

Christmas Day Luke 2:1-14

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light". Those are the opening words from the reading from the prophecy of Isaiah that we just heard. Isaiah lived 800 years or so before the birth of Jesus and the earliest known scrolls of the Hebrew bible contain his words in largely the same form as we have received them. There is no doubt that this was written before Jesus was born, before several generations of his family were born!

As a prophecy that we look back on with a couple of thousand years of hindsight, it speaks perfectly of Jesus. To us a child is born, to us a son is given. These are words regularly inscribed on Christmas cards, this 2800 year old text continues to be associated with the birth of Christ 2000 or so years ago.

It's quite surprising to find that the prophecies of the Hebrew testament fit so perfectly with the reality of the Christ they prophesied about, but we have got used to that. Of course they go together, it's a prophecy and Jesus was its fulfilment, we say to ourselves, very neat. But what is a little more surprising, perhaps is how that ancient prophecy could have been written for us here this evening. The people of Australia today, and any number of people throughout the world.

You see, we live with a great deal of darkness just at the moment. The news has always been more keen to report the bad stuff than the good but lately it seems that the bad stuff is getting worse. Even without dwelling on the horrific acts of individual madmen, society is under pressure to marginalise faith and its public practice, and although incomparable to the persecutions faced by Christians elsewhere in the world, it is not always easy to practice your faith in place where it is deemed irrelevant.

Humanity today largely walks in darkness just as Isaiah says, we dwell in lands as dark as death, so perhaps his words might just apply to us too. Isaiah told of a way out of the darkness, a way out that no one could have expected, through the birth of a boy that might look like any other on the face of it but in fact was anything but ordinary.

To us a child is born, to us a son is given. Isaiah was given a vision of what was to come to pass some 800 years later. A child would be born and that child would change everything. Cut to the scene set in our last reading this evening from St. Luke's gospel. A ruling authority, and occupying force, the Romans, issue an order for everyone to be counted via a census in the town of their ancestry and a young pregnant woman and her betrothed begin a journey which sees them displaced from their home. Nature does not wait for political tension to die down and her baby is born at the appropriate time for himself, but at an inopportune time for his parents, when they had just arrived in Bethlehem and without any appropriate accommodation, the birth took place not in a home but an animal stall. We struggle to understand this level of poverty but I suspect if we were to ask those currently displaced people in the middle east or Africa would they resort to staying with the animals, it is likely they would do just that and worse to have some shelter and privacy.

Then comes a really strange part of the story, shepherds are visited by angels. It's not a normal scenario that we are all familiar with and its hard to explain why shepherds were chosen, other than because the Lord felt with this twist to the story no one could be accused of making this stuff up! The angels tell the shepherds of the birth of the messiah, the one you've been taught to look out for, they tell them where to find him and they break into spontaneous joyful song. What's even more surprising, is the shepherds actually go to have a look at the baby.

Baby visiting is traditionally a woman's thing. It's not that men aren't pleased that friends or family have successfully given birth, but they just don't have the same drive to go and look at the little thing like women do. Most men at baby visits are slightly awkward companions of

enthusiastic wives, girlfriends or mothers, but these shepherds, all men, were moved to go and have a look at the baby, such was the vision of angels they had seen.

This, truly, was no ordinary baby. Here was the child who was born to lead humanity out of darkness and into God's glorious light. Of course the surprises didn't end at his birth, Jesus was a constant source of wonder throughout his ministry. Where the people craved a warrior to crush the oppressors, Jesus preached love of one's enemy. Where the people expected a messiah so fearsome that all the violence of occupation would be avenged, Jesus told them to turn the other cheek. Where the people expected God's messiah to be so awesome that none could look upon his face, Jesus moved humbly among the people, eating and drinking with the least in society and arguing without fear against the most powerful. And ultimately this unexpected child who grew to be an unexpected man claimed victory in the most unexpected way, by submitting to the earthly authorities, by allowing himself to be executed by the state despite being given many opportunities to save himself by Pilate, and by defeating death through his resurrection from the dead that first Easter morning.

This was no ordinary child and the people who walked in darkness did indeed benefit from his wonderful light. But the darkness still exists, many still walk in it. And yet Jesus' birth although a single event in history, has never stopped shedding the light of God in our midst, all we need to do is open our eyes to see it. We too can benefit from having the yoke that burdens us shattered, if we live in the hope that God gives us in Jesus. A hope that there is a better way than violence, a hope that peace can prevail, a hope that we are valuable, precious in God's sight, and a hope that whatever we face in our lives, that death is not an end for us, but has been conquered by Christ.

It's no wonder his birth was in unusual circumstances, how could a child filled with Jesus' potential ever be ordinary. May you focus on the hope of the Christ child this Christmas and with joy take it out into the darkness of our world that others may find peace also.