

Christmas Day
Friday 25 December 2020
St George's Cathedral

Luke 2:1-20

It's impossible to imagine that there could be a Christmas service anywhere in the world on this Christmas morning where the harsh, and in many places brutal, ravages and impact of the COVID pandemic are not also present.

Here in Perth where the isolation we often lament or laugh over has served us well during the year. Keeping to the Emergency Act Requirements we are thankful that we're free enough to celebrate Christmas in our churches. There are some inconveniences, and there are many, many freedoms that we do not take for granted.

This morning, alongside this freedom, many of us are closely watching for news from other parts of the world and on the other side of the country where family and friends will keep this Christmas in a very different way from usual.

For some of us bringing loved ones into this sacred time in this community of neighbours we don't know, and praying with each other heightens our awareness of those who are absent. For some of us Christmas this year will hold a sadness, a grief or an anxiety that could not be anticipated when 2020 dawned. And now, at Christmas 2020 we realise that something as simple as being together with family, friends and neighbours in church at Christmas can't be taken for granted.

People have joined with us online and are in this service from across the country, and the world. We can't see you, but we know you're here.

It's against this background, and the COVID shadow that has fallen on the world, that we once again tell, sing and pray the story of Joseph and Mary, in many ways two unremarkable people, who through their trust and faithfulness in God's promised purpose, are central to the story of God's love born for the world in Jesus. The story of God's divine purpose of love for all people, for God's grace and reconciling love real and active, stooping as it were from beyond humanity into its very heart. This is the story of God's purpose and plan, his purpose for humankind, his plan for the life of the world. His heart laid bare, unprotected, vulnerable, wrapped in human flesh we see God's plan of love.

At Christmas the incarnation – God taking human flesh and tenderly inviting us to know our need of God, to know God's loving purpose for the world, is the heart of our celebration, in every year, whatever the circumstances of the year just passed.

This morning we've heard the story as it's told in the gospel of Luke. We know it well.

Against the background of the people who make history, people like powerful Emperors and governing authorities making decrees, calling for a census, two ordinary people, Mary and Joseph journeyed as did thousands, to obey the census requirement. They travelled from the village of Nazareth in the north of the country, into Bethlehem in the South. Their arrival coincided with the arrival of their baby, born in the only place in which there was a space available for this little family to stay. And so, Luke tells us the story of the arrival on earth of the King of heaven, when Jesus was born in a stable, among the animals sheltered there for the night, and laid in a manger which was able to make do for the new born babe.

The story of Jesus' birth is being told again this year in places where the powerful make and shape history; it's being told in churches like this one, whether or not a congregation is able to be physically present; in this part of the world it was told a little earlier this month in schools and kindergartens before students went on holiday; this week it will have been told again in many aged care residences, where some will no longer recall it as part of their own story, but a few may still have the memory of carols and the music of Christmas.

This year some people will hear the story of Jesus birth, and of angels and shepherds rejoicing, with a new baby of their own in their arms. They will hear it with new hope. Perhaps we all need to know that we are being held in God's arms this year, as tenderly as we think every new-born should be held.

A mutual holding. God of us – we of each other and of God's world. For good. For grace. God's love received and lived out.

One prayer says it like this: Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth; accept our heartfelt praise as we worship you, our Saviour and eternal God.

Last week I spoke to a friend in England who talked of the sadness of not being able to be physically alongside others singing carols this year. I remembered a card I used to have of a blue wren in a tree, the caption read, 'God loves us when we sing, and when we don't sing'.

This Christmas as we are singing those songs which tell the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem long, long ago, we sing alongside and in witness with people like my friend, all of us signs of the presence of faith and hope that God's love is present with people everywhere, especially with those who, for whatever reason, can't gather in worship with their community this year to sing the story of love born for the world at Christmas.

St Paul, writing to the early church in Rome, penned these words as an encouragement and blessing to them. They speak to us this Christmas: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit* (Romans 15:13).

Amen.