

## NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

9<sup>th</sup> December 2012

### Reflection: “Called to be prophets?”

In the past few weeks I've been studying **The First Christmas** by Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan. Always, they set their unpacking of the situation into which the new testament writings came: – they begin centuries back – back to Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. To the time of the conquerors, of the empires; – the Pharaohs, the Caesars, those whose victories over their enemies promised peace, peace through violent force.

The Kings of Israel did evil in the sight of God too, bringing a peace brought by violence and death, and they governed by a domination system which was exploiting and oppressing the people. There was injustice, violence and idolatry. The prophets tell of the people's yearning for the transformed world that the people of Israel were promised by the God of the exodus. A vision of peace through non-violent justice.

Isaiah and Micah both record this longing for peace through non-violence: *they shall beat their swords into plow-shares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war no more.*

John the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets: “make straight the way of the Lord”. Luke's gospel brings us the parallels between Jesus and his cousin John; through metaphor and parable, Luke is asking readers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, and the 21<sup>st</sup>C, to accept Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecies; John the Baptist isn't bringing a message of judgment so much, as an invitation to make the new start – again, and again! – “chose the way of my cousin Jesus –listen, and follow him!”

It was into this time of longing when the angel Gabriel came to bring the news to Mary that she was to bear the child who would be a leader like his ancestor David, however, a leader bringing peace, through non-violence.

John Bell tells it this way:

O Mary, Mary, don't hide your face.  
You are requested to mother God's son.  
And Mary, consenting to what none could guess,  
replied with conviction, “tell God, I say Yes.”

When Jesus came to the temple for his circumcision and Mary for her purification: possibly in the second week after his birth: Simeon says: God, I have seen the salvation you have long wanted to present before all humankind. Simeon isn't saying, as many Christians believe, that salvation is closely connected to post-death existence, with 'going to heaven'. The word has a much more this-worldly, here-and-now meaning which includes – it means rescue, deliverance, liberation, protection, healing and being made whole. For Saviour, read rescuer, or deliverer.

Dora read to us the passage where Jesus speaks of his mission: I had this passage read at my Ordination. When Jesus speaks of his understanding of his role, in the synagogue in Nazareth, he talks about his here-and-now role. Quoting from Isaiah 61: 1-2 Jesus reads: *the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind; to be the one who rescues, who delivers liberation.* It is a here-and-now role, precisely what Zechariah meant; he was made speechless until the birth of his son John, and Simeon, now perceiving the child Jesus in Mary's arms proclaims this child of Mary is to bring deliverance, release,

recovery, good news for the poor, liberation. Simeon added the tough note --- this child will get empire builders off-side; and you, Mary, will be brought to tears.

How will we find peace on earth? We are asked, each and every time of Advent, to choose how to live: personally and individually, nationally and internationally. As the time of Lent asks of us, the time of Advent is a time of preparation. The passage from chapter 5 of First Thessalonians which Barbara will read to us, is a reminder of how a hoping congregation lives. Encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them; see that none of you repays evil for evil... rejoice always, and pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances for this is what Jesus wishes you to do. Listen to new ideas, and test everything.

Bill Loader, emeritus Professor of New testament in WA, says Living for peace is central – but it does not mean avoiding conflict or trying to be ‘nice and Christian’ It means engaging and confronting as well as comforting. It means abandoning revenge and seeking to be a source of good and goodness to all (not just to ‘us’ - also to ‘them’); this is all part of the joy of being a Christian, says Paul. Endless prayers are not “dear Lord, this, or Dear Lord, that... It is more to do with connectedness. It is about sharing the life of God, who might, as it were, constantly interrupt our words and ask us for a hand to do something here and there. A form of chatting with God, being aware of God’s presence always near to our person, AND also very near in those people and situations which we encounter.

Are we called to be prophets? Yes, we are to participate with God in bringing about the world promised by Christmas. Not to wait for God to do it, we are to collaborate with God.

St Augustine puts it well: God without us will not; we without God cannot. We who have seen the star and heard the angels sing are called to participate in the new birth and the new world proclaimed by these stories. It’s a struggle between two visions of life: Empire --- with emphasis on having all for ourselves, reinforcing all our prejudices and preferences, without learning the giftedness of giving self:

Or to follow the One who was conceived by the Spirit and christened as son of God by the community that grew up around us. Jesus is, for Christians, Emmanuel: ‘God with us’. The counter-cultural King – offering peace through non-violence, offering love, the depth of which we just sometimes comprehend!

The northern hemisphere sings its carols into the darkened world: there is a carol they sing which combines the themes of Advent and Christmas in a remarkable way: joy to the world, the political images of Jesus as Lord and King, an incredible contrast to the powers of money and greed, it goes on to the personal image of every heart preparing room for Jesus’ and his call, and concludes with the rejoicing of heaven and nature, the whole of creation.

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come,  
Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.*

Advent gives us this hope. We are to be the prophets, no matter our age and physicality – we can chat kindness and understanding, we can give time and gifts with joyful hearts, we can ask Jesus to guide us when we wish to let politicians know we are dissatisfied with the treatment of refugees, we can because we know the reason for Joy in our world.

God so loved the world that Emmanuel came to be God with us.  
Amen.

Rev Deacon Jenny Preston, North Balwyn Uniting Church, December 9, 2012