

Christmas Sermon from the Bishop of Riverina

The Right Reverend Donald Kirk

What an extraordinary few months we have just been through with all of the rivers in western New South Wales coming down in flood simultaneously! Some of that water has moved very quickly and been described as an “inland tsunami” and much of the water has and is still moving very slowly. Either way, the floods have left significant destruction in their wake – crops ruined, livestock lost, roads destroyed – and it will take a long time to recover from all of this.

As we head towards the celebration of Christmas and the rain seems to have stopped for a while and the sun is shining, we are given a message of hope. A hope for the future of humanity which is bound up in the birth of a child whom the prophet Isaiah foretold would be born when he said:

*“For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* [Isaiah 9.6]

This child, named Jesus in accordance with the Angel’s message to Joseph, is promised by Isaiah to be the source of true justice and peace within humanity. His way would become the example for us, and indeed all humanity, of how to live God’s love and peace for all.

We consider this season a “family time” because we remember the birth of Jesus into an earthly setting to faithful parents. But that birth happened in a humble way. Consider the incredible difficulties they faced:

- a young unmarried mother with her husband to be,
- a census forcing them to travel to a place where they could not find adequate accommodation,
- a birth in a stable with an animal’s feed trough as a makeshift crib

Despite these difficulties, Mary and Joseph found their way and welcomed the infant Jesus. Then the miraculous happens before some shepherds and the Angels proclaim:

“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” [Luke 2.11]

And then sing the words that we have adapted and use to praise God at every Sunday Eucharist we celebrate:

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”* [Luke 2.14]

This story is so familiar to us that sometimes we can miss the upside-down nature of these events. Consider how our modern world proclaims important events. Advertisements happen in every possible sphere of the media – repeatedly, so that we can’t miss it. Even in the ancient world the same principle applied. Heralds would have made noise loud and long shouting of the great moment to come. But here we have a paradox; the birth of the Saviour of the world happening in exactly the opposite of pomp and ceremony:

- The announcement of the birth was made to Mary alone by the Archangel Gabriel.
- The chosen name was revealed to Joseph in a dream by an Angel.
- The birth took place anonymously in a stable in Bethlehem.
- The only heralds of this world changing and saving event were the Angels who appears to a group of shepherds, the poorest people around.
- These shepherds were the only visitors on the night of Jesus' birth. The rest of the world was blissfully unaware of this life changing event.

This is how God designed it. This is how God works with us too. God does not hit us in the face with spectacular announcements, or proclamations, or visions that cannot be missed by anyone. God works patiently, quietly, and caringly with each and every one of us in the midst of all the joys and difficulties we face in life. When we allow that patient and quiet work to take place in our lives, we discover the love of God working in us. This is Jesus' justice and peace bringing us hope and future.

This Christmas as we gather with our families and friends, let us welcome the infant Jesus as the one who is not only a sign and symbol of hope and future but also the child who grows into the man who is God giving us real hope and future. Even though we have faced incredible difficulties with the floods, let us also remember that God's creation will restore itself once more and we can hope for a future that is good in this world and, thanks to the one born in Bethlehem, a future that is eternal in heaven.