

21 DECEMBER 25 - ADVENT 4

Rev Wayne Toleafoa

THE SCANDALOUS BIRTH OF CHRIST

Isaiah 7:10–16 • Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 • Romans 1:1–7 • Matthew 1:18–25

In our first reading for this morning Isaiah offered the disheartened King Ahaz a message of hope. Isaiah foresaw a golden era which would be marked by the birth of a child who will be known as, Emmanuel, ‘God with us’.

In our second reading from St Paul’s Letter to the Roman church, Paul announces that the long-promised hope has finally taken flesh in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The good news is that His salvation is not only for the Jews, but for the whole world.

In our gospel reading, Joseph, is caught in a tangle of confusion and honour, and discovers that obedience sometimes means trusting a future and a God he cannot see.

Across these three readings, God doesn’t wait for perfect conditions. God steps into crisis whether it be national, communal, or personal. God is not only the God of the chosen few, but the God of all people. Finally, in the gospel God plants hope in the most vulnerable form possible: a child.

In real life, a newborn child often represents hope and the future that we will not see. We will not see the world of our grandchildren, and we secretly hope that it will be a better world than the one we have known.

This is the hope in Isaiah’s prophecy, and this is the hope of Advent.

Advent reminds us that salvation often begins quietly, in places we might overlook, asking only that we listen, trust, and make room for God’s promises and God’s future.

This morning, we lit the fourth candle of Advent, the candle of Love.

If there is one word that defines the life and teaching of Jesus , it is the word: ‘LOVE’.

The reason why I am a Christian and a minister, and the reason why you are here in this church today, is that we have been drawn in by the love of Christ. Christ’s love has drawn us to be here in this Christian Church.

Somewhere, somehow, Christ has reached out to you and me from the pages of the gospels, which we either read, or heard through others, and the Christ of the gospels has caused us to believe that He (Jesus) loves us.

And if Jesus was God incarnate (in the flesh), then you and I have also come to believe that the God whom Jesus represented, also loves you and me.

Its sometimes complicated and hard to explain but in simple terms, it is God's love that draws people to God.

I don't think anyone in this congregation is drawn to God by fear. (At least I hope not). I have no fear of going to hell, and if I did, I certainly couldn't love the God who made me believe, through fear.

But we know there are Christians, in some churches, who hang on to God/religion, through fear - rather than love of God. A toxic kind of religion that often divides people into insiders and outsiders.

They are like a flock of sheep huddled together for fear of a wolf or a wild dog. 'Driven' by fear and not 'led' by a loving shepherd.

You'll be happy to hear that I do some study and research around our readings for each Sunday. I don't rely on my own limited brilliance. I also pray each week, that the Holy Spirit will lead me in my understanding of the Bible passages.

This week, I visited several online resources including the website of one of my favourite preachers, Nathan Nettleton – an Australian Baptist minister – who was born in NZ, but who left here as a child. 'Raising the average IQ level in Australia' as one of our past PMs once said. Nathan Nettleton's website is called Laughing Bird Liturgical Resources.

In one of his sermons on today's reading from Matthew, Nathan Nettleton confronts the scandal, and some of the difficulties, inherent in the story of Joseph and Mary.

It is quite a scandalous story when you take away the Christmas tinsel and the commercial version of Christmas. And scandalous if you apply the Old Testament Law to God.

The gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus. There are 42 ancestors between Abraham and Jesus.

Most of the names mentioned are male names.

Nettleton points out that in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, only five women are mentioned – Mary being the 5th.

He also points out that each woman in Jesus family tree, was involved in a scandal of some kind, and yet they are the ancestors of the messiah Jesus. Mathew doesn't mention the women who were not scandalous.

Quoting Nettleton:

“In fact, all four of them (referring to the first four) are associated with some sort of sexual scandal, and at least three of them are also gentile outsiders.

In Genesis 38:14–19, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute to have sex with the father of her dead husband and publicly expose him for failing to fulfil his social obligations.

In Joshua 6:22–25, Rahab was a foreign prostitute.

In Ruth 4:18–22, Ruth was a gentile woman who seduced a Jewish man and then got him to marry her.

And in 2 Samuel 11–12, Bathsheba was the married woman who King David dragged off to his bed and then had her husband murdered to cover it up.”

Nettleton goes on to say,

“Matthew’s choice of who to highlight in Jesus’s family tree is not good news for the traditional family values lobby!” (end of quote).

The fifth scandalous woman Matthew mentions in Jesus’ family tree is of course Mary, Jesus’ mother.

In today’s gospel story, the silent hero of Christmas – Joseph - is Mary’s saviour.

Joseph solves the scandal of Mary’s predicament, that of being an unwed pregnant woman - which in the first century, could mean stoning and possible death, or embarrassment for Joseph, if anyone learned that Jesus was not Joseph’s son.

The noble-minded Joseph, chooses the way of love, accepting the message of an angel speaking to his better self. Joseph chooses the way of love and becomes Mary’s and Jesus’ saviour and guardian.

Nathan Nettleton, very insightfully, points out that, in fact, Jesus whole life was a scandal.

The idea that God could become human was a scandal. The people who were attracted to Jesus, were often scandalous characters: Gentiles, tax gatherers, sinners, prostitutes, and the non-religious.

The idea that God could die on a cross, at the hands of the people of God , was a scandal.

And finally, there is the scandal of the empty tomb and the resurrection, when the body of Jesus could not be found.

The genealogy of Jesus was full of scandal. Jesus' life was full of scandal and even on the cross he forgave a criminal who admitted that he (the criminal) deserved the penalty.

At Advent and at Christmas it's a great comforting to know that Jesus – or God in Jesus, loved and loves, even the worst sinner. And that his genealogy contained some pretty scandalous characters.

No matter what we may have done wrong in our lifetimes, God still loves us. And that is the gospel and the Christmas story, in a nutshell. God loves you and me.

In a few days' time, we will celebrate the scandal of God becoming a human being in the form of a baby born into poverty, born in an animal shelter. He will be worshipped by kings and shepherds and his name will be, 'Emmanuel' meaning 'God With us' or Jesus meaning 'The Lord Yahweh saves'. He will live a life of uncertainty – chased by an evil king and later persecuted by his own people. He will die penniless – but will make generations of people rich through the faith, hope and love he imparts to all who believe in him.

In our uncertainties, God's promise still stands. Emmanuel comes not to the strong, but to the willing, not to the triumphant, but to those who dare to hope. And like Joseph, we are invited to take courage, to receive the unexpected, and to let God's restoring presence be born among us again.

This week I will be going on holiday to Auckland to be with my wider family. Aiga (in Samoan). Some are coming from overseas for the family gathering.

This Christmas will be the second time in forty years that I have not conducted a Christmas Eve and Christmas Day service. But I will be attending Christmas worship in my old family church along with my wider family (Siblings and all of our grandies). I'm looking forward to hearing the Christmas story from another minister's mouth.

I just want to thank you for being such a great congregation and a great parish. It's been a pleasure serving for yet another wonderful year. I have appreciated your support of me and my family and of my ministry. Thank you.

I wish you all a blessed Christmas and happy new year. May the baby Christ give us new hope for the new year and the years ahead.