

## **The power of love.**

Sermon for December 18<sup>th</sup>, Advent four.

*2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16, Romans 16: 25-27, Luke 1:26-38*

In their Christmas letter our three Archbishops have reminded us that the message of love, peace, joy and hope at the heart of Christmas was first proclaimed in a time of great uncertainty, of change and fear.

First century Judeans were gripped with anxiety and were very angry with their political masters – even, perhaps, as the people of Syria are now with theirs – and riots and revolutionary skirmishes were part of life. Even Joseph, Mary and the about to be born baby Jesus, the holy family, were on a journey in dangerous times and into uncertain regions.

But the message of Christmas is irresistible. It came, for example, to the shepherds, out in the fields in a burst of joyous proclamation: “Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people” (Luke 2:10).

Christmas does not promise an immediate end to struggles, trials and fears.

Rather, it declares a way of travelling in God’s peace into God’s future – a future which is ultimately good and not evil, just and not cruel, light and not shadow – although the journey itself may well be made in the midst of anxieties. The angel’s message prophesizes the gift of God’s presence whatever the circumstances -

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom God favours!”  
(Luke 2:14).

Fast forward 2011 years – and we have witnessed trauma, too, in our part of the world these past 12 months.

There were the Christchurch earthquakes, the aftermath of the Pike River tragedy, rising sea levels in the Pacific, flooding, as well as ongoing political tensions in many parts of the world and recession even if some of the world’s wealthy moneylenders still got massive bonuses.

At St. Paul’s and All Hallows we miss the company of those who have died from among our congregation.

The promise of Christmas remains fresh, and God still comes into fraught scenes through caring people who bring justice and new hope. The word becomes flesh as we walk with the one who was born, after a perilous journey, in a stable.

Today we hear the story of Mary, the one who also heard the words ‘Do not be afraid!’

The angel Gabriel appeared to her with a word of grace. “Rejoice, highly favoured one! God is with you”. Mary was among the most powerless people in her society. She was young in a world that valued age. She was a girl in a world ruled by men. She was poor in a society that equated wealth with God’s approval and poverty with divine displeasure.

Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit, a creative, life-giving Spirit that introduced a new act on the part of God. It was an act of Grace. It’s not a reward for a righteous life. Mary was praised for her belief, for her trust. She accepted that she was worthy of love, worthy of bearing and naming God’s child. She took her celebration to her aunt Elizabeth and received her whole-hearted support.

Let’s reflect on another well known saint: Francis of Assisi.

New information shows he was 5 foot 3 inches tall and weighed about 40 kilograms at the time of his death. How could a man so emaciated and diminutive have such an incredible impact? He never set out to be a leader, just to love the poorest of the poor and challenge the Church; yet at his death, over forty thousand men and women had joined his call.

He was stricken by malaria and eaten by leprosy. He became blinded by disease on a fourteen hundred mile journey that he made for peace during the crusades. Yet peace emanated from this man making him a most attractive person; real joy became him as a natural expression of his faith.

The archbishops' letter affirms the truth that Christmas is a message about God's good will towards every human being, a divine declaration that everyone has the right to live abundantly. As Mary put it when she accepted her pregnancy: "He has lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:52-53).

We too can partake of the good things that Mary speaks of – when we share out of our own abundance, when we show generosity and good will to those who are in need.

Those of you at Church last week know that the gifts given to the young adults were gifts that in their name were for strangers who either had leprosy or were very poor. They were gifts that will make a difference to families in various parts of the world.

One of the children came up to me later. He told me about going to an event where such gifts were sold and how his family had chosen some. He enjoyed the experience. Why don't we next year let all the young choose what they wish to give to others so they further understand the joy of sharing the love of God.

We have a week left before Christmas. Plan how you will spend the week, who you will contact, send cards to, visit or phone. Let's be courteous to shop staff, caring of each other, tolerant with the difficult people. Let our love flow through our decisions to those whom we link with these final few days before Christmas.