

Christmas 2022

As people entered Adelaide's Cathedral for Christmas some years ago, they found the Christmas crib smashed. Statues of Mary and Joseph were urinated over, and the Jesus statue smashed. The archbishop instructed that the broken pieces of Jesus be gathered in a basket and placed before the altar. The desecrated image and vandalised crib gave people much to think about as the broken bits produced a powerful image of Jesus' rejection by the world; how people are treated; and, how we treat God's gift of creation. The broken statue was also an invitation to refashion Christ, to rebuild his body in the world.

How we hear and interpret the Christmas story matters. Some details provide a basis for social justice work today - that Jesus was born into immense poverty, announcements were made to social outcasts, the politically, economically, socially, and religiously privileged bypassed, and fleeing violence as refugees. We are challenged more and more to seriously reflect on the broadly inclusive meaning of Christmas. Merely singing carols about 'Emmanuel' (God with us) can miss the profound depth of these words: that God has joined our struggle here on Earth. God so loved the world that God chose to enter it, and the very fabric of creation of which we too are a part.

Just after COP 27 in Egypt (in November) and COP 15 in Canada (in December) we must recognise the wider – indeed, the cosmic significance of the Word becoming flesh, as we realise that we are not at the centre of creation, as we work to respect, preserve, and protect our creaturely sisters and brothers in Christ. The good works for people on society's edges can be circumscribed when the truth to is not spoken to Herods of today; when we do not risk confronting the immoral behaviour of political powers that create widows and orphans and destitute asylum seekers as well as impoverishing people around the world and our Common Home – the Earth. God's entrance into creation as *Emmanuel* — 'God with us' — signifies God's love for all creation, all creatures, humans included. All are interconnected and interdependent. Everything in the created world is implicated in God's decision to become *flesh*. All of God's creatures are touched by and benefit from God's gift of love and life in the Incarnation. However, what happened in Bethlehem is just part of the story. That baby grew up to be a man who faced evil and spoke out against it. We must do no less.

The Bible bears a consistent image of light overcoming darkness. Light is the most important force in all of creation. It reveals the truth about reality. Christmas is known as the Feast of Light because it celebrates the light in all people. As God is light, and God's light is within us, we can bring life and light, to others by our presence. As we prepare to mark Christ's birth, we can find ways to become more aware of God's presence. God is now fleshed. Many religions celebrate the words of peace and proclaim words of justice, but no other religion speaks of God coming into the world in human form. These are the choices God has made. The words of peace, of justice are no longer just ours but are the Word of God. This notwithstanding, we can stumble into darkness and lose our way and act outside of our nature. We can bring destruction, injustice and suffering to all that is around us. The critical question is whether we take the way of light or the way of darkness? This is a question we face daily.

Jesus was born in a period of darkness and confusion. His people lived under oppressive Roman rule under the reign of Caesar Augustus, who loved his power, privilege and wealth and wanted to protect it at all costs. At the same time the tyranny of Herod the Great's brutal and bloody rule was coming to an end. Jesus' people in Palestine still suffer this kind of oppression. There was division among the people, increasing tension and rioting. There was increasing hopelessness as the world – like our own - filled with crises and on the brink of chaos. And now there is also ecological chaos.

This is the world that Jesus came into, where light and love became flesh. He opened the way to reconciliation and revealed the path for the liberation by overturning oppressive systems. Jesus emerges as the 'Prince of Peace' in the face of violence, tyranny, and greed, to declare that God's reign will be ruled by the poor, the least, the powerless and most marginalised. God has come into our world just as those most oppressed do – born among the dust and dirt, poverty, and neglect. God comes in solidarity with all who have been rejected, ignored, and considered burdens on society. In Jesus, God comes alongside the underdog, the broken, the vilified and the vulnerable. God enters our lives 'today,' acting for all people 'now' by the words, hearts and the touch of others.

All Christmas stories hint at the cross and resurrection, of rejection and the triumph of love as God remains vulnerable among us and has nothing to do with domination. Everything about Christmas is sacramental. It is up to us to incarnate the promise of peace. As our common home is presently experiencing at least 30 nations at war, we are called and empowered to become sacraments of Emmanuel – God with us – to be the body of Christ today.

The first Christmas had more to do with a massacre rather than a manager. 'Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.' (Mt 2:1-18) Countless Rachels continue to weep in Afghanistan, Yemen, Palestine, Myanmar, Iran, Somalia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Herod still appears in many guises as children continue to be victims of violence – separated from families as Indigenous people, as refugees, as incarcerated in prison, or abused in other ways.

God dares us to recognise a Presence in everyday faces and in creation. Dorothy Day called it 'making room for Christ'. She tells us where we can welcome Christ: *'it is with the voices of our contemporaries **that he speaks**. With the eyes of store clerks and children, **he looks at us**. With the hands of slum dwellers and suburban housewives, **he reaches out**. He walks with the feet of the soldier and the tramp. With the heart of all in need, **he longs for us to shelter him**. And, the giving of shelter or food or welcome to anyone who asks or needs it, is giving to Christ and making room for his holiness to dwell within.*

Oscar Romero said, *'Some truths can only be seen through eyes that have cried.'* James Cone says *'let the suffering speak'*. The question for us is whether we will participate in the socially transformative work on the margins of their society. If that is the case, then should we not have concern for any violation or starvation or trafficking of any human bodies as that which God took on to be with us? Miguel A. De La Torre in *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, writes, *'Jesus's audience was primarily the outcasts of society. This is why it is important to understand the message of Jesus from the perspective of the disenfranchised. The marginalized of Jesus' time occupied the privileged position of being the first to hear and respond to the gospel. By making the disenfranchised recipients of the Good News, Jesus added a political edge to his message.'* (Amazon Kindle). In retelling the Jesus story, Luke presents Jesus' vision for a human community (reign) in contrast to the powerful Roman society (empire) based on oppression, exploitation, or marginalisation. No wonder that Jesus' birth, and the ongoing memory, created and creates an existential crisis for all imperial, capitalist and anti-immigrant institutions and forces that uphold violence in the name of Christianity.

Jesus' birth reveals a new world order which is possible if we choose it. Mary's 'yes', too, reveals and enables God's entrance in Jesus into the world as a subversive act. The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. There is no room for exclusion. There is no room for exceptionalism. There is no room for anthropomorphic exceptionalism. There is no room for imperial exceptionalism. The promise of God's presence cannot be undone. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Christmas is subversive if we recognise and believe the Good News leads us to change our lives: and confront powerful ideas and institutions that hurt humanity and creation. Christmas is subversive because those in power do not want to hear it or know about that in the eyes and heart of God all people, all creatures, all parts of creation, have intrinsic worth. They do not want us to look at peoples' faces and know them.

Call to open hearts, big hearts, welcoming hearts, caring hearts beyond the sentimental. The birth of Jesus is not about the uniqueness of one baby, but the universality all children and their parents share. The belief that Jesus' birth is qualitatively different allows for the exclusion of others who do not share that belief. If Jesus is qualitatively different, then Christians are too which means others can be seen and treated as less and fair game for violence and predatory behaviour many engage in. The manger reveals the common humanity everyone shares, and the right of Rachel's children everywhere to be, and to belong, and to become.

We have all been given power to be lights to the world. The smallest match will light up a room. The smallest gesture of kindness, act of compassion, or work of mercy will light up the globe. 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' Be a Christmas light today.

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