



Christmas Service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving

West Epping Uniting Church
15th December 2016

I love the Christmas story as it is told particularly in the Gospel of Luke. The manger scene evokes the kind of joy and serenity that is quite uncommon these days while the scene on the neighbouring fields, as shepherds are awestruck by an incredible celestial entourage, warms the heart and leaves one quite breathless in a lovely, warm kind of way.

The story of the birth of Jesus captures the attention of even the hardest cynics. It comes to us every year to stir the imagination and to open our minds to the possibilities of important things like joy, peace and hope.

Some three years ago my wife and I visited the Palestinian West Bank and we drove through the fields around Bethlehem. Here we ended up in the Church of the Nativity that is built over the traditional birth place of our Lord. And as we visited Bethlehem we stopped, we looked and we pondered over all that had happened in this place.

Laurel and I had driven just a short distance that afternoon because, prior to our sojourn into Bethlehem, we had spent some hours checking out a strange kind of place called Herodium.

Now Herodium was built by then King of the Jews, Herod the Great. This enigmatic despot had his edifice constructed some years before the birth of Christ. It's a mind-boggling place as Herod built it in the form of an artificial mountain that literally towers over the countryside. On top of the massive mound Herod built a huge palace equipped with four six story turrets, a bath-house, elaborate court yards and a Roman-style theatre.

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It would have been an understatement to suggest Herodium was simply grand. It was amazing, indeed absolutely extravagant! And Herodium also effectively served as a fortress where the tyrant King could take refuge behind the cover of some 2,000 body guards.

The thing that stood out for me was this. Herodium is only 5 kilometres or an hour's walk south-east of Bethlehem. Moreover, it rises above the city and it dominates the landscape around it, including Bethlehem's sheep fields.

So, on that first Christmas Day when the stars shone brightly and those choirs of angels sang out with utter joy, Herod must have surely known something was going on. Or at least he must have seen or heard something!



But the Gospels are silent here. There is no mention of Herodium. Indeed, I didn't even know Herodium existed until I travelled to the Holy Land and saw it for myself. Yet, in Herod's day, indeed in Jesus' day, everyone would have known it was there. For, Herodium would have stood out like a proverbial "pimple on a pumpkin"!

Now, after the birth of our Lord and after the family's period of exile in Egypt, we know Mary, Joseph and Jesus settled in the north, in the region of Galilee. And again I discovered something quite interesting after visiting the region.

The Gospels give us a somewhat detailed account of where Jesus lived and where he travelled. As a child Jesus grew up in Nazareth. He then based himself in Capernaum, a Jewish town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee while also moving around the region to Caesarea Philippi in the north, to the Decapolis in the northeast and the region of Tyre and Sidon in the northwest.

But just 6 kilometres from Jesus' boyhood home in the village of Nazareth stood a huge Roman city by the name of Sepphoris. This was the influential provincial capital of Galilee and it served as a hub for commerce and culture. Heavily influenced by Greek traditions, Sepphoris prided itself on its level of sophistication and wealth.

But again, there is no mention of Sepphoris in the Gospels. Moreover, Jesus is never reported as going there. This means Jesus either didn't know Sepphoris existed or he avoided the place intentionally during the course of his ministry. Or, perhaps, any visit there by Jesus was just not worth mentioning.

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Laurel and I spent a morning walking along what remains of Sepphoris' marvellous boulevards. We took in the intricate mosaics and the beautifully crafted stonework. And we imagined how this rich, cosmopolitan city would have functioned some 2,000 years ago. Moreover, we did so as the village of Nazareth sat in clear sight just a fifteen minute drive or an hour or so walk away!

Why do these sophisticated, intricately built centres of power receive no mention in the Bible? Why aren't they significant to Jesus and his ministry? Why aren't they seemingly important to God?

I believe Herodium and Sepphoris fail to rate a mention in the ministry of Jesus because God has other priorities. God has a different vision. God chooses another direction. And I believe these priorities, that vision and those directions, involve not the pursuit of power or the accumulation of wealth. They do not involve making a statement about the aspirations, ambition or the yearnings of humankind.

