

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
CHRISTMAS MORNING 2012
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Luke 2: 1-20

“Ordinary people
in an extraordinary story”

Why do we tell that story again and again, every year, for the last two thousand years? The story about the mother - and the father who is not the father - about the lateral thinking inn-keeper, and the rough shepherds who come in from the night - the story about dark fields lit up by heavenly messengers speaking of peace - and about kings coming from far away? Why do we never seem to get enough of it?



Well some of us do. Just before Christmas, as I was looking for some last minute presents and cards in the Oxfam shop in Doncaster, a woman, going through the pile of Christmas cards I'd just put down, exclaimed: "Why is that stupid stable on all of them? I'm sick of that baby! Can't they think of something else? Something not American Father Christmas or European Snow and Christmas trees? Something that fits in with our Australian culture?" As she looked sideways to see if she would get support from me, she spotted my cross. "Oh, sorry", she said, "but I am just not religious. And I want to support Oxfam, but they are making it really hard for me this way." Off she stalked, and I thought better than to tell her I was a minister and on the other end of the religious spectrum as far as she was concerned. In spite of her apologies I felt hurt. And silly. And wondered how on earth I would, if I ever got a chance, explain to her what that story, that baby, means to me, and why the story manages to touch me deeply every year. Exposed to it more than most, I know the story inside out. Writing Christmas sermons for almost thirty years now, I've explored every nook and cranny of it, and still manage to find something new and fresh and moving every year.

So what about this year?

Reminiscing about that chance encounter with a committed non-religious, secular Australian, I first of all realised the story is not about religion for me. It was almost a shock to discover I don't see it as a religious story. Not in the sense of something I believe happened and should be taken as dogma. In that sense I am probably as secularised as that woman, if not more. I know every gospel writer offers their own take on Jesus' beginning and that they are stories inspired by tradition, by context, by literature, by philosophy and by the literary conventions of the time. None of them sets out to write a factual, historical report of the birth. All of them used their stories to put Jesus in a bigger context, against the backdrop of wider world history, and to deliver a message about him and his importance for the world. I think it is highly unlikely there ever was a stable, or shepherds in the fields of Ephratha, or kings from far away following a star, at the time of Jesus' birth. And even if there was, it's not where the story speaks to me. Where it speaks to me is where I let myself be drawn into the story, and allow the characters to enter my heart and my soul.

Wondering what it would be like to be riding a donkey for a considerable number of days when you're about to give birth. I know, as a woman who has given birth, what those last few days of a pregnancy are like, and when I enter the story from that direction I feel for

Mary, and in and through her for all women who are forced to give birth away from the safety of home and family.

At other times I have put myself in the shoes of Joseph, wondering what it must have been like for him, walking alongside Mary and the donkey, full of dark thoughts and doubts. A man who can't look after his young wife and isn't sure the baby she's carrying is his. A simple carpenter, generous enough to marry the girl he loves when she falls pregnant to protect her honour. But perhaps also save his own face?

And then there is the inn-keeper, who isn't even mentioned in the original story. Or did they just creep into a stable with no one any the wiser? But let's assume there was an inn-keeper, what sort of character would he be? Grumpy? Or just tired, and busy, and harassed, and worried about all the people he'd already turned away? Perhaps his wife was unwell, or his teenage son on drugs, or maybe he suffered from arthritis? Who knows? He provides shelter. A place where it is warm, and safe, with some straw to rest on. And that's what is important.

The shepherds? Ever been alone, out in the open on a silent starry night? Ever experienced what that can do to you? I know that I have felt the breath of something beyond my understanding, beyond the ordinary, touch me on an occasion like that. How natural is it that you start to hear angel's voices if you spend so much time sleeping under the stars?

And the wise men? I know there have been Christmases I have had to come from a long way off before I reached the warm glow of peace and comfort. Christmases that were difficult, Christmases where my faith was hanging by a thread, Christmases where I felt alienated from the context I found myself in.

And then there is the baby. I'm not too sure how to handle the Son of God and Saviour of mankind stuff if I am honest. I am not sure what that means for me, here and now, and how I can translate it into terminology I understand with my 21st century mind. But somehow, every year the story convinces me afresh that there is more about Jesus than just a good man living an exemplary life, or even an exceptional teacher and leader entering history in what was a crucial moment in time for both his Jewish and Greco-Roman contemporaries.

There is something unfathomably deep about him, something that managed to turn all commonly accepted concepts upside down at the time and convinced people centuries down the track that the divine takes up residence among us, sharing in the fragility of our existence, igniting a light and love that burns every darkness away and is stronger than violence or death can ever be.

What if it was true? That somewhere amongst all the chaos and darkness, amongst all the difficulty, sadness and alienation we contend with as human beings, that somewhere amongst all that, between you and me, with everything that goes on, the divine seeks to come to birth, year after year. Calling us to come and open our hearts to peace, love, and light. To share it with each other, with the world, and so save the world from succumbing to darkness. Lighting in us a flame of hope and compassion, vulnerable yet strong, small yet persistent.

That woman I met at the Oxfam shop the other day and I are not as far apart as she may have thought when she apologised to me. The stable for me isn't a sweet and romantic

place surrounded by clouds of carols and candlelight. It is a place where I encounter the realities of life, both the light and the dark, the joy and the pain. A story that calls me to action, to get to work on the hope it represents, to not give up even when the going gets tough, because it inspires in me the flicker of a faith that tells me there is hope as long as people are prepared to let themselves be touched by a child, a mother, a father, a couple of ruffians and a handful of strangers. It is being prepared to hear the heavenly music of peace and goodwill calling through the night, beckoning them to get involved in the divine in the most unexpected ways and in the most unexpected places. Amen.