

For the second year in a row, we come to our Christmas Celebrations with some uncertainty, and for some a level of anxiety. We have been wondering over the past weeks if our celebrations might be cancelled or modified – and for some this has been the case. But the delight of the Christmas message is that it is never cancelled – because it is a promise – and one that is founded in hope and joy.

This year, probably more than any other, we have a glimpse of some of the experiences of those who were present at the very first Christmas. Because for Mary and Joseph - and those with them as they begin their lives together and welcome their first child – they are surrounded by not only uncertainty but fear for their lives.

The first part of the Gospel reading we hear tonight from the second chapter of Luke’s Gospel plunges us quickly into the political realities of the world that Mary and Joseph inhabit.

“All the world must be registered” (verse 1) according to Caesar Augustus. Whether or not this is historically accurate as to date and breadth is less important than that it is the first line in the story of Jesus’ birth as Luke tells it. Joseph, Mary

and Jesus are subject to Caesar Augustus – and whether convenient to them or not – they are required – heavily pregnant or not – to go to Bethlehem¹.

We get a strong sense in Luke's account of things being out of control of this young couple – as history overtakes them. The prophets tell of a child who will be born in Bethlehem – the City of David – and Luke is helping his audience to make this connection. But we are also asked to understand something else. This is a frustrating and fearful time for them when what surrounds them is a great deal of uncertainty.

It may be that this Christmas - with all the uncertainty we have experienced in the past 2 years - that we can relate more to the life of Mary and Joseph as they face the journey to Bethlehem, then the lack of housing and giving birth in an unfamiliar place. For many of us who live in the affluent first world such uncertainty is unfamiliar, but many live with this level uncertainty every day of their lives. Sadly, too many people in our world have to learn to live with uncertainty all the time – but it is hard work. It takes energy to live

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christmas-eve-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-21-14-15-20-20>

with not knowing – and I think in many ways we have all now had a glimpse of what that level of unknowing can feel like... even if in a safe and familiar environment.

God does not send Jesus into the safety of the halls of a family who has power and certainty – rather Jesus is born into an earthly family who are subject to the authority of another and live daily with a great deal of unknowing. And in the midst of this being their daily reality, they are plunged into a journey – most likely on foot – with thousands of others from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

And so Luke tells us that when they arrive the time comes for Mary to give birth and Jesus is born and laid in a manger because there is no room in the inn.

The image of there being no room is one which I think is difficult to comprehend. How full was Bethlehem that no one could make a space, even on the floor for a young woman about to give birth. Why was space not made?

We may have similar questions about our own society at present. With all our wealth and comfort this Christmas (even if we are living with

uncertainty) why are there those who have no place to call home, why is there no room in the inn in a global city like London? The story of Jesus birth resonates because it is both historical and contemporary. It causes us to ask questions about why there is no room.

And while we are left wondering about this scene of an exhausted Mary and Midwife, laying a new born in an animal trough, wrapped in strips of cloth – Luke transports us out into the hills which surround Bethlehem – to the camp of shepherds tending their sheep.

I always have a soft spot for the Shepherds, I grew up on a sheep farm in Australia, and our lives revolved around the needs of our sheep. Our Christmas break was always delineated by two other events that happened around the same time. The weighing of the lambs for market; and then the shearing of our sheep, all of which on our farm happened around the same time. My brothers and sister and our friends would even sleep with the sheep in the shearing shed as a ‘treat’ at least one night during this time. In many ways, I miss that rhythm and the smell of sheep at Christmas. But

Luke always brings it home to us, as we meet the Shepherds.

I love the shepherds in the Gospel – they are an image which we will be bought back to by Jesus later in his adult life. The Shepherd stays with the sheep, keeping them safe, leading them where they need to go. And these hard working and loyal shepherds receive the most amazing and scary sight. When I am telling the story of the Nativity to children – I always ask them at this point – how would you feel a multitude of angels appeared in front of you – can you show me that face. Their faces are always surprised or scared. It is an overwhelming image we are being given – one so amazing it is hard to comprehend. But in the midst of a story about authority and uncertainty – comes the reminded of the joy and hope which this story brings. Here is a field surrounded by sheep heaven and earth meet.

Heaven and earth meet in such a way that the Shepherds have the courage and the trust to leave their sheep and visit the promise of God – the new born Christ child.

Let it be clear – the story of the birth of Christ is so important – is the greatest story ever told –

because of where heaven and earth meet in this story. Not in the halls of power; not in places of certainty; not in a light filled room – but rather heaven and earth meet in a field and in a dimly lit room. The light came in those dark fields and that dim room in Bethlehem because God longs, has always longed, for us to know and love God.

The responses of both the shepherds and Mary to that good news, however they may have perceived it, are worth noting, because they end the story we hear each year on Christmas Eve. *And Mary pondered these things in her heart.*

Mary who had seen an angel, embraced an uncertain role, trusted that Joseph would not desert her and had the courage to give birth in unfamiliar surroundings. Mary who was visited by Shepherds with another message from an angel soon after that birth when she was still exhausted from her travels and labour - would spend her life pondering the experiences of this child. A child which is a promise.

Tonight is so spectacular, so special and so important because it is a promise of God' love for us. A God who loves us in the midst of uncertainty and even fear.

A God who comes to us in our dimly lit places. A God who offers us joy even when there is no room in the Inn.

That is the promise of this night. That God loves us wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. God longs for us to embrace this promise of hope, comfort and joy. And so tonight as we come to look at this manger, let us ponder in our heart God's love of us, and allow the seed to grow within us this Christmas. Amen.