

Sermon

If only it was true. Jesus laid in a manger in soft candlelight, surrounded by soft straw, with Mary and Joseph gazing at their new born son in awe. The stable is clean, warm and inviting, even the animals gaze on in worship, and the shepherds kneel at the feet of the new born Jesus. Above this scene countless angels float by singing in dulcet tones, and a star draws nigh overhead. If only it were true!

The reality was undoubtedly something quite different: Jesus was born in stable because there was no room in the inn. There was nothing romantic about his beginnings. Mary gave birth in a stable next to the animals with the smell of sheep, the goats and the cow filling her nostrils. Imagine the risk of disease and the cold of an un-insulated stable. This is not the palace of a prince. God is revealed in an ordinary human life and that person is Jesus. He is born into the messiness of our lives as the embodiment of God's love; to reveal the fullness of the glory of God. All we have to do is receive him and love others in the same way that he has loved us. It is a simple message. The Word-is-made-flesh. God's self communication to us is no longer in texts and commands or in creedal statements. God's self communication is given in the life of a human being. This means that every stage of our lives as a human being echoes something of the being of God.

A friend of mine is the Dean of a Cathedral church in the United Kingdom. He was appointed to a commission charged with negotiating a covenant between the Lutheran and Anglican churches. There was to be a significant meeting of both parties where all the "horse trading" was to take place. So my friend went with the high powered Church of England delegation to Sweden. On arrival at the office of one of the Lutheran bishops they were greeted at reception and promptly told to strip off all clothes immediately, in order to meet the Lutheran delegation naked in the sauna. I don't know how that conversation went, but you can imagine all these bishops and archdeacons sitting flesh to flesh, face to face, in the steamy sauna. Removing clothing is a great leveler if nothing else. Nakedness involves a great deal of vulnerability and trust. This is the way God chooses to come to us. God comes in the flesh. God comes in vulnerability, as a dependent child. God comes to be one with our loneliness and the unloved parts of us, the parts of us that are dependent and needy as well as the joyful, playful parts of us. In Jesus, God is united with our humanity so that we might feel and touch and see the mystery and the grace of God in our bodies as well as our minds, and so that we might be united with God forever. That is the great mystery we

celebrate tonight; God coming to earth with a touch of heaven.

This year we need that touch of heaven more than ever. The last year has been a tough one for many of us. The economic storms assailing the world's major economies are hitting New Zealand and for some the immediate future is bleak. Unemployment, business failures, mortgagee sales; these things are looming if not a present reality. In complete contrast to the romantic Christmas card scenes, some of us arrive here tonight facing hard realities and tough choices.

Imagine therefore, being one of the shepherds on that first Christmas night. The shepherds in this story represent the ordinary Israelite waiting hopefully for God, but they were at the bottom of the social pile in the time of Jesus. Surprisingly to our ears, they were lumped together with sinners and outcasts. Perhaps they too had lost everything. Maybe they had never had it. Shepherds in Jesus' day were rarely in a position to participate fully in society. Yet, they are the first to hear the Good News of Jesus birth; first to be surrounded by the music making of the angels and the first to worship the new born king. These shepherds are remembered tonight because their hearts were open to God and receptive to God's word. On hearing the Good News they respond with trust and joy. The Christmas story calls us to reverence every human life, not only because Christ himself entered every stage of human living, but also because God sees the human being behind our exterior persona and communicates an aspect of Himself through each of us. God makes the shepherds the heralds of Good News and they proclaim it with joy. The shepherds are given a very simple sign, a newborn baby wrapped in cloth. Here lies hope; a new future. God, in total simplicity, vulnerability and trust, lies in a manger. Jesus is no ordinary gift. He is carefully labelled and marked by the very simplicity of life itself. He is born into all the complications of life to face the same challenges we do. The Holy Child is born, the gift of hope for a world forlorn.

Every Christmas the gospel story reminds us that every new born child is an echo of the being of God. A tiny helpless child is capable of revealing the fullness of God. Yet we have great cause to be concerned about the welfare of children in our society. Over the last two years this country has witnessed a number of shocking cases of child abuse. In the case of the Kahui twins, no one has been held to account for their deaths. Naturally this gives cause for anger and protest and concern about the welfare of children in general. If the infant child that we worship tonight is to be our judge, how will be able to stand before him if we have allowed children to be hurt and abused?

Of course Jesus himself faced this reality. The story of King Herod is the story of one who refused God and who responded in violence. The presence of Jesus is directed to places of pain and hurt in our world, to our brokenness and sinfulness. He is here in the pain of betrayal and mistrust and in the hard and uncaring world we so often experience. He is identifying with those who suffer, with those who face the hurt and pain of broken relationships. He is come to bring reconciliation and healing. He is here in the distortions of our society that create and perpetuate cycles of poverty and abuse. He is born into our hearts and into our lives. He comes into our brokenness to heal and to reconcile and bring peace. Jesus experienced all our human vulnerabilities, our needs for warmth, love and affection. Jesus knew our pain, the awkwardness of learning obedience, the misery of being rejected, unloved and unwanted.

On the path to the cross, however, those swaddling clothes took on even greater meaning. Christ is not merely ensconced in our human condition and in its messiness, but he is also conquering our human condition and redeeming it. Bands of cloth are traded for the linens of death. And so who is this Jesus? He is none other than “God-with-us,” Emmanuel, the living Creator of all the galaxies; that One who created this earth; that One who owns all things, this planet and all its life and beauty. Jesus Christ is the One who is from everlasting to everlasting. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

Later tonight, we will gather around the crib. The crib is placed in the church for the next 40 days, to remind us that Jesus comes into our lives, into our joys and successes and our suffering, to bring healing and peace. We will offer our worship with the shepherds, and we will ask that our faith be strengthened so that we can receive the fullness of life God that Jesus Christ came to bring. God is not above and beyond our need or our reach. God is with us. God is revealed in a manger wrapped in bands of cloth. Here is God, coming to give us a taste of heaven wherever we are.

And so may you and yours have a happy and blessed Christmas. Thanks be to God.