

# Heaven touching Earth

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 December 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Christmas Eve A

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-7; Luke 2: 8-14; Luke 2: 15-20; Contemporary reading: '*How the Light Comes*' by Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A book of Blessings for the Seasons*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

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On Christmas Eve, we tell stories...  
we sing stories,  
we live within stories,  
ancient and new.

We humans are story-tellers and story-dwellers. We are shaped by stories.

But we have the capacity to choose which stories will shape, transform and renew us. And we have the joy and the responsibility of interpreting ancient stories and connecting them to our time and place, to our own lives.

Gathering here, on this Christmas Eve, listening to these ancient stories, is a choice we have made, reflecting a yearning that is often below the level of consciousness:  
a yearning for meaning  
and for the healing of the world.

This enchanted night connects us through history, and across the world, to others who hear the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

A story told millions of times, to countless people, over nearly two thousand years. Connecting us to the much older history that of the Jewish people. And connecting us to Muslim people who honour Jesus as a prophet.

In this story time stands still, and invites us to taste eternity for a moment, as we are connected to the human family and indeed to the whole universe: as heaven touches earth.

In the facts of the story, little matters. In the truth of the story, everything matters.

The meaning, the truth, endures from generation to generation, touching us as we gather in the warmth and the candle light of this church, in this Australian summer, in this land of Aboriginal dreaming.

The characters of the story we have heard show us the child Jesus drawing together the amazing diversity of humanity.

Closest to the child is a woman, Mary his mother. Mary who kept faith, who heard the spirit stirrings, who let it be, let heaven embrace earth in the sweet communion of a kiss.

And then there is Joseph, trusting and protecting. Joseph, faithful one, despite the gossip of Nazareth, and the danger of Herod. Joseph who, I imagine, let Mary rest, walking the child, held lovingly in his arms, until the baby's crying ceased and at last he slept.

Then come lowly shepherds, who were first to be told of the birth, affirming that the good news is especially for the poor and the oppressed.

A little later, wise ones appear, elegant and wealthy. The legends tell us that one was old, one was middle aged and one young. One might have been black. All are foreigners.

The story of these Gentiles coming to the birthplace affirms that God, the sacred heart of the universe, whom Jesus revealed, is for all people.

Such diversity, included in intimate community, continues to be a scandal in many places in our world.

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There are other Christmas stories too.

Other gritty reflections, which can get lost in our desire for nostalgia and sentiment.

There is the story of sisterhood. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth rejoicing and sustaining each other in the wonder and the anxiety of their pregnant bodies and their social situations.

There is the story of civil disobedience. The story of King Herod. Herod ordering the slaughter of male babies echoes the story of Pharaoh issuing a similar command in the time of Moses. It suggests that Jesus is like a new Moses, and that a new exodus, was about to happen. It reminds us that the Pharaohs and the Herods and the Trumps of this world are always trying to destroy God's liberating word. In faith and in commitment, we claim that they will not have the final say.

And the Wise ones, instructed to report to Herod, are warned in a dream, and in an act of defiance and courage, depart into their own country '*by another road*'.

This is a story of exile – a story of refugees.

When political forces conspire to detain and murder, Mary and Joseph flee as refugees into Egypt. It is a violation of the memory of Jesus to tell this story without a commitment to the war-torn countries and displaced people of our world, in Syria and Yemen, and other faraway places; and especially to remember those who seek refuge in Australia, who suffer still from incarceration, trauma and discrimination.

This Christmas story, the story that can be ours, has political undertones. Remember...an oppressive Empire, and resistance to it, lie beneath the Christmas story.

The song of the angels declares that Jesus is Lord, and therefore that Caesar, the representative of Empire, is not Lord. That Jesus is Lord begins to undo the rule of oppression and occupation. We join the angels' song: *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards all people.'*

For centuries, this meaning has been downplayed, because we have domesticated and spiritualised the stories and told a horrible, unbiblical story in which Jesus is born to satisfy the desire for sacrifice by an avenging deity.

The Bible is clear: God does not delight in sacrifices. Jesus came as an invitation to humanity to live differently, with forgiveness and kindness.

Christmas 2016 isn't simply a time of waiting for a child to be born.

God has already come.

The birthing of Jesus has created a sacred memory, which empowers us and guides us through the powerful darkness of the birthing process, so that we can make our way into the light.

Jesus came to the world that God loved, that God favoured, calling us to life and love.

Seven hundred years ago, the medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt wrote:

*"We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born."*

This season is a time to enter the sacred memory of birthing God, to grow in love, so that we continue to learn to love what God loves, to love whom God loves,

and long for what God longs to bring to fullness in us and through us:

peace for all people  
and peace for the earth.

Tell the stories, again and again,  
and live through them a life  
of love, and peace, and justice.

Happy Christmas, as you bring the Divine Presence to birth in your life and our world.

Happy, holy Christmas.