebrate that we are God's body on earth with one common vocation: to live in right relationship with the earth and with each other.

Let us do Christmas like God, by becoming human. Living well as creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace...

Happy Holy Christmas, to each one of you, each one of you God's child.