

Church of All Nations

Christmas Day 2024

Luke 2:1-20

Did you know there is a Church of All Nations in Jerusalem? Its on the Mount of Olives next to the Garden of Gethsemane. I have never been there but I have heard it has a sign that sternly warns, “No explanations in the church.” That’s directed to the tour guides, of course – “

We’d all do well to heed it especially on Christmas Day when we are drawn more deeply into a mystery that infinitely exceeds our understanding, a mystery of grace that goes beyond even our wildest hopes and imaginings. So we will go light on the explanations in the church; rather, let us speak softly and with wonder, as befits a holy place.”

The ever ancient and ever new celebration of Christmas each year. A very old story but we tell it and enact it and celebrate each year.

I can pretty much guarantee you will not hear anything in this sermon you have not heard many times before. Sorry. Even the one thing I thought was contemporary and up to date it turns out is also been said before

Something I saw during the week... the edge is off Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem, West Bank town, for the second year in a row.

Yet, I dare to hope you will find something new in the story.

What we have is a story of Incarnation and grace. Incarnation ; The word comes from the Latin word carne - flesh. So carnation the colour of flesh, chilli con care, spicy meat and beans , carnal desires of the flesh; carnage killing of the flesh,

So incarnation - taking flesh - God comes to us in the flesh of the historical fleshly man Jesus. Christianity is perhaps the most material and historical of all world religions. That is why Luke spends so much time locating Jesus in geography and time and politics leading into the birth story. It is Jesus being born of Mary that connects us with all those who have gone before in first making this story fleshly and then living it out down through the generations.

Interesting comment from pastor of church interested in hiring our worship space. I was showing him over and we got talking about different church and worship styles. He has a fair bit of contact with uni students and young people in general. Now his church would be definitely further along the evangelical pentecostal spectrum but the interesting thing he said is he feel

there is now a desire from many of the young people he sees to move beyond the hype and shallowness of some contemporary worship. He said he thinks young people don't want to be part of a faith that feels like it was invented 20 years ago. At Christmas we are drawn into an ancient but ever new story, still being written with our lives.

“Hail Mary, full of *grace*.”

Grace – the power of God to redeem what has been broken, to ascribe worth to those who feel worthless, to make meaning *not in spite of but because of* the brokenness.

Grace is what came to the vulnerable Mary the day the angel told her she would be the Godbearer. *Grace* is what accompanied the homeless, holy family on their long and perilous journey to Bethlehem and kept watch with them through the night. *Grace* is what appeared to the shepherds at the fringes of the little town of Bethlehem to tell *them* about the birth of the Messiah.

Grace creates a home for each of us and invites us to enter. You are included in what God is doing in the world.

We hear a lot about inclusion in our society and it is a favourite term in the Uniting Church. Which is good; with the rider that too often the concept of inclusion does nothing more than uphold our current systems, where those with happy families and heaps of money and high social status are still considered privileged; that is, blessed. Inclusion in this world just means that privileged people make a little more room for others: but they still set the agenda.

In Christmas however we have a story which sets a whole new agenda. For this is a story in which the centre of God's action, the womb of God's life, is nowhere near any human ideas of rank or privilege or success. Instead, God's action is relocated to the margins, and so this story completely undermines the values of empire, both the Roman empire and our own.

God did not choose to be associated with wealthy powerful perfect people: those we usually consider blessed. Instead, God chose to be born into complications and poverty: an unwed mother; a household which could not find proper accommodation; a family being pushed around by the state; a family which was soon under threat, and which had to flee to Egypt for safety. And God did not choose to be announced to the powerful in the imperial courts, but instead to no-status social outcasts living in occupied territories. And yet the story of the birth of this child continues to be told for, in this baby's birth and in everything which followed, ordinary struggling people recognise themselves, and find hope and wholeness and healing.

Lord, we come to worship the savior you sent us...

And we marvel at the manner of the sending.

In the midst of political upheaval, we hoped for a king.

In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, we hoped for a general.

In the midst of religious tumult and controversy, we hoped for a high priest.

But you send us a baby.

[pause for bewildered reflection]

Interesting choice, God.

-Lawrence Lee

Too much of what we sing about and hear at Christmas revolves around the idea that Jesus is born so that God can somehow understand what it means for us to live a human life. But God doesn't need to become human. Or that Jesus comes to set us an example of how that life is to be lived. But God doesn't need Jesus to teach us how to live. The Christmas stories are clear. In the birth of Jesus God comes to *save* us. If I need anything this Christmas, I need to be reminded of what that means and what difference it makes to this world where the shadow of death is too close too often.