

SUSANNA'S SERMON — CHRISTMAS DAY 2010

In St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, there is a famous sculpture in white marble of a youngish woman (early 40s maybe) holding a naked man on her lap. The man it seems, we know is dead.

The end informs the beginning. A Girl, maybe 12 or 13, suckles a boy child at her breast. It is the same woman, the same man, a lifetime in between.

The gift is circular, uncontainable, impossible ...

Christmas is the gift of God with us in the man Jesus and it is the awareness of this gift of God with us that gives meaning to our lives. "We do not come to Christmas to pretend that the baby Jesus is born again in this day. Nor do we pretend that on this day the baby Jesus is born in some mystical way in us. We come to Christmas looking for the signs of Jesus' presence (manifested) in our own life and age, in us and in the world around us." (Joan Chichister)

Christmas is about gift, about God's 'yes' to you, to me, and our response. God says 'I love you always' and Jesus came to tell us that. We are the Beloved, not because we did anything, not because we proved ourselves. Basically, God loves us whatever we do. If that's true, these few years that we are in the world, we are sent to say in the midst of our life. "Yes God, I love you, too."

Just as God cares for us, it's very important that we care for God in the world. If God is born like a little baby, God cannot walk or speak unless someone teaches God. That's the story of Jesus, who needs human beings in order to grow. God is saying, 'I want to be small so what better way to help you respond to my love, than becoming vulnerable so you can care for me?'

God becomes a stumbling God who falls at the cross. Who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. A dead man lies on his mother's lap. God does this so that we can get close. The God who loves us is a God who becomes vulnerable, dependent in the manger and dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, 'Are you there for me?' (p.22: "Jesus, a Gospel," Henri Nouwen) A child is suckled at its mother's breast — she holds him out to us 'would you like a hold?'

This God, this gift is most mysterious and earthy and real and inexplicable. It can change our lives, this love; God with us.

On Monday, Nikolai and I went to Sydney to see Nikolai's dad, from whom he has been estranged for over two years. Nikolai went with some trepidation, yet he also went with the desire to listen and to love. We had asked several people to pray for us.

As we drove to Sydney on that cold windy day, we were anxious, yet trusting. When we arrived, all was smiles. Nikolai's dad's eyes were glowing with love.

He too has been hurt by this separation. We did not speak of what had happened — too much pain. But we talked, and listened. We exchanged gifts and we shared a meal.

There was reconciliation of sorts. There was definitely love — love beneath and beyond the pain and conflict. This was a new beginning. Nikolai's dad is 88. Before we left, Nikolai's dad prayed for us, placing his hand on our heads. And Nikolai prayed for him. I was aware of light surrounding us. There is still some sadness that we live in very different worlds, but underneath this, is love.

On the way home Nikolai said he felt a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. I am very proud of Nikolai for reaching out, for choosing love, choosing life and healing.

The baby Jesus is born in some mystical way in us. We come to Christmas looking for the signs of Jesus' presence manifested in our own life and age, in us and in the world around us.

(p.83) "Christmas is not about a baby, not about sentimental piety, not about Christmas fantasy. Christmas is a very adult feast. It stretches far beyond a manger in Bethlehem 'and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It brings us to recognize who it is that we, like the people of Jesus' own time will in everything we do in life this year, either accept or reject (Chihister)."

The invitation is to choose love ... to give and receive love and life.

I want to share this inspiring story with you. A few weeks ago, Steve Stone, pastor of Heartsong Church in Tennessee, reached out in love to his neighbour.

He welcomed an Islamic community centre to his neighbourhood. The story of his church's hospitality was aired on CNN. Shortly afterward, he received a call from a group of Muslims in Kashmir who'd seen the segment. They shared with him that after watching it, one of the community's leaders said to those who were gathered: "God just spoke to us through this man." One man went straight to the local Christian church and proceeded to clean it, inside and out, because of his desire to be a good neighbour too. They told Pastor Stone that "we're going to keep taking care of this little church for the rest of our lives." (from the net — Soujourners)

A woman holds her dead son on her lap with love. A young woman suckles her new born son. It is the same woman, the same man — a lifetime in between. A lifetime of choices that makes a difference and bring us to where we are today.

The gift is there, held out for us to embrace — God with us.

8am

The Gift — Kevin Hart p.92 The Oxford book of Australian Religious verse.

One day the gift arrives — outside your door, left on the window sill, inside the mailbox, or in the hallway, far too large to lift. Your postman shrugs his shoulders, the police consult a statute, and the cat miaows. No name, no signature, no address.

Only 'to you, my dearest one, my all ...' One day it fits snugly in your pocket, then fills the backyard like afternoon in spring.

Monday morning, and it's there at work — already ahead of you, or left behind amongst the papers, files and photographs;

And were there lipstick smudges down the side or have they just appeared? What a headache! And worse, people have begun to talk:

'You lucky thing!' they say, or roll their eyes.

Nights find you combing the directory (a glass of straw-coloured wine upon the desk). Still hoping to chance on a forgotten name. Yet mornings see you happier than before. After all, the gift has set you up for life.

Impossible to tell, now, what was given and what was not: slivers of rain on the window. Those goldtooled Oeuvres of Diderot on the shelf. (?)

The strawberry dreaming in a champagne flute — were they part of the gift or something else?

Or is the gift still coming, on its way?

10am

Children: What is the best present you ever gave? The best gift you received. I want to show you the best gift you can ever give ... yourself.

That's what God gives us — God's self, God with us in the baby Jesus.