

## CHRISTMAS DAY, GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH, CLONTARF, 25.12.22

While [Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem]...the time came for the baby to be born, 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 (Luke 2:6-7).

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1.0 We have heard these words so often that the impact of this remarkable, world-changing narrative is in danger of waning. Lutheran pastor, Emily Scott reframes the Christmas story in this way. ‘An emperor makes up his mind that the world should be registered while he sits at a banquet table feasting on pheasants and calling for more wine. A couple of just-married kids are wandering the streets of a strange city when the girl’s water breaks. They end up in a stranger’s stable, blood and water mingling with the hay, as Mary bears down in pain. There’s no mama or aunty to squeeze her hand, or tell her when to push.

‘St Luke wants to show that Jesus’ birth occurs in the middle of displacement and desperation. St Matthew wants to point out that Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus flee to Egypt because Herod has promised to kill the newborn child. The holy family become refugees, travelling miles overland with the baby strapped to Mary’s back. She raises her child in a foreign nation, surrounded by a garble of languages she cannot understand. They have no friends, no family and no one to welcome them.

‘Christmas is about how God is born in forgotten places. It’s about families forced to undertake a journey they can’t afford at the worst possible time. The powerful of this world huff and puff about decisions they deem necessary and reasonable, moving pieces on maps and signing their decrees. Meanwhile, in the far-flung corners of their kingdoms, mothers tuck their children in their arms and clamber onto boats or trucks that will take them across the seas or the borders. They pay bribes and strap their babies onto orange life vests. They’ve been told there’s a better life on the other side, where their kids can grow up free.

‘Mary was a brown-skinned, middle eastern teenager who gave birth alone among animals. She was a poor and despised religious and ethnic minority living in a backwater town under the rule of a powerful and unjust empire. In the years since then, history has wrapped her in a clean white cloth, with her skin Lilly white, a blue-eyed virgin looking up to heaven. But Mary was all strength and sinew, bite and courage.

‘Society today would pigeonhole her into the ghettos of our cities, unmarried and pregnant. Unimportant to anyone who really matters. They look at Mary and call her a dole bludger, put her in line at Centrelink, give her a sub-par education, brand her a queue jumper and send her to Christmas Island. We don’t call women like her holy. As her first lullaby, however, Mary sings a song that unseats tyrants. God will tear down the mighty from their thrones. It’s Mary, that dirt poor teenager, who shows us the paradox of God. With God, we don’t go up to the emperors and rulers of this world but down to Mary.’

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2.0 While St Luke starts the narrative of the birth of Jesus in chapter two by naming the emperors and rulers of this world, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria, Luke’s focus quickly turns to the powerless – Joseph and Mary. And then, as to highlight this transition, to make sure we don’t miss it, he writes about John the Baptist at the beginning of chapter three: ‘In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.’ That’s a list of ‘who’s who’ of the times, the elite of the elite, the powerful men of history.

And Luke continues, ‘The word of God came to...’ Drum roll. And Luke’s readers would expect Luke to name Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests. Or perhaps the roman leaders. Luke, after all, names more powerful men than you can poke a stick at. But he writes, ‘the word of God came to...**John** son of Zechariah...in the wilderness’ (Luke 3:1-2). Luke masterfully uses contrast in these words. While these very powerful men were busy being very powerful men, the word of God came to a semi-naked itinerant in the desert. Christmas is about how God is born in forgotten places.

Christmas, still today, is about how God is born in forgotten places. God is still today born in the places that are shunned and ignored by the powerful. God is still today born in the places where the vulnerable gather, where those gather who hope beyond hope for a better future, who lay down to rest in temporary shelters, when there is no room left among the respectable.

God's kingdom breaks through, and it breaks open amongst the forgotten places of life. God's kingdom comes to us in Christ, and it is a kingdom that is of another kind to that of Caesar, Pontius Pilate and Herod. It is an alternative order to that of the kingdom of Caesar, the head of the kingdom at that time. Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz points out that when we think of God's kingdom coming to us in Jesus Christ, we often do not grasp its full meaning. Throughout the centuries, the church equated God's kingdom with the kingdom of the church. The church aligned itself with the powerful and the privileged.

We got used to our privileged and respected place in society. But we failed to recognise that talking about the kingdom, in that sense, was an inadequate, if not a corrupt way to talk about God's governance. Luke makes it clear again and again for whom and *to* whom the kingdom of God comes. God is first and foremost born in the forgotten places, amongst the forgotten people. God comes for the weary and the tired, and the anxious. And by extension, the everyday folk, who struggle with everyday things, doing ordinary things that become extraordinary in God.

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3.0 At Christmas, we sing *Joy to the World*, as we just sang. No matter what our personal circumstances, we sing *Joy to the World*. Our lives may be *depleted* of joy, yet we sing, *Joy to the World*. We might be weary and in poor spirit, yet we sing, *Joy to the World*. Our hearts might be *full* of joy, and we sing *Joy to the World*. We sing, because 'The Lord is come.'

As the author and poet Kathleen Norris says, it is precisely because we are weary and in poor spirit that God can touch us with hope. At Christmas, we are asked to acknowledge that the world we have made, is in darkness. For the Ukrainians, *literally* in darkness. We are asked to be attentive and keep vigil for the light of Christ. We, and our world, are broken. But the story of God's birth as a human being, is also the story of God's death on the cross and the resurrection. The manger of Christmas, is indivisibly bound to the cross of Easter.

And the cross is the fabric of daily life. And Jesus wore the fabric of daily life. And by wearing the fabric of daily life, he redeemed it. That is why he is called the redeemer. As Diana Butler-Bass says, Jesus pointed out how the every day, was holy. The incarnation, of course, does not mean that he saves us from the pains of life. It means that God is with us, *in* the pains of life. For Christians, like for anyone, there will be times of uncertainty, there will be sickness, loneliness, seasons of frustration, periods of darkness and ultimately, a season of death and dying.

But Christianity is hope-filled, and it is also realistic. As Avery Dulles says, the message of Christmas does not grant us the ability to rock-climb out of the human condition. It rather gives us the ability to dig into the heart of all creation and find everything pregnant with the presence of God, where God is born in forgotten places. Hence, once again, we sing *Joy to the World* with all of Christendom this Christmas morning.

Bishop Mark Vainikka  
Christmas Day, 2022