

A Children's Festival for Grown-Ups?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Friday 24 December 2021

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Christmas Eve C

Isaiah: 52: 7-10; John 1: 1-14; Contemporary Reading '*How the Light Comes*' by Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A book of Blessings for the Seasons, 2015*

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

"And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us"

Most children of five or six can tell you at this season with reasonable confidence whose birth they are celebrating. "*Baby Jesus*", they will chorus if asked.

It has to be said that it is with even greater confidence that they will tell you who it is that will visit their homes tonight - and should, even now, be winging their way across rooftops, sleigh-bells ringing, bearing the presents for which they have learnt to long. In the minds of most of them Santa Claus and Baby Jesus belong together.

And it cannot be thought surprising if, over time, the figure who brings the presents becomes more appealing than this somewhat elusive baby, who does not seem to bring anything in particular.

Now I'd like to invite you, in these last few hours of advent while we still await the birth of Christ, to reflect on the ways in which the children are right - baby Jesus and Santa Claus do belong together; and upon the ways in which they are also wrong, or at any rate limited.

For what is it that we celebrate tonight? What brings you and me here to church tonight, even in the midst of a pandemic, even while there are still jobs to do at home, even though our hearts may be heavy with all that this past difficult year has brought?

What is the light that draws us? Is it not the gift of life in the celebration of the birth of a human baby?

"in the word was life and that life was humanity's light" as the gospel reading said. We all rejoice in new life, in the birth of children with all their potential and promise. In that sense to call Christmas the *children's festival* is quite correct - though not enough.

For of course the baby Jesus, like all babies is very appealing (as an idea at any rate, if we forget the squalling half the night and dirty nappies bit). And if we surround him with cute animals (also unusually tidy, sweet-smelling, and well-behaved animals), why then we have a Hollywood winner - thank you Francis of Assisi! Though our two-year-old granddaughter rightly points out that surely the baby would have been scared of that big cow!

Jesus' sweet vulnerability, coupled with the pictured tender care of Mary and Joseph and the animals (regardless of the crowd of very odd and uninvited visitors) taps into our own inner child that still longs to be loved and cared for. The Christmas story provides us with comfort at a level of deep need. And that's fine.

It is also fine that Christmas celebrates our materiality – that we who are flesh and blood need material things – the kinds of things that Santa brings – to sustain us. Christmas has always been a commercial festival – adopting as it did the rituals of earlier pagan festivals. We may rightly say that it has all gone too far. But we cannot take commerce out of Christmas. We cannot remove its glitz and tinsel as the puritans attempted, because they are essential to it. Christmas celebrates the material – we are gathered here tonight precisely because in Christ made flesh, God becomes present to us in our materiality, our fleshliness – in blood and bone, and bread and wine.

And so the children are right - baby Jesus and Santa Claus belong together; god present to us in and through the gifts and good things of this world. For we have no other world and no other way in which to experience God, except through our own bodies – the food we eat, the gifts we share – God, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, the child of Mary and Joseph.

So, it is the *children's festival* because it is the child who reminds us of all this. But Christmas is not for children, and we must not stop there. If we do, our spiritual growth becomes stunted. For it is not enough to stay with the comfort of the baby enclosed in its swaddling bands lying in the manger. For just like the puppy or kitten that comes into the family at Christmas, baby Jesus grows up – and we must not be tempted to abandon him. Jesus the Christ is for life, not just for Christmas.

This Christ does bring gifts – but they cannot be wrapped up and put on a sleigh; nor, on the whole, are they gifts for children. The gifts of Christ are for those of an age and stage to need them, and there are always new ones. And mostly they come in the form of a challenge.

The first gift and challenge is the birth itself. For the Greek world in particular, into whose thought system Jesus of Nazareth was born, did not accept that God could mix in any way with the material world. The material and the spiritual were distinct realms, which could never, and should never be brought together.

The 'good news' – the challenging, and in that world, unimaginable news – was that God became human! And so that immense and unbridgeable divide was bridged for ever – this is the perception of the great Johannine prologue we just heard, that we too are "*empowered to become children of God.*"

That truth was, and continues to be, a challenge to those religious people who like to keep things pure and separate. God in the baby Jesus was messy, and smelly and hungry and cried – like every human child. And the material reality of that birth and that baby is God's first gift to us.

But that baby grew up to continue to challenge the religious and secular authorities of the day, and to suffer and die because they dared to stand up for the poor and the defenceless.

And this is the Christ-child's second gift to us; not a pretty gift, and also a challenging gift – the gift of an example and a way to be followed; a way of love and service on behalf of all those who cannot speak for themselves. Jesus spent his life helping others.

Jesus the Christ challenges us to do the same. And in so doing we find a continuity with those who have travelled before us along that way – a continuity greater than the continuity of the Christmas traditions surrounding the baby. For if at Christmas time we tend to be aware – and I think this is unavoidable – of past Christmases and their similarities and differences, then to walk the way of Christ, in love and service, is to find ourselves sometimes unexpectedly surrounded by the great company of those who, down the centuries, have walked this way before us – a challenging continuity indeed.

And so beyond the manger (but in order that the manger may make sense, and the baby Jesus not be abandoned with Santa Claus) we must step out along the paths of faith. And find there as we walk, perhaps the greatest gift of Christ - the gift for which so many long and seek – the ability to find meaning and purpose in our lives.

This too is a challenge. For we all know that however much we desire Christmas to be happy, and strive to make it so for ourselves and others – yet sadness and difficulty and sickness and all the hard things we have seen even this week in Devonport and across the world as COVID bites deep again – these things are never far away. And we must hold them constantly and with trust to the light, even when our own light seems dim.

Baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes, does not help us much with these things. But the crucified Christ stripped and defenceless understands these things, shares and carries our pain and helps us to make sense and purpose through it all.

So this Christmas, rejoice in the children's festival, in the gift of the baby Jesus – rejoice in all that is material and fun and full of tinsel and laughter. But rejoice too, that whatever the circumstances of your life this Christmas, sad or happy, Christ shares them and can help you to shape them for good.

And do not leave your Christ as a baby in the manger.

Allow Christ to grow up in you, to challenge you and inspire you and help you to find and spread the light in the darkest places of our lives and world.

Amen