**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 23 December 2018 Advent Four**

**Readings for Sunday 23 December 2018**

**Hebrew Bible Micah 5:2-5**

2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

5 And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses. We will raise against them seven shepherds, even eight commanders,

**Gospel Luke 1:39-45**

**Mary Visits Elizabeth**

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

**Contemporary reading ‘Virgin Birth’**

By Joy Cowley

We have within us a virgin place,  
A holy space which belongs to God alone.  
We know it by its hunger,   
We name it by its need,  
The space which will not be touched  
By the people we love  
Or the things we gather  
Or the positions we hold.  
  
We have within us a growing place,  
An eternal space that exists for Truth,  
Where the love of God overcomes us,  
Where the life of God fills us,  
The Emmanuel space where we conceive   
And become pregnant of the Holy One  
And day by day, give birth,   
To Christ in the world.

**The Reflection for the Gathering**

The two scriptures today are based in small places. Bethlehem is a small space within the larger space of Israel and Israel is a smaller space within the larger space of the middle east. It is certainly all very small compared with the mighty Assyrian empire which did indeed swallow Israel up and hold it under its control for many years.

Did you used to write in your exercise books “Fred Smith, 12 Acorn Place, Haitaitai, Wellington, New Zealand, South Pacific, The Earth,

The Solar System” and so on and so on ending up with a flourish on the words “The Universe!” I don’t know whether it gave me a feeling of being in something big and important, or whether it gave me a feeling of being small and insignificant in that universe!

Bethlehem is a little like that, a tiny hill top town, not particularly important, Not a capital city, not on the trade routes, just small town, Middle East.

And Mary, when she finds she is pregnant, goes to an equally small hill top town to see her cousin Elizabeth. The writer has chosen Elizabeth as a dialogue partner to hear Mary’s song of praise – the Magnificat - recited weekly at least in liturgical churches. We did not hear that song today, but we do hear Elizabeth’s recognition of the moment. Her extra-sensory- perception fits into this mystical story which elevates the small and the quiet, the lost and the least, the weak and the waiting.

Love where you least expect it.

Joy Cowley’s poem picks up something of that paradox. That we, many of us who are ***not*** virgins in the usual sense, nevertheless have a place often tucked away inside us, difficult to find and easy to hide; a virgin space. A space not one of purist, shrinking-violet quality, but one of readiness and fecundity, creativity and yes, again where you might not associate it, waiting Love.

We crash and bash about our world a bit these days. Cars (and even sometimes Wellington regional buses) get us there more quickly than walking or riding a donkey, cell phones reach us wherever we are, even in a hill top town. Thanks to social media, we can always find a receptive audience – whether we regret confiding it all to facebook afterwards or not.

But, Mary goes to Elizabeth to ponder this change for her in quietness, where her great news will receive a sympathetic and empathetic reaction. Love where you most expect it.

As I wrote this reflection, the church was bustling with guests for a wedding. We were trying to pack up for the year! Laetitia was trying to record the phone message and kept on getting interrupted by the noise of guests and a choir practising! Love where you least expect it!

One of the distinguishing features of the Scriptures is that love and sometimes power get handed to the most unexpected people. It begins with the noisy, smelly shepherds who were on the bottom rung of middle eastern society of the time. It continues with Jesus picking a tax collector and a bunch of fishermen as his band of disciples. It includes lepers, a woman caught in adultery, a widow with her last least small coin, and ends with a criminal death. Love is shown and given, preached and taught to those whom and where you would least expect it.

Underlying all these stories – ones like the Christmas story which tug at your heart strings and the ones like the crucifixion from which we turn in horror, is this message that Love is for everyone, even when you least expect it.

You might be little or tired, depressed or lonely, out of step with the rest of the world, different in your beliefs, crazy, grumpy, or just straight boring (in your opinion). But the Love which we celebrate this fourth Sunday of advent is for you too. And any person or institution and particularly any church which has ever suggested that for some reason you are outside the pale, beyond redemption or hopeless in any way, is wrong. Love is for all, whatever the circumstances.

So this year whatever you did or didn’t do,

Whatever you said or didn’t say

Whatever you thought or didn’t thought

Whoever you are or whoever you are not,

It is still true that you are loved

and Love will continue to be found where you might least expect it

That’s what unconditional means

No more to say really!

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