

Advent 4 Luke 1:26-38

We are well and truly in the season of carol services, nativity scenes and celebrations. One of the most enjoyable nativity plays available online, and perhaps the one that really gives pause for thought, is a nativity found on YouTube, a video put together by a church in New Zealand called the Unexpected Christmas. This telling of the story starts not with the annunciation but with the imagined conversation in heaven. It is a story of why Christmas had to happen and if you have access to the internet then please to look it up, the Unexpected Christmas by St Paul's Arts and Media.

In this nativity we hear of how saddened God was by what was happening on earth and how difficult it was for God to be friends with people when he didn't like what they were doing. Beautifully described for children that cuts to the heart of our understanding, God felt separate from us and unable to communicate with us because of our human behaviour.

The angels and God talk about how God will intervene, "we'll get the army ready for a battle!" says one, "no" says God, I'm not sending an army, just one person. Well it will have to be someone strong and mighty, not so says God, I am sending a baby. But you'll have to send that baby to people capable of protecting a life so fragile, rich and powerful people. Still God had his own idea and says he will choose a peasant girl with a beautiful heart, full of courage. And when questioned about who this person will be, God says the prince of heaven himself, his own son. All through this dialogue, each time God comes up with a new and unexpected plan one of the angels pipes up with the line, "Brilliant, they won't be expecting that!"

The nativity goes on to show the annunciation, the birth, the visit by the shepherds and the wise men and ends with the joyful singing of the angels. It's very cleverly done and professionally presented but the bit that really catches the attention is its central theme of WHY. Why did God do this in the first place, why is this not just a lovely story of happily ever after of a couple and a baby, why is this the start of the life of the one who was to change the world. God was saddened by what he saw and he intervened in a way no one expected him to. Not even John the Baptist who we saw last week was tasked with preparing for this mighty messiah from God who would be like the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. There was no sign in the old testament prophecies that God would entrust his mission to an unmarried peasant girl and with little intervention allow his Christ to be born in poverty, spend his early years in danger, grow up an ordinary boy and young man, and only at 30 years would God intervene to confirm that this man was indeed his messiah.

Yet, if we think of it another way, perhaps this was the only option for God. Had he sent an army of angels there would have been no more free will, humanity would have been quashed by the power of heaven, that's not how God has a relationship with us, we are free to commune with God or to ignore God, there is no compulsion, only love. If Jesus was born to powerful rich people, how could he have empathised with the marginalised in society, how could he have understood what it was to be human if he experienced only the privileged bits of society. How could he have challenged and taught people about their lives and behaviours without hearing back, it's ok for you, you've had it easy. Jesus was accused of many things in his lifetime but never, as far as we know, of not knowing something of the grit of a real life, full of hardship. And what if God had sent someone else to intervene to protect his son, well then he would have perhaps had an idea of what humanity was like but it was only by Jesus, the son of God, the co-eternal word of God, the person of the trinity which we cling to but also fail to really understand, only by Jesus himself being born that God could truly be incarnate, only then could God really communicate with his people in a new, close way which transformed lives and continues to transform lives.

This illustration tells the same story in another way:

There once was a farmer. One winter evening, just before dark, he heard something hit the bay window in the dining room. He went to investigate and saw a small bird flying into the window repeatedly. Farther out in the yard he saw a whole flock of little songbirds. He realized that these were birds migrating south and they had been caught by an early snowfall. They were cold and scratching through the thin snow in search of food. The one bird had seen the light and had tried to get into the house. The farmer had an idea: He had a large barn where the birds would be safe and warm and there was plenty of hay on the floor so they could find seed. He put on his coat to go out and open the barn doors. But the birds did not come in. He turned on a light hoping that would attract them. No luck. He sprinkled seed on the ground to make a path for them to follow. They ate some but did not come close to the barn. Fearing for their safety, he decided to take more drastic measures. He planned to circle around behind the flock and chase them into the barn. THAT WAS A REAL FLOP! After running himself ragged, he dropped to his knees on the snow. Finally a thought hit him--- "If only I were a bird. Then I could tell them about the warm barn and the seed. I could save their lives."

That's what Christmas is: Jesus becoming one of us so that we can understand God's plan. Jesus becoming one of us so that he can save us.

This 4th Sunday in Advent we ponder not just why Jesus was born but the unexpected way in which the story unfolded. The response of Mary to the visitation by the angel and the entrusting of the most precious gift to the one who at first glance was least safe but by her faith and courage was in fact perfect. But throughout advent we are also thinking about the parallel story of Jesus coming into the world, the second coming, the time when we come face to face with God.

When that time comes, whatever form it takes, what will God be thinking about what he sees in humanity, in each of us? Will God once again be saddened by us and our behaviours or will we be one of those who stand out as being transformed by Christ and the holders of beautiful hearts, full of courage? Advent is not just about preparing to celebrate an event in the past, it is about being ready to be transformed anew, it is now Advent 4, are you ready for Christmas yet?