

Reflection on Christmas Eve (24 December 2020) at Gisborne

Luke 2:1-14

Things that the saviour brings us tonight

Christmas happens in the middle of the ordinary circumstances of life. Let's think about the first Christmas: an emperor issuing decrees for taxing people, a couple that is unmarried and pregnant, a no vacancy sign, farm workers working night shift. These are real life circumstances even at Christmas. It was back then and it is still today. In addition, every year we come to this night to hear the Christmas story. The story never changes. In this story, we hear about the same characters, the same locations, the same ending. Mary and Joseph are pregnant and unmarried. Emperor Augustus issues a decree of taxation. Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem. Mary gives birth to Jesus and places him in a manger. The angel announces this good news to the shepherds. They come and see this thing that has happened.

On the surface of this story, it seems that Emperor Augustus is in absolute control. He orders people from all over the places in the empire to be registered in their home towns. Yet another hand is also at work in and through these events. Centuries earlier, Samuel had journeyed to Bethlehem and anointed the shepherd boy David to be king of Israel, even while Saul remained in power. Now in this city of David, a child is born to inherit 'the throne of his ancestor David,'¹ even while Herod, Quirinius, and Augustus remain in power.

In this story of the birth of a baby, however we still see that the peace is offered, which the empire couldn't offer even through Pax Romana.² Further, we see that the child will be the true shepherd-king, the true Prince of Peace and Saviour, who will usher in God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. The peace he brings will come not from military might, but from justice and mercy. He will rule not with coercive force, but with the power of self-giving love.

In this story, we see the love of God that will make us be reconnected to God; Joy that we may cherish in any life event is here also that will always bring us back to hope for life in the eternal for those who believe in this saviour.

We may often wonder how these things happen, or how the shepherds were able to understand what the angel told them. In the first century, shepherds were not considered desirable company. They were poor, illiterate. They were outcasts of polite society with other despised occupations. Even so, it is to these unlikely folk that the angel announces. As such, when the good news is given to us tonight, how do we receive it despite many odds and ends? Tonight, we'll find the words of the incarnation through our various life events in the past. In doing so, we'll see how the birth of Jesus has brought hope, peace, love, and joy to our lives as before. Here are the questions that will prompt you to reflect on the good news in your lives.

- Have you ever loved someone so deeply that all you wanted to do was pour yourself into the life of another?
- Who are the Josephs who have accompanied, protected, and cared for you through this life?
- Who are Marys whom you wish to accompany, protect and care for through this life?
- Have you ever become someone's hands and feet without any expectation of rewards?
- Recall a time when hope, strength, and courage were born anew in you.
- Have you ever experienced peace and contentment in circumstances that were neither peaceful nor what you wanted?
- When was the last time you danced with joy and smiles?
- Have you ever done what seemed to you impossible and not known how you did that? Things that you haven't thought about that you could or would do before.
- What are you cherishing in your heart tonight that you know beyond a doubt is a gift from God?

You may need more time to answer some of these questions. But remember that all of yours including doubts and hesitation are all part of the story in the birth of Jesus. Together with the facts of Christmas in gospels, your stories enrich the reality of Christmas. Indeed, God with us, Emmanuel, is always happening. Amen!

¹ Luke 1:32

² Roman Peace