

Mary is stealing your cosy Christmas

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 December 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 4C

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 3: 1-18; Contemporary Reading:

“Touched by an angel” by Maya Angelou

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

Today is the fourth and final Sunday during Advent. So close to Christmas. The liturgy booklets have all been printed - from today all the way through to Epiphany. Still a couple of reflections to write, but tomorrow is Christmas Eve. We are almost there.

But in the midst of joyous anticipation, I wonder if you have heard that there is a war on Christmas?

This war was announced a few years ago in the US by the conservative media, most notably Fox News. It focused on the practice of some Americans saying, “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” This was actually quite commonplace in New York when I lived there in the 1980s and 90s because there were many people of other faiths, particularly Jewish people who were resident in the city for whom December was Hanukkah rather than Christmas. It just seemed polite to me not to impose my religious understanding on others who didn’t share my faith.

The “war on Christmas” rhetoric has ramped up over the years as a critique of anything that recognised, that for many secular people in western countries who do not practice Christianity as their faith, Christmas does have genuine cultural, perhaps even spiritual significance.

Secular/cultural Christmas has long been a reality. In the play that the Pitt Street players performed last Sunday, Christmas was viewed through the lens of different historical periods, starting with Constantine’s rather cynical blending of Saturnalia and the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

The medieval woman who organised the extravagant menu and playful activities for the household seemed rather unconcerned with religious ritual.

Only in Oliver Cromwell’s suppression of Christmas was there a sense that the rituals of Christmas were linked to the story of Jesus birth.

And in the final vignette, the First World War Christmas truce between Germans and British Empire fighters in the trenches of Europe, the shared meaning of Christmas, found in peace and common humanity, was expressed in the moving story of soldiers crossing the bleak desolation of no man's land to connect with one another in carol singing and playing football.

It's long been true that Christmas has had non-religious meanings as well. The first Christmas card, designed in 1843, featured people drinking wine (including a mother feeding some to her small child) and generic scenes of offering charity. Most of our Christmas traditions come from the 19th century, epitomised by Charles Dickens, "*A Christmas Carol*" which focused on Christmas as a time for charity and for spending time with family and friends rather than emphasising a theological message.

Christmas has always been a cultural reality.

In our time this has some problems in terms of commercial excess, and pressure to shop, to buy more than people can afford, often untempered by the message of generosity to the poor and outsiders. But cultural Christmas also holds a sense of valuing kindness and nurturing relationships.

So the war on Christmas, I think, is fake news. Many of the people who are outraged by happy holiday greetings and secular Christmas cards, do not practice generosity or kindness or inclusion at Christmas any more than secular people; and some perhaps do so even less.

I had a first-hand glimpse of the faux outrage of the war on Christmas in the last ten days when Pitt Street's participation in Carols Against Coal, an action of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, went global via the internet. Because we were raising environmental concerns in the context of Christmas, we were declared to be not real Christians, but political activists.

Carols Against Coal involved some pointed new words to traditional Christmas Carol tunes. "*Cool down the world, the time has come for targets tight and fair. Let petrol, oil and coal, prepare to go. Let's fund renewables, let's fund renewables, let's fund, let's fund renewables.*" And others with words like "*Deck the halls with solar panels...*"

(Yeah, we found it funny, but not everybody did!)

Pitt Street's Earthweb Team got us on-board supporting the campaign which was originally designed to get the Labor Party conference to support renewable energy. But after the carols were covered in the right-wing media, our YouTube video became a global sensation, and often not in a good way.

It's been viewed over 4000 times and we've had screeds of messages on Facebook and YouTube – often rather hostile - from climate change deniers and conservative Christians agreeing with the media commentators that we are, in fact stealing, or ruining Christmas.

On 2GB I was accused of scaring children with climate change messages. The carol tunes were ascribed with sacred religious significance while care of the earth, God's good creation, was considered partisan and political and not at all religious. The cultural meaning of Christmas (or a cultural meaning of Christmas) was given ascendancy, even by people who claimed to be protecting religious Christmas.

The nastiness of some of the messages was extraordinarily unchristian and reminded me of the comments that we received during the Marriage Postal Survey last year. I thought I'd share one of them - Mary from Maroochydore emailed me directly: "*Dear Minister. I have never been more appalled in my life at your 'revised' Christmas Carols. How dare you turn our spiritual special time of Christ's birth into this filth? Shame, shame, shame on you. And you call yourselves Christians!!!! As you commit blasphemy on our Lord, by bastardising our beautiful Christmas Carols.*

Do you and your church know the meanings of Sacrosanct and Sacrilegious? Obviously not.

But you do know the alternative to Heaven - enjoy your journey."

Not exactly "Joy to the World!"

As one of my friends (who I shared this with) noted of Mary's missive: what a thing to have "*never been more appalled in my life about*". Genocide? Nah! Children in detention? Obviously not! 78 women killed as a consequence of domestic violence in the space of less than a year? No!

Despite the threat of hell, I replied to Mary's email with as much politeness and kindness as I could muster. And as the days went past, supporters of people of faith engaging in climate activism began to leave some lovely encouraging messages.

The backlash against Carols Against Coal from Mary of Maroochydore got me thinking about Mary of Nazareth. Mary, Jesus' mother. That Mary understood the political implications of the impending birth of Jesus right from the start of her pregnancy.

The story in Luke's gospel reminds us that political singing has always been part of Christmas - right from Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth when they were both pregnant; Mary with Jesus, and Elizabeth with John, who would become the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was greeted by Mary, the story tells us that John leapt for joy in her womb (as depicted in the stunning painting on the front cover of the liturgy booklet: 'Visitation,' by James Janknegt).

In response to Elizabeth's blessing her, Mary sings the hymn of praise that we know as the Magnificat.

Mary's song remembers, celebrates, and anticipates events that are revolutionary in the purest sense of the word: when kings are removed from their thrones; when the powerful, imposing their will by violence, war and occupation, will no longer shape the way of the human community; when the lowly are elevated and dignified; when the hungry are fed; when the rich lose their economic power!

Mary's words are profoundly political, not in the partisan sense of Liberal, Labor or Greens, but in the political sense of confronting the exercise of dominating power in society. Mary of Nazareth's words convey her impatience with the way things are. She praises God and holds God to account, singing of revolution.

Mary's restless passion characterizes the Christmas of people of faith – not as a time of happy families and romanticized carols, but a time when Christians should survey the world and shout to God and each other and to the principalities and powers: instead of what is now, let there be love. Instead of what is now, let there be justice. Instead of what is now, let there be peace...in our hearts, in our homes, in our cities, in our land, in our planet home.

The candles that we light for Advent, fragile flickering flames, remind us of Mary's stubborn belief that light will prevail against darkness and that love will make a way.

Her voice echoes in those who defiantly speak out for human rights, racial, economic and environmental justice, and for peace.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, we have lit the fourth Advent candle for Love (along with the candles for hope, peace and joy).

Love is at the centre of the Christmas story which we will celebrate tomorrow night and on Christmas Day. And love is at the centre of the faith that we practice.

Jesus called his followers, and calls us still, to love one another. It is by this love that the world will know we are followers of the Way of Jesus.

Love is at the heart of it, love given to us by the God of love, revealed in the life of Jesus, and revealed in us whenever we act in kindness and with love - to one another, to our neighbours, even to our enemies, and perhaps hardest of all, to ourselves.

And we are surely called to love what God loves: creation – this fragile beautiful planet home and all its creatures, its life forms, and the substances from which all is made.

This Christmas, every Christmas, it is by love – expressed in kindness and compassion and seeking justice – it is by these things that we will give birth to God who is always waiting to be born.