

3 January 2021 Epiphany

Jeremiah 31 has been one of my favourite chapters in his book alongside the writings of Micah and Isaiah. Especially when one reads through Jeremiah from beginning to end, chapter 31, with its boisterous promises of restoration from exile, stands in stark contrast to the proclamations of disaster and scattering that precede it.

In Jeremiah 31, we see an exiled people whom God is promising to restore to their land. And in Ephesians 1, we are brought into the story ourselves—we, who were once strangers, now embraced as children and heirs.

The reading from Jeremiah is very timely as is the account from Matthews Gospel. They both bring good news.

Over the past few days, the media has been telling us what a shocker of a year it has been with Covid19 and a defining moment for many of us. I am sure we all have asked ourselves the question why and how has my faith explained, given meaning to the suffering and distress or provided support and or comfort? Other issues also arise. Was it really 12 months ago that bushfires scorched 24 million acres and created havoc in the bush with many losing their livelihoods and 3000 homes destroyed? Many still have received little if any support to rebuild, restock and restore their lives. Thirty-three people lost their lives, and some billions of animals were either killed or displaced.

As I reflected on the days and months past, I recalled coming home late one evening ,9//11, to be exact and watching on television what I thought was a James Bond movie, till I realized that the scene of a plane going into the twin towers was real and the seriousness and callousness of the act awakened me to the suffering and devastation. I was not in some movie and the effects of that day is still being felt in many parts of the world.

Thankfully we have fared much better than the rest of the world, during the pandemic nor been in a movie, with government leadership stepping up to the mark to ensure the income safety net was lifted, food supplies regulated, health and safety precautions put in place and we all have had to act differently, responsibly and with integrity for the wellbeing of everyone. Yes, there have been the deniers and the lack of charity to political leaders by some sections of the community who suggest they know better. The reality is we have all been on a steep learning curve. The big challenge and real test will come in the months ahead. Will we just return to a so called normal or have we discovered more about ourselves, the needs of the community, the impact of social isolation on the mental health of our community or ideology that discriminates and destroys. Will we demand as a community that leadership at all levels govern for all and not only for sections of our nation?

As we are entering a new year, we are also ending the season of Christmas with the celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany on Wednesday of this week the 6th January, with the story as told by Matthew of the visit of the three wise men or were they three kings as the carol by the same name goes. There is not a shred of evidence to support the popular view that there were three kings, nor for that matter that there were three. There may have been more or less. Probably the best we can offer is to say that someone, and probably Matthew the writer of the gospel, linked the three gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to the idea that there must have been three wise men and hence the tradition developed.

Most likely they were astronomers from Babylon who heard about the promised messiah from earlier Jewish writings. This is storying that Mathew has constructed to influence the audience to whom he is writing and teaching, and I am not suggesting that my comments about the three kings distracts in any way from the central of Matthew's message of the coming of God in human form among God's people. The crowds however who gathered although smaller in numbers than previous years for Christmas are not to be seen today awaiting the arrival of the Magi at the manger.

The pre-Christmas frenzy of our times both religious and non-religious that goes into Christmas eve and Christmas day contributes to the virtual neglect of the days following, which fill out the fullness of the Christmas message which reminds us that the child born at Bethlehem becomes the crucified Christ of Good Friday. The full message of Christmas is therefore only partly heard, and the significance of the feast overlooked. Would it not be revealing if we all gave the same attention to the impact of the story of Christmas in the same way as we do new year?

A few years ago Michael Leuing, Age cartoonist, theologian and philosopher and very frustrating at time, in an article entitled "Bush Christmas with butter flies and child," wrote these words at the beginning of Christmas.

"Christmas comes to urban Australia and up goes the decorations-the holly and the Reindeer motifs, the sleighs, the Santas and snowflakes-the same old incongruous winter symbols, reminding Australians their summer is well underway and the year is fading fast. The lives of little pine trees are cut short and hung with baubles".

He concluded with these words, "For joy and meaning we might well turn to our natural country and witness miracles of vitality and new life of inspiration and profound beauty, all in some quiet and improbable place".

This quote helps explain why I had Gum branches in the church during advent. It was these last words that resonated with me as I read Leuning's article once again, "all in some quiet and improbable place".

It is these sentiments that Matthew in his Gospel of the visit of the Magi wants us to hear afresh. It is the story of an encounter with the Divine, the vulnerability and brutality of our times associated with being human. The Magi knew what they were looking for. They had come to pay their respects. They are not kings, but rather seekers after truth, and they represent the fullness of all humanity as seekers and sojourners through out life. Their visit to the Christ child is a poignant and momentous part of the Christmas story, an historical fact, not myth as some miss informed commentators speak about that has changed the face of humanity over the ages and in so many ways and influenced our values and hope for a better world. The Magi understood this, and it is why they returned a different way and did not tell Herod. God in the stable, in the warmth and familiarity of a mother's love has come among us to share our common humanity. The world could never be the same again and the Magi knew and understood the significance of the moment.

Matthew tells us that in the birth of the child our rational and scientific left, or is it the right brain cells, pushes the boundaries of faith and belief to a new level. The birth of the Christ child is no sentimental or nostalgic event but rather a shattering event turning the world upside down where the meek and lowly are raised and the powerful and rich challenged.

Herod understood the significance of the birth, as does the powerful today with their attempts to distort and marginalise the call of faith to justice for all.

We may ask ourselves the question, how does this story of the birth of the Christ child impact on our own lives? Is the celebration of Christmas simply a feel-good experience as I noted over the past few weeks?

The Season of Christmas culminates in today's celebration of the arrival of the Magi. The Gospel reminds us of the brutality and exploitation of the regime in control, and the vulnerability of the birth. So, what do we take away? Can we truly say this Christmas has changed how we think and act as Christians in today's world? Or are we like so many Australians caught up in the marketing and the "razz a ma taz" of Christmas that we miss the wonder of God's presence in our own lives, because like Herod it challenges who we are, what we believe and what we think important. The message of peace and goodwill towards others is more than a pious, nostalgic story we bring out once a year. It is to be the cornerstone or lynch pin of all we do. It is about our relationships with one another, the stranger and the whole of created. It is the giving of ourselves for the other, as a mother does for her child without conditions and expectations. A reminder to us that our humanity is diminished, and our redemption hampered when we ignore the sharing of light with others. A light that shines which comes from a quiet and improbable place. Or in the words of the prologue to John's Gospel.

"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God-----. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it: the word was made through him and the world did not know him, and his own did not know or receive him."

Surely the beginning of a new year is more than simply pious resolutions but rather the embracing of the values of the kingdom of God as foretold in the story of the Christ child. Truth, justice and reverence for the gift of Creation should shine in the darkness of brokenness, exploitation and greed.

Amen