**St Andrew’s on the Terrace Christmas 1 Sunday 30 December 2018**

**Readings for the Gathering First Reading Luke 2:21-40**

21On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

**Jesus Presented in the Temple**

22When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to God 23(as it is written in the Law, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to God”), 24and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” 25Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. 27Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29“Sovereign God, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” 33The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. 34Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 36There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. 39When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

**Second reading: Luke 2: 41-52 The Boy Jesus at the Temple**

41Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

49“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” 50But they did not understand what he was saying to them. 51Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and with people.

**Contemporary Reading ‘Fresh breeze’** by Susan Jones

You had been a priest in the temple/for God knows how many years.

You enjoyed the cut and thrust of theological debate/ though sometimes you caught yourself wondering/ if that was all there was to it - / was there not maybe some freshness deep down;

which you were all missing?

Then he arrived, this young boy, / all of a dozen years old, asking his questions;/ questions arrowing straight to the heart,/ finding and releasing that freshness - / or did he bring it with him?

an energising breeze / blowing down through the world/ through him, into you./ Either way it was glorious.

**The Reflection for the Gathering**

You know how when an adult read to you just before bed and at the end of a fairy tale, they said “and they all lived happily ever after” and you heaved a sign of pleasure and snuggled down to sleep? What did that mean? “Happily ever after?” I have often wondered at what happened behind stories or before they started or after they finish. “After the beginning, then what?”

We have just spent 4 weeks anticipating the birth of the boy Jesus. We’ve sung about sheep and cows and donkeys, about angels and wise men and shepherds. We’ve revisited Bethlehem. We tell the ancient story again each year with a slightly different twist. But after this angel-studded event, what happened next? Our first reading tells us almost exactly. The two new parents have only had just over a week with the new baby and although the original carol ‘Away in a manger’ has Jesus not crying at all, we can be sure that after 8 days they were sleep deprived as all new parents are. According to Jewish custom, they make sure their little scrap of humanity is circumcised as had been the Jewish way since before Jacob’s time, centuries earlier. That must have been a trial for his mother at least! Then comes the trip to the temple – this was not just down the road. If they went to Jerusalem from Bethlehem the trip was 27 minutes by car, but almost 2 hours by foot. If they had already returned to Nazareth it would have been a day’s journey on foot. When was the time for purification? The rules are laid down in the twelfth chapter of Leviticus – after the first 8 days another 33 days were to pass until the woman could go to the temple when the couple were to offer their sacrifices. That Mary and Joseph offered birds, not a lamb for their two offerings indicates their relative poverty.

These ancient rituals may seem barbaric to us now, but the significance of blood was key in both actions – the sacrifice and the need for purification. It is infuriating now in these times of more gender equality that the woman had to wait twice as long to be purified when she had birthed a girl child than when she had birthed a boy child! Also it is disappointing that menstrual blood and blood shed in childbirth was considered so unclean. But that was in times past. We strive to do better now – sometimes we do and sometimes we don’t. Old superstitions and fears such as these attitudes unfortunately underlie some of the discrimination against women that the #metoo movement is protesting now with energy and vigour. This is a good example of something written in the Holy Book of Christianity to which we would no longer hold, in fact consider quite wrong. Maori reverence for the placenta teaches us something much more life giving and respectful.

But like it now or not, this was what happened after the beginning of the Jesus story – Joseph and Mary’s careful observance of what they had been taught was the Law. These two parents were starting out getting things right for their firstborn just as a kiwi couple might when their first child arrives and they are a family for the first time. And as they do so, they encounter two special people in the temple there in Jerusalem. Two wise old prophets, Simeon and Anna. Two people who immersed themselves in the sacredness of prayer and who were familiar enough with the numinous and the mystical workings of holiness to recognise something special in this couple, with their child.

These two older people - one of them eighty four years old - are signposts in this story. They point to this child, still only just over a month old, telling us to watch and look and listen. They warn us there is sacred potential here. “Watch this space” they are saying. They are signposts too for Jesus’ parents, characters in Jesus’ story who point to greatness and to great sorrow to come. They are a flash forward as opposed to a flashback. The story teller has given us thereby a glimpse into this child’s future – the purpose of that future and the pain it will bring. That Simeon and Anna are old, tells us their words are to be taken as wise and far seeing. Somehow for me, the presence of Anna makes up a little for the arcane rituals around purification for women at the time. Not only a male is speaking prophetically here in the temple that day but also a woman is there, standing in the line of female prophets of Israel. Jesus is being blessed by both masculine and feminine energy.

So after the beginning, this family first pays due attention to the sacred dimensions of their great life event. Then after this beginning, what next?

