

God with us
a sermon preached at the
christmas day 8am liturgy
25 December 2019
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by mother colleen clayton

the lections: Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

During the last four weeks, the time of Advent, we have been waiting and preparing for the birth of Jesus. Waiting for God to become incarnate, to take on flesh and become fully human, just like each of us.

This morning we have emerged from our time of waiting, into the beginning of the story of Jesus of Nazareth; who was born in Bethlehem, grew up, was baptized, exercised his ministry, healed the sick, cast out demons, was crucified in Jerusalem, died, was raised to new life and was exalted into heaven.

This is the story of Christmas. The story of God's Son, fully human and fully divine. But if you were listening to the readings, you will have realised that it is not the story we have told this morning! There were no angels and shepherds, no wise ones following a star, no Joseph, no Mary, not even a baby Jesus! It turns out that the story of Jesus living a human life, is not the whole story.

It's a bit like Star Wars. The first three episodes were released in the late 70s and early 80s. Around 20 years later, grateful fans welcomed 3 prequels that have now been followed by sequels and spin-offs, and it seems that perhaps it is a story that never ends! What we thought was the beginning was really just a significant part in the middle.

In a very different way from Star Wars, the story of Jesus really never ends! But like Star Wars, the part of the story to which we pay the most attention, the earthly life of Jesus, is really only a significant part in the middle. And at Christmas time, we narrow our focus even more so that all we think about is little baby Jesus, cradled in the hay.

Of course, the story of God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ is hugely significant for humanity and all creation, but it is still not the whole story. And that's where today's lectionary readings come in.

The prologue to the Gospel of John, broadens our view and reminds us of the first episode in this amazing story. And it turns out that it is not just a story about the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. John gives us a cosmic story about the time before the beginning of all time. *In the beginning*, he says, *was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. This is a story about God who is before all being and God who is after all being. The God through whom all things came into being.

Although John's Gospel doesn't start with a miraculous baby, if you read his story carefully, it is clear that this is the same story but told in a very different way, to help us towards an understanding of what the birth of Jesus means. The key question for John is not so much, "How can this man Jesus be God?" but "Who must God be if this man Jesus, in his actions and words, is God's revelation?"¹

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also picks up this story. We are told that the Son whom God appointed heir of all things, is also the Son through whom he created the worlds (Heb 1:2). *He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word* (Heb 1:3).

These extraordinary, statements of cosmic scale provide the context in which we must consider the middle part of the story, the part which we focus on far more, the episode that begins with the birth of Jesus at Christmas. The most important message of Christmas is that God's love is incarnate in all creation. This is good news of great joy and it carries with it profound implications for how we treat ourselves, each other and all of God's good creation.

¹ Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A reading of John's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2014), p16.

Most indigenous religions recognise the sacred and personal nature of all reality.² Think of the Aboriginal people of this land with their deeply personal connection to country. The land is alive to them.

In the Christian story we understand that it makes sense that God would send God's Son into the world because this is a God who has been pouring out God since before time. God's nature is creative and life-giving. The world comes into being because of God pouring out God's love, speaking a creative word, bringing light and giving Godself away in creation. This is the character of God and that is why it should come as no surprise to us that God's love is intimately involved in creation.

Too often, Christianity has focussed on life after death as though this world doesn't matter. But if we are to truly claim the message of the incarnation we must recognise that everything is holy, nothing is excluded from God's purpose.

It is wonderful to be here together on this holy day, celebrating in this beautiful church. But the message of God incarnate is that God is with us everywhere and everywhen. God is with us when good things happen, and life is full of joy. God is also with us when terrible things happen, and life is full of grief. The message of Christmas is that because God is with us, everything is potentially sacred and holy. Everything; the good, the bad and the ugly. God is involved in all the ups and downs of being human, and we are invited to offer those ups and downs to the God who creates abundant life. As we do, we too learn to offer life to others.

Earlier I said that Jesus' human life was only the middle of the story. The last episode begins when the resurrected Jesus leaves this physical world and returns to dwell in God. This doesn't mean that God is physically absent from us; this is Emmanuel, God with us. God's Holy Spirit dwells with us, in our hearts, and as Christians, we believe that we are called to be Christ's body on earth. What that means is that, as we live our human lives on this precious and fragile planet, we are called to see God's presence in all creation and to grow into living in the knowledge of the sacredness of all life. Surely that is good news of great joy!

² Richard Rohr, Living "en Christo", Sunday, December 22, 2019. Meditations@cac.org