

God is Great!

Christmas Day

2016

West Epping Uniting Church

John 1:1-14



Last Tuesday the New York Times web site left nothing to one's imagination as video footage and photos of the assassination of Andrey Karlov were posted. Karlov was the Russian ambassador to Turkey and he was cut down in a hail of bullets in Ankara by a plain looking man in a black suit.

As the gun was repeatedly fired the assailant cried out "Allah akbar" - "God is great".

I felt sick.

A well-known ABC commentator once said to me, "religion, you know, brings out the best and the worst in people." Indeed, while people have a legitimate right to protest over the horrific, indiscriminate killing that is taking place in Aleppo and across Syria in general, such blatant brutality in the name of God, that took place in Ankara, surely ranks as the most hideous form of behaviour.

And then there is Berlin. Last week a truck ploughed into a crowded Christmas market killing twelve people and injuring 48. This comes in the wake of another similar attack back in July when a truck mowed down onlookers in Nice who were watching fireworks on Bastille Day.

All this "in the name of God"?

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Now, I don't want to spoil your Christmas Day. But the world out there can be a very dangerous place. And in all of this, the name of God is being appropriated and used to justify the most horrendous acts.

This puts me in two minds because I, too, want to cry out "God is great". But I wish to do so for very different reasons - and out of a motive that is light years away from those of the terrorists.

For you see, God is great, not because God chooses to dominate, force, coerce and control. God is great, not because God chooses to wipe out the infidel, cleanse the impure or banish the heathen.

No way!

Rather, God is great because God overturns all this coercion and control. God is great because God flips the practice of force and domination on its head. God is great because God says a big NO to violence and terror. And God does this by coming to us in the form of a vulnerable baby born in a shabby outback stable in the non descript city of Bethlehem.

Friends, never underestimate what is going on here as we celebrate Christmas. Jesus is born in the most humble, fragile of circumstances. His mother is a peasant girl from Galilee. The first outsiders to see him are common folk, shepherds, from the fields around the city.

The place where Jesus is born is an animal shelter because, as we know, there was no room for him in the inn. And Jesus' first experience as a young child is to be taken on the arduous journey to Egypt where asylum is sought because the king of the day wants to kill him.

Friends, here we see the kind of God in action whose greatness doesn't conform to the motives, the ambitions or the intentions of those who carry out acts of terror across the world. No, the God we worship this morning has a very different agenda and that agenda is one of mercy, compassion and peace!

Moreover, the God we worship today speaks to us not from high. The God we acknowledge this morning doesn't involve the "cringe factor". We don't have to cower or grovel before this God. Indeed, unlike the gods of ancient times who lauded it over their community and treated their followers, often with scorn and disdain, the God who appears on this Christmas Day comes to us as a vulnerable, helpless child. The God who is present to us in this place does so in human form, as a person just like you and me!

And that, my friends, was and is, an utter scandal for many people. For you see, in many religious traditions the gods have to be coaxed and appeased. Meanwhile, in other religious traditions the gods are remote, all-powerful, disinterested and totally "other".

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But on this Christmas morning we affirm that God is born among us. As we gather here today we proclaim that God is interested in us, that God takes the initiative and God comes to us in the most remarkable of ways. The Gospel of John puts it this way: “the Word became flesh and lived among us”.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us”.

Friends, this means God defies the expectations of those who can only conceive of a deity who is totally “other”, a god who is completely disengaged and who can only be approached with fear and trembling.

This means God flouts the presuppositions of those who worship a God of vengeance and who only associate God with retribution and revenge. Indeed, God contravenes those who use the name of God as a way of imposing their will on others and whose methods involve force and intimidation.

For here, in the birth of Jesus, God shatters the cravings and the appetites of those who hate as God’s presence in made real among us in the form of a poor, vulnerable child born into the family of peasant woman and a simple carpenter.

Jan Hynes, an artist from North Queensland helps us here. In her painting, “Bonding time: the Nativity in Townsville”, Jan captures the essence of what is going on. Asking what might the nativity look like if it were to take place in Australia today, Jan comes up with a scene set in a roadhouse somewhere along one of Australia’s remote highways.

Here the sojourning Mary gives birth in the Parenting Room. The Christ child is wrapped, not in swaddling clothes, but in paper hand towels from a dispenser on the wall. Garage attendants and mechanics are the first witnesses as Mary wears a simple dress and Joseph dons a blue singlet. And take note, Joseph is holding the child. This is surely a statement about modern practices where the father is present at the birth and there is a keen interest in both parents being involved in the process of bonding.



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I think this says it all. For you see, God's greatness is revealed to us on this most wonderful day in terms of the divine becoming one with us. And God does this by entering into and identifying with our experiences of life, whether they be joy, happiness and success or whether they be struggle, disappointment and failure.

For on this day we proclaim: "the Word became flesh and lived among us".

Friends, as you celebrate Christmas, know this. God is great, not because God lauds it over us. God is great, not because God wants us to grovel and cringe before God. God is great, not because God manipulates, coerces and controls. God is great, not because God seeks total domination over us. Indeed, God is great, not because God wills us to claim total domination over others.

Rather, God is great because God becomes one OF us. God is great because God becomes one WITH us. God is great because God climbs down from the heights to offer us life here and now in the frailty, the complexity and the uncertainty of this world.

Today we rejoice in the birth of Jesus because God comes to each and every one of us in the most deep and personal way. God does so to affirm God's most generous unconditional love that is offered to us in the form of mercy, compassion and peace with the words: I am with you, you matter, you are valued for who you are, you are loved no matter what!

And this, my friends, IS a God who is truly GREAT!

Today may you be aware of the God who comes with humility and in peace to be one with you in all that do. Indeed, every day may you be conscious of the God of grace who is truly there in all that you attempt, in all that you achieve and in all that you struggle and yearn for.

For, "to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ, the Lord."

Amen.



John Barr