

do not be afraid
a sermon preached at the
christmas eve midnight mass
24 December 2019
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by mother colleen clayton

the lections: Isaiah 9: 2-7; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

Tonight, we have heard again the story of shepherds out in the field who are first terrified and then reassured by a vision of angels who tell them about God's good news of great joy, the birth of the Messiah. How will they recognise this Saviour and Lord? They will find a poor couple, sheltering in a stable where the woman has given birth to her first child, a son.

Luke's story begins his story by talking about Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius; the might and power of the Roman Empire. But it quickly becomes clear that he only mentions the power structures of the day in order to give us context for the real story. God's Son is not born in the comfort of wealth and power but in a manger. And his birth is not announced in the royal court, but to shepherds out in the cold, dark fields.

In Luke's story, we read that when the shepherds first see the angels they are terrified by the glory of the Lord. But the angel tells them, *do not be afraid*. The angels are not heralding the arrival of a God who is coming in force and power to subdue the world. Instead, they are announcing that the arrival of God among us will be heard in the cry of a new-born baby.

This is the baby who the shepherds find; the newly born Jesus, wrapped by his mother in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. This is the Jesus we look for tonight, who comes to us as an absolutely free gift from God, from the womb of a human mother who gave her heart freely to God in trust, carried God's love in her body and brought him safely to birth.

This is where we meet him every year at Christmas; wrapped up like a present, tiny, beautiful, and full of the potential that all new babies have.

And as we all know, babies change everything. Life after a baby arrives is never the same again. What an extraordinary way for God to come to earth! This tells us so much about who God is, and so much about who God believes humanity to be. Despite everything that is wrong and broken in the way that people behave, human nature is still capable of bearing the life of God. A human woman carried God's divine love and gave it birth in the world. It is God's ongoing invitation to humanity, and it is good news of great joy!

Babies change everything. And babies don't stay babies for long. The cute little 000 outfits only fit for such a short time. The bands of cloth with which Mary wrapped Jesus needed to be loosed and then abandoned as he grew. The birth of the Christ child was not the end of the story but only its beginning. Jesus was born in order to help humanity find their way back to where we belong, back to God's love; and that means growing up!

In order for any baby to reach its full potential it must grow and change. This was as true for the baby Jesus as it is for any other baby. Presents must be unwrapped and enjoyed and this present from God is no different. This is also part of the story. We meet the baby Jesus each year at Christmas, wrapped

in bands of cloth and lying in a manger but if we are to fully receive the gift of God among us, we must let him outgrow the manger and go on to become an adult.

Our faith too is a living, growing thing. It cannot stay a baby forever, wrapped up safely and asleep. Faith that is a gift, supporting and enriching life, is a journey of struggle, uncertainty and discovery; like any journey of growth. Adult faith is not sweet and simplistic, it is rich and fully awake, engaged with life in all its complexity. Adult faith often finds itself in the dark, but it still hears the voice of angels saying, *do not be afraid!*

At the first Christmas, God's good news of great joy was announced to the shepherds outside in the cold and dark. God still speaks to the darkness and loneliness of human existence. God's invitation to each of us as we come seeking the baby in the manger is to invite us to trust that we too can bring God's message of hope and love to birth in the world. And not just bring it to birth, but then help it to grow, in us and through us, so that, like the shepherds, we will share what we know about this child of love so that all who hear us will be amazed.