

Christmass – Midnight 2016

On Christmass eve a little over 100 years ago, the troops on the Western front emerged from their trenches and, so the story goes, spent a little while kicking a football around, sharing cigarettes and other rations and enjoying each other's company, singing a few carols, swapping memorabilia and getting haircuts. The time was also used to swap prisoners and collect the dead and dying from no man's land, before the troops returned to their trenches to unleash hell on each other. It is a scenario that most of us cannot even begin to comprehend, but it demonstrates the extraordinary power and the specialness of this night that it can move people to behave in such a way. Unfortunately we often need extreme contexts to move us in extraordinary ways, ways beyond our comfort zones, beyond our comprehension.

As many of you know I recently completed a stint in the Australian regular Army. One of my postings was to the Army Recruit Training Centre at Kapooka near Wagga, a good place to get out of your comfort zone! We would endeavour to instil into the recruits the Army's values. When I joined they were Courage, Initiative, and Teamwork; by the time I left 'Respect' had been added. Respect, of course, had always been part of the Army's ethos but the time came to make explicit what had formerly been a given - I found that rather telling. It was the most difficult of the values to teach, and we would use stories of the Christmass truce and the laws and ethics of warfare to hint at what respect might look like. We would stress that even those with whom we are odds, our enemies, are worthy of our respect not because they've earned it, a common misconception, but because of our common humanity. The Laws of Armed Conflict are in place to protect our humanity. As Jesus famously said 'Love your enemies.'

This respect or perhaps a radical new way of understanding it, is what is at the heart of the Christmass celebration, we don't use the word respect but the intent is the same, the scriptures use a variety of words that we translate love... as in the poem by Christina Rossetti 'Love came down at Christmass.'

Love came down at Christmass, Love all lovely, love divine
Love was born at Christmass, Star and Angels gave the sign.
Worship we the Godhead, Love incarnate, love divine,
Worship we our Jesus, But wherewith for sacred sign?
Love shall be our token, Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men, Love for plea and gift and sign.

We might think this is all rather sentimental, but the love being described is the tough love, the sort of love that stands at the centre of the Christian faith. St Paul tells us the greatest virtues are Faith, Hope and Love and then reminds us 'but the greatest of these is Love.' St John tells us God is love, 'whoever does not love does not know God,

because God is love.’ Perhaps part of the problem with understanding God is because we find it very difficult to understand love. And thereby hangs the importance of the Christmass Feast it is in the child in the manger that we can truly glimpse love. It provides us with a context so different from the ways in which we band around that overused word today.

In the birth of Jesus we can experience love, which can remain for us a largely intangible emotion, and therefore we can experience God. In the 4th century Gregory of Nazianzus wrote ‘he who is without flesh becomes incarnate, the word puts on a body, the invisible makes itself seen, the intangible can be touched, the timeless has a beginning, the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.’

This means that we can no longer sentimentalise love, a child – soon to be driven into exile, a refugee, born to an unmarried teenage mother, at that time homeless, we are ticking so many boxes with the modern issues of our day – is love. This is love we can reach out and touch and see. The intangible can be touched.

We here at St Philip’s have a particular way of depicting this love and its tangibility. Many churches follow the tradition of St Francis of Assisi and have crib scenes. We are a minimalist mob here in O’Connor for a good reason. In front of our altar is a simple manger with a child. You may well ask where are Mary and Joseph, where are the shepherds, what’s going on? *You* need to fill in the gaps. A BBC journalist wrote a piece called ‘How the world was changed by the slogan Je suis Charlie.’ We need to adopt similar slogans. Tonight *I, you, we* are Mary and Joseph, *we* are shepherds scurrying to the manger. These are slogans that have the potential to change the world. We need to engage at that level, it is that tangible. Like Mary we need to say yes to God, allow love to be conceived within us, ‘be born in us today’ as the carol goes. We need to be the Joseph who allowed himself to see differently and open his mind to the possibilities that Mary’s child brings. Like the shepherds we need to come with nothing to be filled by the love that is presented, the love that is God.

You may well say that I am being mushy and romantic, what good can it do? What about war, disaster, famine, disease, let alone the issues here at home, get real! I believe that this is as real as it gets, if a child born in these circumstances can go on to become the most influential person who ever lived and ever will live and whose Spirit lives on in you and me, what can prevent us?

I hope that your Christmass celebrations are filled with joy and love and I hope that that love spills out so that all may know the true nature of the God who is love, who is Emmanuel.... among us. A happy and holy Christmass to you all.