

Christmas 2B

4 January 2009

Lay Pastor Elizabeth Richardson

Readings: Jer 31:7-14 Eph 1:3-14
 Ps 147: 12-20 Jn !:(1-9), 10-18

SERMON

Four nights ago, Sydney spent \$5m on fireworks. The Lord Mayor said that 2009 was going to be a tough year and it would be good to get people together in community. Millions of people around the world celebrated the New Year.

What are we celebrating when we do that? Are we glad to be rid of the old year? Are we hoping for a better year this year? The answer is yes for many, even when they have no reason to believe that 2009 will be better than 2008.

Certainly for some, when there has been a year of severe illness or a major disaster, there is a genuine hope that with the coming year, they can start with a fresh slate and have better health or recover from their disaster.

For others, there is the knowledge that things will likely get worse. A terminally ill person may die in the coming months. Workers in some industries will lose their jobs in the economic downturn. Some fear loss of income in a stock market which has lost over 40% of its value in the past year.

But still we celebrate. Are we putting our faith in fate? Do we do anything to make it better ourselves? Some celebrate to the point of alcoholic oblivion. Does that help, other than for the very short term?

Some pick themselves up and brush themselves down and go back to living just as before. Does that help?

Or can we really turn over a new leaf? Can we make whatever happens, different because of the way we approach it?

At Christmas we celebrated the coming of God to earth in the form of a baby, Jesus. This was the Christ, the Messiah as a baby who was there for some of the poorest and roughest of that society – the shepherds. He was also there for foreigners, for highly educated, wealthy foreigners – the magi who visited bringing gifts. These men came from countries to the east and must have been wealthy to be able to afford a good education and to travel a great distance. These people represented the whole range of society both of his own country and faith and of other countries and faiths.

God came as a baby. Last year both my nieces had additions to their families and so two lovely babies visited my home over Christmas. Babies are such wonderful signs of new hope. Hold a young baby and marvel at the little features so perfectly formed. Each baby has a different personality. Look at a baby and wonder about its future. The baby Jesus was just such a new beginning. No doubt his parents also marvelled at how perfect he was and wondered too at his future. Even today, so long after his life, we can think about God's appearance as a baby and the promise this brings to us. For each of us, and for our world,

God can bring new hope, like that of a baby.

As the Christmas carol (O little town of Bethlehem) says: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight".

Think then of what that baby grew to do. Think of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus who ministered to the poor and rich, to the outcasts from society, and to the family of a soldier of the occupying force. Jesus who ministered to women in a society and time when women were very low on the social scale. Jesus who taught that the law of love was greater than any of the detailed laws people had devised over the centuries.

When people today follow Jesus, then they can no longer be the same as they once were. They can no longer be the same as most people in this post modern society.

We call the season marked by the visit of the wise men Epiphany. That word Epiphany means the manifestation of a divine being. It is the occasion on which God appeared to people in the form of a baby. Because of that we now also use the word epiphany to mean 'a revelation of the basic nature of something'. Like the wise men seeing the star and following it we too can 'see the light' and follow it. We can follow Christ.

But following Christ is not easy. The poet TS Eliot spoke of the difficulty in following Jesus in his poem Journey of the Magi.

He imagined them coming from luxurious palaces with good food, wine and women. He imagined that they had a hard, cold trip fraught with difficulties. Finally they saw Jesus and then eventually returned home. But once home, they were no longer at ease and regarded their own people as an alien people clutching their gods.

This is what can happen to people who turn to Jesus. They no longer fit in to their old ways and old friends. But having seen the light, they can no longer continue as before. Their and our old selves belonged to another country, another way of life.

The gospel of John is a story about a new way of life. Or, as one commentator puts it, a new race of humanity. This morning's reading sets the scene. It talks of God the creator creating a new way of living. The first words mirror the start of Genesis. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. In Genesis, God spoke and it was by speaking that he created. God said "Let there be light" and there was light. God said "Let the earth put forth vegetation" and it did. Later God spoke to Abraham and Abraham changed his ways. God spoke to Moses and to the prophets. All the time, God was creating. God created a new nation.

Finally God's word became flesh. Thus in John, we are told that the word was Jesus. Up until that time, God had not revealed his appearance to people. Remember how Moses asked and was told no. But now, in Jesus, people could see God. Some of the people of the time believed that Jesus showed us what God was like but the majority did not believe it. The same is true today.

Fortunately there are always people who can show us the way to Jesus. People who live the gospel. These are not the people who want to make a name for themselves. Not the

ones who want to have their names publicly recorded as having given large amounts of money to good causes but the ones who struggle to keep the faith.

None of us keep the faith totally all the time. And so each new year we may review how we think we have done and resolve to improve. The end of one year and beginning of the next can be a good time to search our souls and consider how we can do better next time.

What does Jesus mean for each of us? I don't mean the formal academic understanding which has its place, but the personal understanding that touches us at the core of our being. Each one of us will have a different understanding of Jesus, and a different response but together they make up a dynamic and overwhelmingly impressive whole.

Jesus fed the hungry. So it is not for us to think that the poor have only themselves to blame. Or to turn responsibility back on to others. Of course we know that some people work the system and are good con artists. But that should not turn us against all who beg for help.

Jesus broke the convoluted laws of his day in order to abide by a higher law. He raised a young woman from the dead. That would be remarkable enough today but in a culture that said that women had no value it was shocking. Jesus cured on the Sabbath – something forbidden by the law. For Jesus, love won out over law every time.

Jesus brought the message of love and care for others from God and became, himself, the message. His way of life became the way for all to follow. Jesus understands our feelings and is with us and will be with us whatever the year brings, he meets our hopes and fears or the year ahead. Have faith in Jesus, the son of God. With faith we can face anything. Amen.