

SERMON CHRISTMAS 2012

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Luke 2: 1-20

May our hearts and minds be open to hear the call of the Christ child, born as one of us. Amen.

Last year I had the joy of singing in the Canberra Choral Society's performance of Handel's 'Messiah', a joy many of you also shared here last Friday night. What a blast! Over a few short hours, we sang about Jesus' birth, death and resurrection beautifully packaged by Handel in glorious baroque counterpoint. 'Lord of Lords, King of Kings', we belted out. 'Wonderful, Counsellor, Prince of Peace'. It was a fabulous, feel good moment.

And yet, does it hold any truth? What difference did Jesus make? If he truly was/is God born among us, was it really a successful experiment? Titles such as 'Prince of Peace' and 'light of the world' ring hollowly when we see the world still wracked by war, when mob violence reaches into our suburbs, school children are slaughtered by a gunman in Connecticut and family life is so often characterised by domestic violence. Nightly television coverage shows us that our grip on peace is fragile, the veneer of tolerance is thin and good people feel impotent when faced with violence fuelled by hatred. If Jesus came to bring peace and to usher in a new reign of love and harmony, it doesn't seem to have worked.

Of course, some would argue that all this is irrelevant – that Jesus' sole purpose was to provide our passport to salvation, a mission he fulfilled very effectively, if somewhat mysteriously, by dying. He was, in short, a man born to die. If we believe that he is God, then everything will be OK. In this way of seeing things, the focus really belongs on his death and resurrection. The events of the 33 years or so between birth and death were pretty irrelevant really and just show us that he really was the long expected chosen one of God.

But I want to argue a very different kind of line. For I believe that the birth of Jesus as a human child, as one of us, has a much richer significance than that and is indeed infinitely more challenging. The incarnation is not some kind of crazy rescue plan; it is a systematic and timeless revelation to humanity about what it is to be human and about our relationship with God. Jesus' life is not so much to show us who he is but rather to show us who we are, and who we are in relationship with God.

For we are nothing less than the children of God. All of us. Not just the people we happen to like or be related to. (Though in the stress of Christmas, it can be hard to see those we are related to as children of God!) If we are serious about the statement that Jesus is fully human, then surely his life is a demonstration of how we too could live. If we are serious about the statement

that Jesus is also fully divine, then surely his life is a demonstration of how we should live. Jesus is not a magician who has come to say abracadabra, wave a magic wand and change everything overnight. Rather, he showed us how we too can live lives that will transform the world. How else can God's purposes be fulfilled? He has no hands but ours, no eyes nor ears, no mouths but ours. He cannot speak or act except through our words and actions. He may well be the Prince of Peace, but peace will not overwhelm and enliven our world unless we make it happen, unless we live as he calls us to live.

This sounds straightforward and leads us inevitably to the question 'what would Jesus do?' This question begs simplistic answers and is often caricatured: What would Jesus drive? is one version doing the rounds. A stretch donkey perhaps. And one day, lost in perplexity about what to do in a particularly difficult situation, I asked my husband the 'what would Jesus do?' question. His answer was prompt and unequivocal. 'Call in sick' he said.

That said, the question holds a kernel of truth and deserves to be grappled with seriously. What would Jesus do? What did Jesus do? The answer is laid out before us in the New Testament. 2000 years ago Jesus was born, utterly dependent, as are all babies, on those around him for his food, his shelter, his very survival. Nurtured and supported by them, vulnerable to them. As an adult, he preached love – constantly, persistently, in word and action. Jesus embraced the loveless, the unlovely, those condemned as valueless; he ate with the despised and accepted gifts from people regarded as morally reprehensible. He told stories underlining the artificiality of our moral constructs and in so doing, challenged us to see the world through a truer lens, the lens of love. Jesus risked status, social acceptability, even life itself, to call us beyond our limited view of ourselves and of God.

And so, back to the original question – what difference does it make? If Jesus didn't come to wave a magic wand and fix everything up, if his life didn't actually change anything, why the fuss about Christmas?

Aaah, but it did – change things, I mean. For in Jesus God has shown God's very self to us: face to face. God with flesh on. Love in human clothing, with human features, vulnerable to all that we might do. It is counterintuitive, indeed it is a profoundly shocking thought, that God might become vulnerable to us. But that is what Jesus' birth tells us: love is risky, but it is the ultimate truth. We no longer have to guess what God is like. In Jesus, God's passionate, unconditional, yearning love for us is starkly before us.

And God is still vulnerable to us. This was not a once-off, 2000 or so years ago: it is a timeless dynamic. Will we encounter life with fear and hatred, self-centredness and greed in our hearts, or will we respond to the call to live compassionately, lovingly, vulnerably? Will we respond to the call to join God in transforming the world? It is a joint enterprise with Jesus – requiring courage, strength, commitment, hope, vulnerability and love; asking the very best of us. Jesus, fully human, fully divine, born as one of us, invites us to understand, to participate, to know God.

May we accept the invitation. Amen.

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Christmas 2012