Rather, God's priorities, God's vision, God's direction, indeed God's way of working is focussed on a concern for that which is very ordinary, that which is quite common and routine. In other words, God chooses to engage in the ordinariness of life. God elects to identify with the commonness and the routine-ness of what you and I experience.

I believe this can be explained as we witness Jesus' ministry. Early on in the in piece, Jesus walks into the village of Nain. Located in the hills south of Nazareth, Nain is an inauspicious place that today is a predominantly Arab village. Nearing the village Luke's Gospel tells us Jesus notices a funeral procession as a body is carried out of the town for burial. But the thing that really catches Jesus' eye is the grieving mother, a widow who has just lost everything as her deceased son was her only security.

We are told, that upon encountering this poor, nameless widow, Jesus has "compassion" for her. In other words, upon citing this woman, who we know virtually nothing about, Jesus is literally "gut-wrenched" by her plight. And because of this, Jesus responds by raising her dead son to life.

This account is not so much a miracle story about Jesus raising the dead as it is a story about Jesus' heart-wrenching compassion for those inconspicuous people who are doing it though. And here we see God's priorities clearly set in motion!



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Jesus' ministry continues. There are encounters with lepers, people who were literally despised and marginalised. There is a powerful interaction with a mentally ill man who lived on the other side of Sea of Galilee, a region that was normally out-of-bounds for Jews. And there is the story of a so-called unclean woman who touches Jesus cloak.

The stories go on. One story that never escapes my attention is the account of another nameless man who had been sick for 38 years. In Jerusalem at the pool of Bethesda, people would gather on its porticos to jump into the waters which were said to have healing powers. But, in the midst of huge thronging crowds and bustling activities this sick man never has a chance. He was ignored. He was overlooked and he was pushed aside. This happened because the man did not have the ability to fend for himself.

However, out of a crowd of perhaps thousands, Jesus eyeballs this man, approaches him and makes him well.

Friends, as we gather here tonight to remember those who we grieve. As we come here this evening because we feel down, are struggling or are challenged with many issues, worries or needs, remember this - God notices you. God touches you. God cares for you. The Gospel imperative is clear - you are never lost or forgotten in the crowd.



Indeed, God's priorities, God's vision and God's direction does not focus on aspiration, ambition, strength, prosperity or success. God's way of working does not affirm the powerful at the expense of the weak. God's approach does not applaud the successful at the expense of those feel they have failed, God's perspective does not favour the strong and the healthy at the expense of those who are sick or are dying. God's standpoint does not uphold the happy and contented at the cost of those who are grieving and sad.

Rather, the Good News of Jesus Christ is gifted to each and every one of us. By ignoring the centres of human power and by overlooking what human institutions regard as fundamental benchmarks, God simply says this - you matter, I matter, everyone matters. Nothing escapes the attention of God!

When St Paul writes *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39) the great apostle claims this:

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It doesn't matter what we do. It doesn't matter how our mortal bodies or our vulnerable minds fail us. It doesn't matter what human institutions demand of us. Indeed, it doesn't matter what others do to us, the ultimate benchmark, the final truth lies with God. And that truth is grounded in an unconditional love that is there for you and for me - always!

Moreover, the God we worship, the God who reaches out to us with that kind of love is the God who so beautifully says, in the words of Jesus, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, I cannot provide all the answers as to why we grieve. I cannot offer solutions as to why we are sick, as to why we are facing death or as to why we struggle to keep our heads above water.

But I do know this. God cares.

I stand here to reassure you that God notices. God yearns to reach out to you. God longs to touch and embrace you. For to God, you - and every person here in this place - matters.

Indeed, we matter so much that God gives his Son for us in self-sacrificial service that begins in a lowly manger in Bethlehem and culminates on a brutal cross in Jerusalem.

Friends, in the mystery, in the struggles, in the contradictions and in the awfulness of life, God is there for you - this Christmas and always.

Amen.



John Barr