They go home. They trudge that day’s journey to Nazareth. No flight into Egypt in Luke’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ life. It’s Matthew who gives us the wise men and the Herod dialogue and all that tension and intrigue. He’s making another point with *his* story.

No, Luke has Mary and Joseph simply going home to raise their boy in the relative obscurity of Nazareth – the town of which later people will say: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So, after this spectacular and promising birth, validated by this prophetic blessing, we have 12 years of ordinary life about which we are told few details. Jesus became a big brother to younger siblings, he would have skipped stones on the lake with his mates, gone out in fishing boats, cleaned up wood shavings in his father’s workshop, picked wildflowers for his mother, observed what a shepherd did when he found a lost sheep, watched bread rise, seen men sowing seed on stony earth and learned to live under Roman occupation. Maybe he was even ordered by a Roman soldier to carry his pack for a mile and offered to take it for two.

He would have gone to Hebrew School in the synagogue with the local rabbi and learned the scriptures. All this activity turned him into a boy whom people liked, we are told.

How more ordinary than that could you get? Small town family life, parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers and those older people in the village who no doubt felt just as entitled to correct you when you did wrong as your parents did – hasn’t it been said that it takes a village to raise a child?

And so, from this ordinary little town, and their ordinary little lives, the family makes the annual day-long trip back to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This ancient festival had been celebrated every year for centuries already by this time. It commemorates the leaving of Egypt, the liberation from bondage of the people whom Moses and Aaron and Miriam led out of slavery. And Jesus (who would have gone with them every year) goes now as an almost-man. In later years the ritual of bar mitzvah was developed to mark the passage of a Jewish boy into manhood. If it had been in place when Jesus was a boy that’s what he would have done that year at the temple. Not yet what we would call a teenager and not yet what they would have called a man, Jesus is obviously fascinated by the whole experience.

I wonder whether he had been fascinated every year or whether this year was different? Did it all come together this year and make sense as it had never done before? However it happened, Jesus, we are told, gets totally absorbed in the discussion between the teachers in the temple and forgets to leave with his family. The Jewish method of theological discussion was argumentative – questions asked and answers flying back and forth. So for Jesus to ask questions, fits the method, it is just that he must have been at least two or more decades younger than those with whom he was debating .  How did the Gospel writer put it? ”Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.” So Jesus wasn’t just posing questions – he was also giving answers, presumably to questioning in return by the teachers.

It is as if he had found a lovely deep pool of spirituality, has dived into it and is splashing and playing and diving deep into it and returning to the surface to get air and diving deep back down again. He has lost all sense of any outside world and any mundane things such as family, the trip back home or a son’s duty to human parents.

So he is amazed when Mary’s tone is sharp. This is all so natural to him he cannot understand why she would not see that he must be about this kind of business – that another Parent has a claim on him besides her and Joseph.

While you can’t claim that Jesus did live happily ever after in the conventional fairy tale sense, this glimpse into his life shows us what it is to be truly human.

Mostly it is mundane, a lot of daily routine, learning, chores, obeying the rules of the family in which you are placed, observing the customs, completing the rituals, but as you do so, there can be moments, where the numinous breaks through into that ordinary life like a shaft of light into a dusty room. When it all comes together and makes sense. Perhaps just for a short while, but it is enough to give you a sense of what it is all about, that there is a meaning which is the mainspring of the universe - though if anyone asked you to describe it you might be hard pressed.

And you discover that it is alright to ask questions, even if you don’t have the answers, and perhaps no one else in the room has adequate answers either.

In those moments you realise that all those ordinary days, those weeks and months and years when you ‘just lived’; they have prepared you to be able to sense the sacred about you, to see that sower in the field with new eyes, to ponder the shepherd’s joy at finding that lost sheep and to rethink old mores like blaming only the woman for adultery or shunning a prodigal when they returned home.

And on a day when everything seems incredibly stuffy and stale and stagnant, you, alerted by something (you do not know what), can sense a fresh breeze blowing down the world as you make the connections you didn’t know you were searching for.

That’s what can happen after the beginning. It takes patience and care, it takes turning up, it takes devotion, it takes intentionality, determination and that old fashioned word, humility, the willingness to learn and to be taught.

It takes persisting with those rituals and sacred routines – the special ones after a birth and the annual ones each Passover and no doubt weekly ones, like Friday night Shabbat for Jesus’ family and maybe you have your own weekly routines. Because having those spiritual practices set the scene for those moments of enlightenment and clarity. Joining in places like this with a faith community help the underlying meaning of it all to become more clear.

So celebrate that ordinary life of yours. Its little happinesses are teaching you about yourself as are the painful times and deep sorrows. The frustrations are honing your soul and the irritations turning you into a pearl of great price.

And persist with those patterns which touch your soul. As you turn up to them in your life, it will be surprising what can happen after you begin.

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