



First Sunday after Christmas

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 27 December 2020

READINGS

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2:22-40

God with us, as we are with God

I hope that you all had a very Happy and blessed Christmas, and that in spite of current restrictions, you did manage some meaningful contact with friends and family. We can be sure that, as is told us every Christmas, that God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ, and was present even in our constraints.

Today's Gospel reading takes us beyond the birth and shows us the first events of Jesus life where his parents, according to the law, take him to be dedicated in the Temple. On the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised as is required of every Jewish male and, in today's passage, as the first born child, he was to be dedicated to God. Mary, as happens to every Jewish woman, is required to be purified 40 days after the birth, and the two pigeons were to be sacrificed for this reason at the same time. Jesus was very much part of 1st century Jewish society, and his parents were conscientious in their observance of their religious law. What better start for any baby?

Every child from a normal family is born into a society, a context in which certain rituals are carried out which mark the baby's arrival and expresses his or her belonging to the community. We all have been to baby showers or stork parties, where presents and fun are designed to help a young wife to begin to feel the role of mom. Presents from the community show that the baby is welcomed. But there are many more formal ways of doing this too. In our African culture –traditionally, a man sleeps separately from his wife for a specific period of time. Whatever the belief is, there is a very good medical reason for it, and the mother's body has time to heal.

In Nigeria, the grandmother gives the baby its first bath. That is not only to give the mother a chance to rest, but it is also to assure her that the community is there to help, and that she is not alone in caring for this new little life.

Also in African life, after about three months, the baby moves from relative isolation with the mother and is formally presented to the community, and the father now plays more of a role in being a presence in the life of his child. The child takes his or her place amongst the family and friends who are going to be an integral part of its upbringing and nurture.

In western culture we inherit various rituals too. Our Portuguese daughter-in-law tells me that at a Portuguese wedding, someone steals the top tier of the wedding cake and hides it. It is returned to them on the first wedding anniversary to mark the achievement of a year together, and it is usually eaten at the occasion of the first baby's baptism. Ireland has a similar custom, and crumbs from the cake may be sprinkled on the baby's head at its baptism.

Most of us dedicated to our Christian faith tend to find that our child's baptism is the marking of the entry of the child into the church community. The church family acts as an extension of the biological family, and loves the child and encourages the parents. In this we are not that far from what Jesus experienced in his family, and our parents are as loving and accepting as they are able to be, and the child belongs to the community of the church.

So baby Jesus, with his righteous parents is dedicated to God, and Mary has fulfilled all righteousness as a Jewish mother. But this was not an ordinary dedication. Simeon, who had been promised he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, recognised Jesus immediately as the fulfilment of that promise, and praised God in that lovely song we use during Evening prayer. What a wonderful feeling of fulfilment, and a vindication of the faith that would be realised in the coming years. But Simeon also warned Mary that, as with many exceptional children, particularly those who have a strong vocation given by God, that his life will be difficult, and she will suffer watching what happens to him.

And we also have Anna - a widow who was living the life of a contemplative in the Temple. She too acknowledged the little Jesus as Messiah, and prepared his way by telling EVERYONE. In a sense, she is the first bearer of the Good News.

And after that? They went home to Nazareth, and lived a normal, family life. Until the age of 30, Jesus' life was ordinary, apparently with family duties, earning a living as a carpenter, and presumably becoming closer to God in the time honoured way – prayer, study, and seeing God in daily living. But he was the Messiah, and ultimately he fulfilled his calling magnificently. His mother did suffer greatly, watching his controversial ministry which led to his crucifixion, and gradually we realise that the God who foretold his coming in the Old Testament, did as was promised, and came to be with us. All, as St Paul said, when the time was right.

Like Jesus, we all are born of a woman, and we all have or should have a loving, nurturing community with its rituals to accept and nurture us, and we all have a calling and a God who is with us one way or another. How do we respond to that? Why has God placed us in our world when our “time is right”, and what exactly are we called to do? How have the hardships of the pandemic revealed to us problems that WE can solve, people WE can help, and a God whom WE can serve, both as individuals and as a community?

We were all very proud a few weeks ago, where we learnt that our own Professor Abool Karim was to share the John Maddox prize with the USA’s Dr Anthony Fauci. This is a relatively new prize – it has only existed since 2012, but it is awarded for the following:

The **John Maddox Prize** recognises the work of individuals who promote science and evidence, advancing the public discussion around difficult topics despite challenges or hostility. Here are people who have studied and worked long and hard in their chosen fields, and in a time of criticism, they stood firm. We in this country have had our share of achievers, people who have worked long and hard and suffered through it – and our country is 22nd out of 197 countries worldwide in the number of Nobel prizes won, including the first black African winner, Chief Albert Luthuli who won the Peace prize in 1960.

Today, when we reflect upon “God with us” after this challenging Christmas, let us ask ourselves – is EVERY mother in this country supported by others who will step up to help those who have no family willing to support her? Is every baby given the opportunity to bond with his or her mother before she has to work? Is every community prepared to accept the many children born into it, and are they there to help the family cope with the stress of child-rearing so that despair leading to cruelty and abuse can be contained and the children be kept safe? Is every child able to learn who God is and what God in Christ did for him or her? Will our education system enable us to produce the Luthulis and the Tutus and the Karims who will be our future prize-winning contributors? We have in all our various cultural histories a good pattern for nurturing children, and we have in addition, a history of many of all races, whose instinct has always been to help and we are in a position to take the very best from the whole world and use it in developing our young people.

God sent his son to save the world, and we are eternally grateful for our faith and what it has meant to us. But Jesus was sent into a family – a young woman who said “yes” even while only partly understanding what was wanted of her, and she was supported by a man who was prepared to accept her as a faithful fiancé out of obedience to God, and he nurtured and trained the young carpenter so that when in his ministry, Jesus talked of “Abba, father,” he probably had an earthly as well as a heavenly father to model God’s love. And Jesus was born into a nation who followed a law given at Sinai, which created a

firm, loving, community so the young Jesus could establish the Kingdom of heaven with its foundations in a faith community which knew its identity in God, in spite of suffering at the hands of those who would conquer and destroy it.

In researching this, I got a lot of help from our parish secretary, Nosisa Miti, and also our pastoral care co-ordinator, Sam Hermanus for which I am grateful. I also read the biographies of our Nobel prize winners. For every enlightened and hard-working missionary school, hospital and administration staff in our country which helped them become the people they were, there was evil legislation passed which gives us cause to be ashamed of in our colonial and Apartheid history. Many of our heroes prevailed and were helped to prevail over terrible circumstances, and their achievements were quite outstanding – God was really with them. And there were many who struggled to put right what went wrong in our past, just as there are those who want to fight our current evils.

God is with us, and is part of our community just as much as Jesus was part of his. Let us make sure that God, in God's 21st century manifestation is just as welcome in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, and may our precious children all fulfil what God has called on them to do.