

## **The Epiphany of Our Lord 5 January 2020**

### **A Light Shining in the Darkness [A Sermon Preached by the Rev'd Jill Renison]**

*[Isa. 60.1-6; Mt 2.1-12]*

Most, if not all, of what I am about to say today you will know already; my purpose is to remind you of these things and to give you hope in the face of dark and difficult times.

Some of you may have been directly affected by the bushfires or you may have family members or friends directly affected. My heart goes out to you.

Today's readings remind us that suffering is part of the human condition, but more importantly, that Christian suffering has meaning. The reading from Isaiah expresses a hope for the future and the promise that the light of God's glory will shine in the darkness, a promise that Christians see as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

Matthew's account of the search for and finding of the Christ child by the wise men has a subtext of sheer terror. King Herod the Great takes an interest in their search, fuelled by his insecurity and paranoia. His claim to the throne was uncertain since he was not of the line of David, and history relates that he ruthlessly and systematically rid himself of his enemies and rivals. For the innocent Magi to ask, 'Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?' is tantamount to signing a death certificate for the child for whom they are searching. Jesus is protected by the swift action of his parents when they seek refuge in Egypt. Herod's reputation for cruelty and viciousness is only reinforced when he orders the massacre of all baby boys in Bethlehem when the Magi fail to return. We can hear Matthew's acute concern for their mothers in the verses that follow this section.

Just as the coming of the Magi points to the coming of the Gentiles to faith, so the massacre of the innocents hints at the crucifixion, the slaughter of God's own Son.<sup>1</sup> Jesus will share the fate of the innocents massacred at Bethlehem.

Dorothy Lee points us to the bigger picture here:

Matthew's birth story is a dark, brooding one, full of danger, doubt and violence. There are moments of light, but there is also a profound awareness of the reality of the world into which the Son of God is born. Though Christmas is a time of joy, it is also a time to face the reality of the world, and its desperate need for redemption. Jesus is born precisely as the Saviour. In him, God embraces our humanity with all its ugliness and sin. He does so in order to save us from it, to

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<sup>1</sup> p. 15, Dorothy Lee, *A Friendly Guide to Matthew's Gospel*

transform the world into a place of beauty, peace and goodness. This is the meaning of Jesus' coming for Matthew.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus offers living hope in our suffering. When you have lost everything, faith remains. Suffering has meaning.

One other matter I would like to explore is, where is God in all this? I certainly don't have all the answers here, but the one thing that has shone through these dark days for me has been the love that we share with one another. This is where I see God; in the way that people have reached out in all sorts of ways to help those in need.

I've been following the news on radio, TV and in the newspapers, as, I imagine, have many of you. What really stood out for me was an ABC TV News Channel interview on Friday with one of the senior fireies, if not the most senior person in the Victorian fire services. He was quite open about the love, for that is what he named it as, that was evident in the fire ravaged communities he'd been through. People were selflessly helping each other, expecting nothing in return. Often they were total strangers. A TV reporter said of the people in the Bega evacuation centre, 'There's a general message of teamwork, we're all in this together'. Emergencies like this tend to bring out the best in people and they love and support each other in quite breathtaking ways. In all this I see the hand of God, drawing us all into the circle of divine love, whether we are conscious of the fact or not.

Helping each other in this way not only builds community but it's good for us, too. Psychologists will tell you that reaching out to others has a powerful impact on us, that helping others fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and even feelings of happiness. You may have heard the comments of the captain of HMAS Choules to this effect. We know that people who volunteer in some way during retirement tend to live longer than those who do not. We might be obeying the command to love our neighbour as ourselves, but it's also nurturing resilience within us.

As Christians, we are called to the service of others. You may know the story of a church which had a statue of Christ. For some reason the hands were broken off, whether by wartime bombing or urban vandalism depends on which version you read. The leaders of the church decided not to replace the hands, but instead, put up a sign which read, 'I have no hands but yours'. This was a reference to a poem by Teresa of Avila which read, 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours'.

When we say in the liturgy, 'We are the body of Christ', we are reflecting this fact. As Christians, we proclaim the love of God in our response to the bushfire crisis, whether as individuals or as a community.

If you have not yet donated to the bushfire appeal and wish to do so, you will find the details on Anglicare Victoria's Bushfire Appeal website. I'll conclude by

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2 *ibid.*

quoting the end of a pastoral letter to his diocese from the Bishop of Gippsland, Bishop Richard Treloar:

May the light of the one who is revealed to us as the Beloved in this season of Epiphany shine into the darkness of this crisis, and show us a way forward together as beloved children of God, whose heart is heavy for us and with us in him. Amen.