

Christmas Night 2017 – St Paul’s Manuka

Well it’s been quite a year: terrorism and its danger for us all; Trump – no more need be said; the alt right and the rabid nationalists; constitutional crises in our own federal parliament; refugees fleeing terror; degradation of the environment; gender and equity issues; and of course our own joys and celebrations, issues and problems. There is a great deal for us all to consider.

I heard the story the other day of a man who went into an antique shop and was attracted to a large brass rat. He asked the owner how much to which the owner replied \$2 or if you want the instructions \$100. No, I don’t want the instruction he said and so he paid the \$2 and went off with what he thought was a handsome brass rat and a bargain at that. It did not take long before he noticed that live rats were following him. After 30 minutes he had hundreds following and then thousands. He ran towards the harbour, with the rats in hot pursuit, and tossed the brass rat into the water. All the rats followed, drowning in the harbour and he felt free. He went back to the antique shop and the owner said: ‘Ah you want the instructions?’. ‘No’ said the man, ‘I was wondering if you had a brass politician?’

I guess with all the issues surrounding us we look for strong leadership and we find that very hard to see sometimes. We come to see that there are very human characteristics surrounding us and that often these parade as leadership and we are left feeling hollow and wanting to throw the whole lot in the harbour. This leaves us in a vacuum and so we search for leadership somewhere else – we want something deeper and more lasting. Some search for possessions and money, others for power and influence or privilege and status. These too can prove hollow and goals that destroy us and make us very unlovable.

And then we come to Christmas. And what do we find at Christmas? In the scriptures and the story of Christmas we find a helpless baby and a couple of peasant parents, surrounded first by humble shepherds and then by Wise Men. We hear of angels singing and the great portent of a star in the sky. Do we find worldly wealth and possession here? No we don’t. Do we find great worldly power and influence in a dirty stable in a forgotten part of the Roman Empire some two thousand years ago? No we don’t. Instead we find a helpless baby and a young woman who found herself pregnant and a man trying to do the right thing and stick by her. Not very auspicious. Not very powerful. Not very wealthy. No great prestige here. And yet it has got us all here tonight. We come. We sing carols. We hear beautiful music. We gather in large numbers. We hear the story of the baby and know that God has come to us. Here is the story of a leader who comes in humility with nothing more than a wish to serve

the whole human race and a willingness to give himself for others. Here is real sacrificial leadership. One who lives, dies and rises again so that we might live.

There is something unique here. There is something beyond the ordinary here. We hear the prophet Isaiah tell us that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light and that this light is shining for us. Isaiah tells us of joy and exultation and the lifting of a burden because a child has been born for us, a son given to us who comes with great power and heritage and how there will be a new era of peace and justice with righteousness. Our reading from Titus tells us about the grace of God appearing bringing salvation to all. The salvation on offer here is not just for some, not just for a certain sort of people or those who believe certain things – it is for all of us.

So this story we read in Luke's Gospel of the child being born is pretty major stuff. It is about God making an appearance in our world. How does God choose to do that? Does God come with a great army or with worldly power? No, God comes as an ordinary human in a human family – people like us – in a little helpless baby. This is God's choice for coming among us. Remarkable.

I think this is what appeals to me most about the Christmas story. Jesus is born in the ordinariness of human life. Jesus is right here with us. Jesus is God with us, knowing what we know, feeling what we feel and experiencing the ups and downs of human and family life. God is not disconnected but connected to us in our situation. God is not dead but alive and this day proclaims it. God lives with us and we know the power of that connection through the messy and the ordinary. Real and lasting peace, justice and goodwill in our world and in ourselves depends on knowing that power of Christ's love born and lived in you and me today in the way we behave towards others, accepting others and ourselves. Now this is the sort of leadership I have been happy to follow my whole life.

Jesus shows us that God's love is for all people – not just for some, not just for the rich or the powerful and not just for the religious. Jesus' love is for everyone – not just those who follow certain rules or certain ways of being. It is in relationship with God through Jesus that all those other things matter and make sense. This is what Christmas is about. This is real leadership – full of substance, peace and love.

Relationships matter and God knows that we need relationship with one another. This is why Jesus came into the world and lived as a person in relationship with others. Jesus continues to live in relationship with people through their belief in him, as we hear the Scriptures read, and as we worship like we do tonight. As we share this Eucharist together Jesus is present with us

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in a real way through the bread and wine and we know the power of his life and his death and resurrection – right here with us now. Jesus lives in you and me this day as we celebrate his birth. This can change us for ever. This is leadership we can follow. This is Christmas.