

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Day, 2013 at St Ninian's Uniting Church, Lyneham, ACT

Message delivered by Reverend Margaret Middleton

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Christmas day 2013 has dawned. How are you feeling? It is a day of mixed feelings.....

No matter how we are feeling, it is a day we celebrate, a remarkable event. But let's be honest and acknowledge that our celebrations contain a mixture of myth and truth, fantasy and fact.

For example, of all the writers who contributed to the New Testament, only two felt it necessary to relate anything about the birth of Jesus. They are Matthew and Luke, yet their narratives do not agree about anything that is supposed to have happened. Yet whilst some may want to argue as to whether the birth narratives are fact or fiction, I believe there is a truth in them beyond historical accuracy for they point to the meaning of the Christ event.

Let me tell you a story.

It is about a school Christmas play and Wally. Wally was big for his age--seven years old. Everyone wondered what role the teacher would give him in the play. Especially considering the fact that he was also a slow learner. Perhaps he could pull the curtain.

To everyone's surprise the teacher gave Wally the role of the innkeeper. The boy of course was delighted. After all, he had to learn only one line: "There is no room in the inn." He had that down pat in no time.

Then came the night for the program. The parents took their places. Every seat in the auditorium was filled. The children entered singing "Oh come all ye faithful." The lights dimmed. A hush moved over the audience. The curtain opened on Scene One. Mary and Joseph entered the stage and walked up to the inn keeper. Joseph says: "Please sir, my wife is not well. Could we have a room for the night?"

Wally was ready for his line. He had rehearsed it all night. He began, "There is....." and he hesitated. He started over again. "There is. .." and again his mind went completely blank. Everyone was embarrassed for him. Poor Wally just didn't know what to do. Joseph thought he would improvise so he started walking toward the stable on stage left. Seeing him walking away Wally in desperation called out: "Look, there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."

That seems a rather delightful twist on a familiar story. Over the years the characters in the Christmas story have become clearly defined for us. The issues all seem so clear cut. Herod in Matthew's story is a political heavy and the Wise Men are goodies. The shepherds for Luke were heroes and the Innkeeper--well, the poor innkeeper has gone down as one of the baddies in the story. In our minds eye, we envision him as a crotchety old man with a night cap on his head sticking his head out a second story window and tersely shouting: "Take the stable and leave me alone."

It is unlikely that anything remotely like this happened. After all there were no inns at the time. Scholarship has shown the word used for the place where Mary and Joseph stayed has been mistranslated. It means a house and there was no room probably because it was a one room house filled with Joseph's relatives. Or, perhaps there was no room for them because of the suspect pregnancy. But whatever happened, it is clear, that this little family was homeless that night.

And you know something; this simple little statement about there being no room in the Inn or house becomes a symbol for Luke. Luke takes this one line, "There was no room in the house or inn," and shows us how this was recurrent throughout Jesus' ministry.

There was no room for Jesus in the economic world.

There was no room for Jesus in the legal realm.

There was no room for Jesus in the realm of the religious order.

There was no room for Jesus in the world of politics.

Friends, has anything changed since then?

Here and there we catch glimpses of what can happen when room is made for Jesus and his rule of love and forgiveness.

We saw it in South Africa when Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu established the truth and reconciliation commission to give the new democracy a foundation in justice rather than hatred and bitterness.

Occasionally we see peacemakers emerge amid the chaos of fear and violence like Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager shot in the head by the Taliban for campaigning for girls' education. Speaking to a United Nations gathering in her first public appearance, she said:

"Dear friends, on the 9th of October, 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends too," she said. "They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed." She said the "terrorists thought that they would change my

aims and stop my ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this -- weakness, fear and hopelessness died, strength, power and courage was born."

Once in awhile someone responds to the call of Jesus to show compassion and give a fair go the "down and out" of society.

Recently I read an article about Pope Francis and I quote some of it.

Pope Francis has been named Time magazine's "Person of the Year".

" "What makes this Pope so important is the speed with which he has captured the imaginations of millions who had given up on hoping for the church at all," Time said in its cover story. "In a matter of months, Francis has elevated the healing mission of the church - the church as servant and comforter of hurting people in an often harsh world - above the doctrinal police work so important to his recent predecessors." Unlike other popes before him, Francis prefers to drive an economical car rather than the traditional Mercedes. He also travelled by bus and cooked his own meals when he was an archbishop." End of quote.

However, despite the encouraging stories such as these and more, I think it is true to say that the world still finds it inconvenient to make room for Jesus, for what he lived and died for.

Friends, the challenge of Luke remains as real for us today as it was for those who first heard his gospel narrative. The Saviour has come among us but is there room for him? The essential question however is this: Will there ever be room for him especially in our own lives for this is where it all begins. Just as it was for Wally, for the shepherds, for Mary and Joseph, the inn-keeper, this Christ event - the birth of the Christ Child is about people finding room for Jesus in their world.

May this Christmas be a time of joyful celebration for the Saviour has been born. And like Mary, let us ponder the significance of this story not just today, but throughout the year as we seek to make room for Jesus in our world, in our communities and in our living.

*"What do with Wally" – source unknown.*