

On not straightening out Christmas

Pitt Street Uniting Church and Metropolitan Community Church Sydney

Sunday 24 December 2023, 8 pm

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-18

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

In essence, Christmas is quite a queer thing - don't you think? I don't really mean its added oddities, like the 19th century, mainly English, extras, like the carols we sing, and the 20th century, mainly American, extras, like the exaltation of Santa. Those are aspects of Christmas down under which are part of our eclectic multiculturalism, even if they partly reflect our settler colonial culture and tend to work better in the northern hemisphere. For we have more than a little work still to do in listening to the Spirit in these lands now called Australia, including turning many of Christmas traditional symbols upside down and inside out.

But that is less of a challenge when we truly celebrate the queerness of Christmas, especially in its original, biblically recorded, forms. For the stories of Christ's birth - God made flesh - are, like queerness, full of extraordinary features, and very difficult to pin down. Indeed, the very idea that God is made flesh was, and is, a horror to many people. That means that matter matters, and, not least, our bodies matter - and every little bit of them - and caring for one another and our planet matters, because 'matter matters' and everything shares in this divine matter.

Meanwhile, the idea that God is born in, and with, marginal and outcast bodies still seems so absurd and objectionable to many. For the biblical stories and symbols present God's queer love: the ultimately irresistible power of Love which overturns all the neat boxes and boundaries of our oppressive world, and its typical ways of thinking. So, rather than trying to straighten out Christmas, as many people try to do every year, I believe that we are far better simply to enjoy its very queer ride: which involves keep adding to the oddities of this time of year, with fresh joy and creativity; and letting its divine queerness shine in us...

Of course, many people have gone to much trouble over the years to try to make Christmas straight. These include three particular types of people down the centuries, each of whom can distract us from fully receiving the divine joy and encouragement of this time.

The first type of people who have tried to straighten out Christmas are religious fundamentalists. For how tough is Christmas for fundamentalists! They have always been around in various forms: objecting in earlier centuries to making Christmas connections with the wider culture; such as to 'pagan' elements like trees, dancing and revelry; and, of course, to modern elements like Santa and sales.

The biggest problem for them, however, is the Bible itself. For, let's be honest, the Bible is full of such confusion about the story of Jesus' birth, with glorious unpredictability about how and what things happened. Two of the four Gospels – John, and the oldest, Mark - do not even mention Jesus' birth at all, and the other two – Matthew and Luke - have two different accounts. These we have typically merged into one, with various adornments. So it may be hard enough to agree on where the birth exactly took place, and who was there – who exactly were the star-struck visitors, the '*magi*' for example, and how many of them were there?

Yet that is not really the biggest Christmas difficulty for fundamentalists. Maybe they can iron out those details. How on earth, though, can anyone make straight the core doctrinal Christmas messages? First off - forget supposed sexual and gender constraints - God becoming Flesh busts the biggest binary of all: that between God and human beings. Secondly – forget hetero-cis-normative marriage – what is the Virgin Birth all about? Clearly, whatever the transphobes say, all kinds of biological bodies are possible with God!

The second group of people who have tried to straighten out Christmas are over-rationalists & secularists. Like the fundamentalists, they also like to keep things in boxes and under control. They too believe that only their kinds of truths and people are really possible. Surely, they insist, it is only rational thought and accepting modernity's limitations that matter? They resist the deeper truth of human experience: that, as Shakespeare's Hamlet put it: '*There are more things in Heaven and Earth Horatio. / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*'

Many of them also tend strongly to resent how Christmas makes so very, very, central the poor, the homeless, refugees and other outcasts. Indeed, if you are keen to maximise the secularist opportunities of Christmas, then cut out all that troublesome God stuff and concentrate on commerce, the beach, and the Big Bash - least of all, tell stories about impossible things being made possible.

The third group of people who have tried to straighten out Christmas follow somewhat in the wake of the other two groups. These are some liberal and progressive Christians, who, on the one hand, like fundamentalists, can get sucked into fruitless discussion with others about details of the Christmas birth narratives, and how exactly God becomes flesh and what we mean by the Virgin Birth.

On the other hand, influenced by over-rationalists and secularists, they can also become offended by some of the Christmas contradictions and oddities, and start stripping out anything which smacks of myth and magic. After all, they may argue, if we are not careful, all that transcendent and angelic stuff may distract us from doing good works. Well, yes, potentially, that can be so. Yet works and wonder are not to be separated in God. It is precisely because of that very queer thing called God's grace that we can really do any good at all. True love, divine Love, involves extraordinary, indescribable, wonder, and it is that kind of Love that transforms us, our own lives and the wider world – however odd, and utterly queer, that may sound.

For Christmas, thank God, just can't be straightened out. The birth of Jesus, like the conception, is queer, subversive and untoward. Indeed, arguably, as one of our great Australian icons, Dame Edna Everage, used to sing, Christmas is *The Spookiest Time of All*. As she put it: '*just lie there in the dark, you'll soon feel Matthew, Mark...and Lukie, it's 'spooky*'! ¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIFjaUM8ZxM>

Angels for a start are very queer. I mean what kind of a space is it that has them hovering above and in their very midst?! I am also hardly an expert on gay bear culture, but it is hard to believe that not one of those rugged masculine shepherds wasn't conceivably gay. The Magi are most certainly queer. I mean: who carries around with them so much bling and perfume (apart from the Kardashians and the housewives of wherever)?!

Above all, God is queer and full of the kind of Love which passes all our understanding: not just in the queerness of the virgin birth and the company he/she/the(y) keeps, but also in avoiding definition and appearing however and wherever they are not supposed to be: like in human form, in an other than white form, in a woman's womb, in a despised group and race, in an occupied land & colony; and at an in opportune time & place.

Such a God, such a Love, is so hard to market properly, without upsetting someone - whether you are a fundamentalist, a commercial secularist, or an over-anxious progressive - but such a God, such a Love, is for us all.

So, this Christmas, if you think you're queer, or feel different or an outcast in any kind of way, or just want to open yourself up to profound joy and wonder, well, you've probably got Christ stirring in you.

So start kicking and screaming like the baby Jesus. Do what the Magi did - put on the bling, and splash the perfume around.

Let your inner gay shepherd out, and give someone a gorgeous bear hug (metaphorically at least).

Try living like a true Christmas Angel - which so a very queer being of course, just like Jesus - knowing and embodying our very queer God, at this very queer, and spookiest, time of year.

Alleluia! Amen.