

# The Risk of Love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Monday 25 December 2023

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Christmas Day

**Contemporary Reading: *The Risk of Birth* by Madeleine L'Engle; Luke 2: 8-20**

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

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*'This is no time for a child to be born'!*

It would be very easy to echo those words; to feel that this is the 'wrong' time to rejoice in the birth of any child; the wrong time to rejoice at all. The world is burning and flooding; wars are raging and children are dying; famine is rampant and the political landscape as many of us have understood it for decades seems to be crumbling. The aftermath of the pandemic – and the threat of future pandemics – has left many people feeling tetchy, unsettled, grumpy and reluctant to trust. The message of the angel '*do not be afraid*' seems to have a hollow ring – yet never has it been more important.

*'This is no time for a child to be born'* – yet it is the only time to be born and '*Love still takes the risk of birth*' in spite of all our imperfection.

We also have a dangerous and inbuilt longing for things to be perfect and a sense of frustration when we and others fall short. We have had some of our very young grandchildren staying for a fortnight. Their longings are simple – a perfectly ripe banana that does not break! A cherry tomato with just the right degree of sweetness. A trip to the pool that is neither too hot nor too cold. The joy when these things are so - even for an instant – and the terrible devastation when they are not! First World problems? – of course. Toddler tantrums? – naturally. But it is when the adults of the world throw toddler tantrums that the real troubles begin. And it is often our misplaced, infant desire for the 'perfect time' that can wreak havoc at a festival such as Christmas.

So perhaps it is helpful to remember that the first Christmas was not perfect in any way. A child was born in an occupied middle eastern country. Their parents found themselves homeless with no safe place for the baby to be born and soon afterwards were forced from their home country into exile as refugees from the tyrant of the day, Herod. Their first visitors were outcast shepherds - the poorest of the poor – of course, because there is likely to be more openness to love there than in the corridors of power.

The fact that this story is in itself far from 'perfect' and largely a theological concoction, does not matter because it is the theological point that matters. This was not a 'perfect' birth. It was 'no time for a child to be born' – yet Love took the risk of entering fully into our fragile human existence and entrusting their whole divine self to the human experience, both joyous and painful, in order truly to be '*Emmanuel – God with us*'.

In Jesus we see the infinity of God in a scrap of humanity, a child born in terrible circumstances – so that when we see a child born in terrible circumstances, or indeed any circumstances, we have a chance of seeing God. God risked everything on such risky love – and so must we.

What do we risk when we love? We risk being hurt. We risk disappointment. We risk that in opening ourselves to joy we may open ourselves also to pain. We risk losing some part of ourselves and the things we thought mattered – but don't really matter at all.

In *The Four Loves* CS Lewis writes:

*“There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.*

*The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.”*

So though this is ‘no time for a child to be born’ – ‘no time for the risks of love’ yet love we must. Letting go of our need to control, we must set out again and again on the pathways of love and see who we meet there.

Our smallest grandchild who has just learnt to walk might help us. Every day while our daughter got ready for the day he asked to be taken for a walk. On legs that grew ever stronger he took us to the corner of our street – and then up the street – a little further every day.

On the corner of our street someone has planted a small community garden. Clusters of shells, small toys, water and a watering can, tomato plants, parsley, chives, and mint – so much joy and enchantment in an old bath tub. So much love offered by a hardly known neighbour, towards people they may never meet. To say nothing of passing cars, trucks, buses, dogs – and best of all the rubbish truck with a driver that learnt after several attempts to slow down and wave back. Such a precious corner.

Gradually more delights opened up – the spot where one day a possum was seen and might visit again; the house with the dog made from Lego bricks; the house with the goldfish; and wonder of wonders on the last day, the house with a real live rabbit in the garden.

As we walked our love grew – our love for each other; our love for this beautiful earth that yields tomatoes in due season; our love for our community where someone would take such trouble to bring joy to others – taking the risk that their work could be undone by carelessness or greed. And we learnt that a little love makes a difference – and God's love makes an infinity of difference – in every corner.

‘This is no time’ – but it is the only time; and Love again offers to be born in and through us and the little actions that we can take, that might seem like nothing and yet are everything.

This week I saw a poem with which I shall conclude – it is a poem that reminds us that Love is incarnate in us and that if there is to be any better time, then we have to take the risks of love all over again, and toddle to the corner together, to change the world. This is the poem and I dedicate it to all the feisty grandmothers here today.

*Summons* by Aurora Levins Morales

Last night I dreamed  
ten thousand grandmothers  
from the twelve hundred corners of the earth  
walked out into the gap  
one breath deep  
between the bullet and the flesh  
between the bomb and the family.

They told me we cannot wait for governments.  
There are no peacekeepers boarding planes.  
There are no leaders who dare to say  
Every life is precious, so it will have to be us.

They said we will cup our hands around each heart.  
We will sing the earth's song, the song of water,  
A song so beautiful that vengeance will turn to weeping,  
The mourners will embrace, and grief replace  
Every impulse towards harm.

Ten thousand is not enough, they said,  
So, we have sent this dream, like a flock of doves  
Into the sleep of the world.

Wake up. Put on your shoes.  
You who are reading this, I am bringing bandages  
And a bag of scented guavas from my trees. I think  
I remember the tune. Meet me at the corner.  
Let's go.