**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Christmas Eve 2018 ‘On such a night as this.’**

**Readings for the Gathering**

**Hebrew Bible Isaiah 9:2-7**

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;/ on those living in the land of deep darkness

 a light has dawned./ 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;

they rejoice before you/ as people rejoice at the harvest …. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,/ and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called/ Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,/ Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. /7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

**Gospel The Birth of Jesus Luke 2:1-14**

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all.”

**Contemporary reading** [***Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road***](http://brianmclaren.net/archives/books/brians-books/why-did-jesus-moses-the-buddha-a.html) **by Brian McLaren**

Perhaps in this context, we rediscover Mary as the living icon of receptivity to and participation in the new gospel way of life. Perhaps we also rediscover the social, political, economic, and theological foment of Mary’s Magnificat. And perhaps we re-tradition the idea of virgin birth as a decisive repudiation of the standard patriarchal systems of violent male dominance, evermore associating the saving power of God with the tender care of a mother’s love. Such a celebration would give new meaning to the title Saviour as applied to Jesus—a fitting focal point for Christmas Eve: Jesus, the firstborn of a new generation of humanity characterized by love, nonviolence, and solidarity with all, comes to save humanity from what it has become.

**Reflection for the Gathering**

You know those puzzles where you are shown a whole lot of dots of different colours and hidden within them is a word? Depending on whether you are colour blind or not, if you gaze at the picture and look sort of beyond it, you can see the hidden word. The green/red puzzle I first encountered had the word ‘onion’ hidden amongst the dots. Not a very exciting word, but mysteriously hidden to my eyes until I changed my focus.

On such a night as this, we need that changed focus. We could obsess over the details of the story – Was there a star? Was there a census? Who were those wise men? But on a night like this, the importance of the story is its symbolism and what it stands for.

Remember the opening words to the Isaiah reading: “2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;/ on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

This is an event set at night time. The setting tells us the story’s significance. If you have been following the news recently you will be aware of how black and dark the world has become recently – weak leadership, strange military decisions, political skirmishing, racism , murder, unethical dealings and narcissism are casting huge black shadows over our world. Worldwide, we are people walking in darkness, a darkness of greed and blinkeredness to what is good and true and lovely and just plain kind.

The star – whether it is fantasy, supernovae, alignment of planets or something else - is that light bursting into the darkness. As we take our focus off the external things of life and look beyond that, deep within our psyche, within what has traditionally been called our soul, we see that light – sometimes a small glimmer is all at first, then a steady glow, then a radiance we had not known before. The star guides us to the place of new birth.

Isaiah yearns for the time when a good leader will arise for his nation, one who brings peace through justice, not an avenging, territorially hungry emperor interested only in the peace which comes through vanquishing and victory. As McLaren puts it, perhaps the virgin birth part of this fantastical story imagined differently reminds us maternal tenderness can be an attribute of God – something we all yearn for, whether our biological mothers were close and loving or absent and cold.

Such a night as this tells us this story is about that part of us of which we are as yet not fully conscious but which awaits as a mystery to be revealed. Such a night as this tells us there is light which can be found, maybe unexpectedly on such as night as this. The virgin light cast into this narrative tells us maternal love which is for all of us.

The shepherds are ordinary people – people like you and like me, going about their business, lonely perhaps, isolated within their compartmentalised lives, but also a small group of colleagues dedicated to protecting their livelihood; the flock of sheep and goats grazing on the sparse hillsides. In their lives on such a night as this, they are surrounded suddenly by glory. It terrifies them. It may terrify us, the thought of falling into such a sacred, numinous moment where our usual way of seeing does not serve us well, or our usual rational way of thinking is not quite adequate enough to make sense of what is happening.

On such a night as this you can believe in people again,

for here in the darkness, the power and grace society has hitherto only associated

with an avenging, almighty God is present

through the sweetness and freshness of a baby’s birth.

On such a night as this we can find that space within us

where we too can know the creativity and fruitfulness of new birth.

On such a night as this we give thanks for all that has been

We ask forgiveness for all we regret

We ask healing for wounds which were deeper than we thought

We ask energy for what needs to be done

And for wisdom to leave undone what needs to be left undone.

On such a night like this we can relax

relax into the straw of this manger bed

and, trustingly, like this much loved baby rest in the beauty of the power that is love.

on such a night as this

and every night like this.

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