

Christmas Day - 2014 – 8 am St Aidain's & 9.30am Wesley
Theme: 'What do we make of all these Christmas accounts?'

Introduction

The birth of Jesus. Since probably before you knew you were hearing, you've heard the story of Jesus, his birth, the shepherds, angels, the star, wise men and the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath and the premature killing of the baby. Hopefully it has done what all good stories do – it's gone deep: past your ears and your head, lodged firmly in your heart and maybe even deeper – embedded itself somewhere in the core of your being – your soul, that place where changes come from....

In a sense, this Christmas story is like the Aboriginal dream-time stories, handed down from generation to generation, revered as part of our being, who we are, part of our 'make-up'. It is a gift from God that touches the soul. We people of the post-modern age have an important hurdle to get over if we are to understand the power of this gift we've been given – because this most sacred of stories is a gift, make no mistake. It has the power to make people lay down their weapons - if only for a day. I'm thinking about the German and Allied soldiers in the First World War trenches, who laid down their killing machines to sing carols and play football with each other on Christmas Day. It has the power to change preconceived notions and stubborn hearts, to open pockets and minds long closed. There is a profound truth in the story of Jesus' coming:

a message of peace on earth, goodwill to all. But we have to remember that being factual and being true don't necessarily mean the same thing. So let's consider what we might hear and understand if we begin the story with: *'I don't know if it happened exactly this way, but I know this story to be true – it is part of my faith tradition, my sacred dreaming stories, handed down from generation to generation'*.

Let look at some aspects of our Christmas story

1. In our reading from Isaiah 52: 7-10 we have the beautiful account of hope being delivered to a people burdened by living in exile in a foreign country, Babylon, and being assured that they have not been forgotten by their God. If we were a movie director, we would surely begin with shots of feet running along a mountain path. Accustomed to such terrain they would be practised, swift and deft. They would also be dirty, dusty, calloused and probably bleeding. What makes them beautiful is the message we hear when the focus widens to the runner's mouth: good tidings, peace and the news that God reigns. For us today as Christians worshipping on this Christmas morning, again we hear the message of hope, joy and peace. God is here revealed in the baby Jesus. Immanuel, God-with-us. A much needed voice of hope in the midst of much of the horrors we have experienced over the past few weeks. The killings in Martin Place, at the Lindt Café, of Katrina and Tori. The madness of the massacres of children and youth in Pakistan and the list goes on. Here, in the midst of despair are words of hope.
2. What might we make of Mary's story? A frightened, insignificant girl who had the audacity to believe that *'with God nothing is impossible'*. A challenge to our rational thinking, that through Mary's 'Yes' to God, the Saviour of the world is born. To have such faith, to believe so amazingly, God brought forth the possibility of hope for the world.
3. And what of the shepherd's and the angels? Maybe God comes to the poorest first – good news for them at last!! The wise travel and journey to God, but God finds the poor where they are and whispers first to them that justice is coming.
4. What could we glean from the star and the wise men, if we were not tied to trying to explain this phenomenon rationally. A star that freely roams across the sky, actually

turning left and stopping over an exact spot, as if directed by some ancient form of GPS or satnav! What if the story tells us about a light in the deepest darkness, leading us to a love so pure that it sends us home by another path – changed forever by what we have experienced; unable to go back to what we saw as powerful, because everything we used to understand about power and guidance has been turned on its head?!

5. And what do we make about a Gospel reading that talks about Jesus as '*the Word*' ('*logos*' in the Greek) that may as well be 'all Greek' to us? But this is the picture image given to the early followers of Jesus. For the Greeks the image of '*the Word*' was a rational explanation that Jesus was with God and was God and so explained the bond of God the Father with God the Son. '*The word*' for Jews also meant the creative power of God at work and so reached both Jew and Gentile in the early years of the Christian faith.

We have here differing aspects of our faith story, our sacred dream-time Christmas story. We like many may well say: '*I don't know if it happened exactly this way, but I know the story is true for me.*'

So what will you make of this ancient story? The one you've probably heard before you knew what you were hearing, the one that's hopefully done what all good stories do: gone deep, past your ears and your head, lodged firmly in your heart and maybe deeper – embedded itself somewhere in the core of your being, your soul – that's where changes come from.

What kind of impact could this kind of 'understanding and seeing' make on us listening today?

May I suggest a few possibilities?

1. May we see hope even in the terrible things that happen in life. In Martin Place we have seen the outpouring of a nation as they mourn for and with the families of Katrina and Tori. There we see hope into the future and not retaliation and vengeance. Alongside of this is the '*Come ride with me*' phenomena, offering support for Muslim women for their safety when travelling on public transport etc. A practical, thoughtful, loving response to a horrific incident. This type of attitude needs to be fostered.
2. Secondly, not all things in life are quantifiable from a scientific point of view. Some things we accept by faith, some positive attitudes defy reason, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't accept them or act on feelings of justice, compassion, care, love and hope. To think of a baby born to poor country folk in an animal stable, has become the Saviour of the world, defies all logic. We need to recognise that God can use even us to make change occur. May we have faith to accept this for ourselves and when we can act upon what we see as the call of God to care for others.
3. Finally, at this time of the year, may we look beyond ourselves and see that money, power, staying safe and secure might seem like a sensible focus, however we are called to be a light in the darkness and to care for the powerless, the estranged, those on the fringe of society, the refugee, the homeless and those for whom we will get no recognition for helping.

This is the true message of Christmas – the fulfilling of God-with-us. Immanuel. Jesus came to serve and in so doing show us God at work. May we do as Christ has done – be servants, one to another. Amen

(I wish to acknowledge using ideas from Sally Foster-Fulton's book: "Hope was Heard Singing – Resources for Advent" pages 137-9 Wild Goose Publication 2013)