

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

CHRISTMAS EUCHARIST

SUNDAY 25 DECEMBER 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Luke 2: 8-20

Christmas Reflection - "Defenceless"

The picture on the front cover of our order of service this morning is of a pastel drawing by Pablo Picasso. It is called '*Los Desamparados*', which translated means something between 'defenceless' and 'homeless' (depending on which dictionary you consult).

'Amparados' means 'covered', so 'Desamparados' would then literally mean 'uncovered', or without cover.

Like a pearl without a shell, like a city without fortification, this woman is without cover, without home, without defense, without a place of safety.

The work dates from 1903 when Picasso was living in great poverty.

He is in his early twenties, is traveling a lot between Barcelona and Paris and doesn't have his own living space or studio.

Instead of expensive canvas or paint he uses paper and pastel. Influenced by an anarchist-socialist environment he focusses his attention on the poverty and despair around him.

In this period he paints portraits of people on the margins of society: poor labourers, alcoholics, beggars and prostitutes, the weak and the hungry.

Like van Gogh - who deeply influenced him - he often pictures women with the vacant look of poverty and despair in their eyes, Oftentimes forced to prostitution, they are mothers, without cover or protection, without defense or a place of safety.

Here, in *Los Desamparados*, the haggard looking, wasted mother holds an undernourished child. Her disproportionally large hand protecting the fragile creature held against her breast.

Images of the Christ child often show a lovely, radiant, well fed, round baby. With the stable from the gospel of Luke in an idyllic, rural spot.

This romantic and radiant imagery of Christmas can make us forget the real journey of the child through the history of human kind. Jesus' journey did not start, continue or finish in romance.

It was marked by suffering and despair, it was lived in simplicity and weakness amongst people on the margins, just like those who Picasso painted in this early period of his career.

And only after, only when that life of plain love and compassion had been lived, was that divine intervention that saved it from oblivion and brought it back to say "Here in this man God was present, here God lived among us and showed us his innermost being".

Jesus' journey started with a young woman who gave birth in dire circumstances.

Defenseless, homeless, desperate to find cover and safety for herself and her newborn son she ends up giving birth among the poorest of the poor.

Supported by a father who isn't the father, visited by ruffians nobody would like to see pay a maternity visit.

This woman stays with him, follows him, supports him, and, at the end, gathers him in her arms when he is taken off the cross, her heart broken, her soul torn apart by grief.

Jesus was woven in his mother's womb, she bore him under her heart. Her labour pains were the beginning of his extraordinary life.

At her breasts he was fed and nourished. She committed her body and soul to make life possible for him.

It is this image of motherly love, of the life-giving and life-sustaining instinct of motherhood, the prophet Isaiah uses to explain the love of God.

"Could a woman forget her child, can she be heartless towards the child she is carrying?"

Yes, unfortunately, there are children in our world who are abandoned and left defenseless, who hunger and thirst for love, for care, and don't get any. Unfortunately we live in a world where children are neglected, abused, unloved, unprotected, and left without cover of loving and caring parenthood.

God may sometimes seem a long way away. It must have seemed so to Mary, with the babe in her arms homeless, defenseless, coverless and later, with his broken body against her breast, desperate, bereft, lost without a child she had raised and loved all his life.

Her hands are not able to keep him from harm, to keep him safe.

Did God perhaps forget this child?

It is a place where we may sometimes find ourselves - feel ourselves to be without shelter, fragile, defenseless against the sufferings life may throw at us.

At the same time we are people in whom and through whom hope grows and comes to birth, even at those most desperate of times, in the most difficult circumstances.

Find that we are, like Mary, people with the ability to care and nourish the flickering light of change and love that has been placed in our hands by a God who will not forget us. A God, who, to use another image of the prophet Isaiah, has written us in the palm of his hand. Amen.