

CHRISTMAS EVE REFLECTION 2023

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7). In these plain and clear words, Luke brings us to the heart of that holy night: Mary gave birth; she gave us Jesus, the Light of the world. A simple story that plunges us into the event that changes our history forever. Everything, that night, became a source of hope.

Let us go back a few verses. By decree of the Emperor, Mary and Joseph found themselves forced to set out. They had to leave their people, their home and their land, and to undertake a journey in order to be registered in the census. This was no comfortable or easy journey for a young couple about to have a child: they had to leave their land. At heart, they were full of hope and expectation because of the child about to be born; yet their steps were weighed down by the uncertainties and dangers that attend those who have to leave their home behind.

Then they found themselves having to face perhaps the most difficult thing of all. They arrived in Bethlehem and experienced that it was a land that was not expecting them. A land where there was no place for them.

And there, where everything was a challenge, Mary gave us Jesus, he had to be born in a stable because there was no room for him.

So many other footsteps are hidden in the footsteps of Joseph and Mary. We see the tracks of entire families forced to set out in our own day. We see the tracks of millions of persons who do not choose to go away but, driven from their land, the Palestinians in the Gaza strip have nowhere to escape to no place to hide. Those who manage to escape leave behind their dear ones either dead or dying, lost in rubble.

For asylum seekers in many cases their departure is filled with hope, hope for a new future; yet for many others this departure can only have one name: survival. Surviving the Herods of today, who, to impose their power and increase their wealth, see no problem in shedding innocent blood.

Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room, are the first to embrace the One who in his poverty and humility proclaims and shows that true power and authentic freedom are shown in honouring and assisting the weak and the frail.

That night, the One who had no place to be born is proclaimed to those who had no place at the table or in the streets of the city. The shepherds are the first to hear this Good News. By reason of their work, they were men and women forced to live on the edges of society. Their state of life, and the places they had to stay, prevented them from observing all the ritual prescriptions of religious purification; as a result, they were considered unclean. Their skin, their clothing,

their smell, their way of speaking, their origin, all betrayed them. Everything about them generated mistrust. They were men and women to be kept at a distance, to be feared. They were considered pagans among the believers, sinners among the just, foreigners among the citizens. Yet to them – pagans, sinners and foreigners – the angel says: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11). This is the joy that we tonight are called to share, to celebrate and to proclaim. The joy with which God, in God’s infinite mercy, has embraced us some might call us pagans, or sinners and foreigners, and demands that we do the same. (*Pope Francis, Christmas sermon 2022*)

The faith we proclaim tonight makes us see God present in all those situations where we think God is absent. God is present in the unwelcomed visitor, often unrecognizable, who walks through our cities and our neighbourhoods, who travels on our buses and knocks on our doors

God’s love isn’t just for the pious and the perfect.

God’s grace doesn’t come only in moments of quiet contemplation, when everything else is all wrapped up and all settled down and all put to bed.

God’s love breaks in on us precisely when everything else is going on, precisely when everything else is chaos and commotion, precisely in those days when it is the *last* time and *last* place we would expect God’s love to be:

In the critical care unit, in the homeless shelter, in the women's refuge;
where people's hearts are breaking, where people are struggling for justice;
in the choice between war and peace, in the decision between generosity and
greed;

in the moment of love when everything seems loveless, in the flash of hope when
everything seems hopeless, in the sudden joy that breaks through even the
deepest sorrow.

It is precisely into these contrasts and contradictions, the Christmas story tells us,
that God's love comes; it is precisely such contrasts and contradictions that God's
love holds together, just as the ancient story tells us it did in a stable in
Bethlehem; and suddenly the world is hushed, and the chaos pauses for a
moment, and the angel appears, and Jesus is there, and new life begins. That is
the story of the word becoming flesh, those are the days in which God's love is
embodied for us.

I stand here, conscious that I do not know the particulars of what most if not all of
you bring with you to this place, on your heart, in your soul on this night of all
nights – your contrasts and contradictions, what joys and what satisfactions, what
heartbreaks and disappointments, what frustrations and what fears, what loves
and what hopes, what dreams and what plans are part of you this night.

But whatever you bring, this timeless story of God becoming one with humankind
in the most vulnerable manner imaginable – in the contrasts and contradictions of
a baby born in poverty in a violent and oppressive society – this timeless story this

Christmas Eve embraces you and embraces me and tells us again – perhaps for the first time – that you and I and all people are held in the heart of God for ever and that this can make all the difference. Merry Christmas. Amen.