

Disruptive, Delightful and Divine – the bells and babies of Christmas

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Wednesday 25 December 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Easter Day C

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-14

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

Loving God in the written word and through the spoken word, may we behold the living Word, Jesus the Christ. Amen

I believe some of you have some bells – bells to recognise and welcome the Christ child on this Christmas morning. If you've got some bells, can you give them a shake now, so we know you're there? Thank you. Now you bell-bearers have an important job today – to keep us all awake to the possibility of Christ among us today. So, every time in the next few minutes that I say the word 'bell' or 'bells' or 'baby' I want you to shake your bells. Let's give that a test run – one of the most easily recognised symbols of Christmas is **bells**. Well done.

Now some of the rest of you listening, may be thinking that all this ringing of **bells** is going to be rather disruptive of your peaceful contemplation. And you'd be right. **Bells** are disruptive in general. They have been used throughout human history to alert us that something is happening – for good or ill.

Bells have been rung to mark everything from birth to death - coronations, weddings, wars and emergencies, alarms and excursions of every kind; to say nothing of the ringing of sanctuary **bells** in some Christian traditions at the moment of consecration of the eucharist. **Bells** keep us alert to possibilities. No one seeking a quiet life buys even a door **bell**, leave alone an alarm clock.

But my goodness **bells** are helpful when we need to be alert to the most important things. **Bells** point us to disruption – but also to delight and to the presence of the divine. Not unlike **babies**, so as we think about **baby** Jesus today it is helpful to have some **bells**. For **bells** alert us to all that is disruptive, delightful and divine about the Christ child. Disruptive, delightful, divine – let's think a little about each of these – and let these **bells** ringing out awaken us from the stupor of too much, towards the wonder of this holy moment here and now.

No matter the circumstances, there are few things in peacetime life more disruptive than the arrival of a **baby**.

Those of us with children and grandchildren have no doubt quietly smiled to ourselves when listening to the pre-birth plans of those expecting their first **baby** – the attempts with preparation and pre-reading to control what will be uncontrollable.

Yet it is very natural to humans to try and control things. Indeed, **bells** have been used precisely to control – to measure time and determine how our hours are spent. These days many schools seem to play music to mark the end of lessons in a less jarring way than a **bell**, but the effect is much the same. One way of being is brought to an abrupt end and we are obliged to encounter something new.

It was much the same in the time of Jesus. Roman imperial rule was all about ordering the potentially uncontrollable. Our text tells us today that *'All went to be registered'* – this is about human attempts at ordering; at resisting unexpected disruption precisely by creating disruptions of our own – in this case movements of people that enable them to be counted and catalogued. And no doubt in some places when it was done someone would have signalled its completion by ringing a **bell**.

Now we don't know if this census actually occurred in the way described – probably not; most likely this is a literary device by the author of the Gospel to get the **baby** Jesus born in the theologically correct place, in Bethlehem the seat of David and literally the *'place of bread'*. What we do know is that the place is important to the writer – or rather the lack of a proper place. There *'was no place for them'* – the reverse of a *'place for everything and everything in its place'* – the Christ child, the **baby** Jesus, belongs to all places and none; this **baby** disrupts the order of things.

Previously it was believed that God could only be encountered in particular places and through particular people – in the temple; through the high priest. But the Christmas story disrupts all that – here is God instead in a feeding trough being fed by a woman whose very giving birth made her ritually unclean – as the Levitical instructions dictate *'she shall not touch any holy thing'* – yet she touches, caresses, cleans, feeds the holy **baby**. There is a total disruption of place and the understood order of things – a disruption that makes a place for each and every one of us. And that's good news.

So let the **bells** clang and alert us that something great is going on. Or rather – let's step up from the mundanity of **bells** to the whole host of heaven, angels in all their glory proclaiming more loudly than any **bell** that this **baby** is special. Let's find some disruptive non-binary characters – angels who do not fit – neither human nor divine; let's pick the disreputable unclean shepherds to herald the divine and in the midst of all this disruption let us find delight.

Now delight's an unpredictable thing. I wonder what would bring you unexpected delight today? For delight breaks through our old, tired habits and our attempts to control things. Delight takes us past even our legitimate longings for peace, for flourishing, for the end of violence and fear. Delight and its twin sister joy is the spontaneous response of our hearts to that which is beyond our planning or control. It is the smile that floods our being when we see a newborn **baby** or acknowledge the chiming of joyful **bells** that point us beyond ourselves and our own concerns to a larger reality.

The poet Mary Oliver has it spot on when she writes, *'every day I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight, that leaves me like a needle in the haystack of light. It was what I was born for – to look, to listen, to lose myself inside this soft world – to instruct myself over and over in joy, and acclamation.'*

'Acclamation' – like the ringing of **bells** on this Christmas morning - delight invites expression. And so today – no matter what else is going on across our troubled lives and world – we express our delight in the **baby** Jesus, in the ringing of **bells** and the singing of songs.

For in the depths of our hearts we know that our delight in God is a response to God's delight in us – a delight not determined by our actions but by our very being in the image of our creator. We do not earn God's delight. Rather it is grace and gift woven through every strand of creation to make it holy, Word made flesh. And so, we ring our **bells** to acknowledge the divine among us, God with us.

Throughout history **bells** have been used to signal the holy, the divine, the very, very different. **Bells** alert us to the places and moments where encounter with the divine becomes possible – the thin moments where for an instant we recognise and acclaim the holy.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks puts it *'there must be some window – some point of transparency – in the screen between the infinite and the finite. That is what holiness is. Holiness is the space we make for God.'* (*Exodus: The Book of Redemption*)

Christmas is such a window on the divine if we allow it to be. Like the **bells** that herald it, Christmas wake us up and invites us to attend to the **baby** Jesus. For when we see **baby** Jesus - really see Them, with the eyes of our heart, not just physically - everything can change for us and our world. For **baby** Jesus, as symbol and sacrament, tells us some very important things about who we are and who God is.

First of all, **baby** Jesus tells us that there is nothing in the universe more important than a single helpless human child. Christ was the Word of God - able to create universes in an instant - but as **baby** Jesus They became an infant – literally one who cannot speak.

The Word of God – without a word -unable to speak a single syllable. And by doing that **baby** Jesus shows us not only that every human infant is infinitely precious and powerful in God's eyes; but that God is one with helplessness, powerlessness, vulnerability. This God is not in control – and so embraces all of us, who know that so much is just beyond us to control or change in our own lives, let alone in our world.

Secondly **baby** Jesus shows us how much God loves us. When we look at a **baby** our hearts fill with love. When God looks at us, God's heart fills with love, and it is the outpouring of that love that does have the power to change the world if we only receive it. For it is love that casts out fear and hatred.

Lastly **baby** Jesus shows us the way to peace. When in imagination our eyes meet those of the **baby** in the manger our hearts are filled with a peace beyond our understanding. It is peace that melts away violence and anger. It is a peace that ripples beyond this moment into the wider world with all its rage and confusion. It's a peace that takes form and flesh in the lives that touch our own in this very moment.

So, this Christmas morning may the **bells** ring in joy and harmony. May we delight in the gift of the **baby** Jesus, sign and sacrament of God's delight in us and all creation. And may the divine one meet us in the places of our deepest need and bring us healing and hope. Today and forever may the **bells** ring. Amen