

God's welcome to our world. Christmas Eve/Christmas Day. Vicar Joyce

Isaiah 9: 2-7, Titus 2: 11-14, Luke 2: 1-14

This year perhaps more than most we gather for Christmas worship with mixed emotions. It is so good to see you here, to know you are honouring God's presence in this local community and in our world. It is especially good to see you because of the ups and downs of this year's circumstances.

Are you here tonight to hear, like the shepherds, news of great joy?

As I write this the pine Christmas tree at the Vicarage stands in place undecorated. Somehow, the task, which can be lots of fun, seems of less relevance this year. It will be done before Christmas but I have heard of people not decorating at all this year, not because they are depressed, but rather that other activities have taken their energy. I am so grateful though that God our Creator has the time and the thoughtfulness to decorate the native coastal Pohutukawa, to feed our souls, to delight our spirits.

An unusual task for me this December has been to search for the symbol of the Bethlehem babe in our altar crèche scene. We do not place the babe in until Christmas Eve. All the secret safe places in our storage have been checked and rechecked but baby Jesus eluded us. Eventually a new symbol was made, bringing me much relief, so we have a complete crèche tonight. Those with lots of imagination may wonder where the original one has gone.

God present among us as a child is a miracle of joy. We received a card from Bishop Kito, Tikanga Maori Bishop of the Northern region. His card reads:

"He came not to a throne, but to a manger.

He lived not as a king, but as a servant.

He chose not an earthly kingdom, but a cross.

He gave not just a little, but everything."

A human family were entrusted to care for Jesus. They had to do so without the Family Benefit or Plunket or Starship – although I'm sure if they'd been available life would have been easier for them. The miracle says something about God's daring love for the human family and for our world.

God sees us as made in the divine image with a great capacity for care and for responsibility.

We have role models in the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph, angels, shepherds, no doubt some caring townspeople in Bethlehem. To care and take responsibility for a child is a great privilege. To take care and responsibility for generations of children is one of the Christmas calls. Today many grandparents and God-parents respond to that intergenerational call.

Christmas is a natural time to take stock. People's annual letters do this – catching up with a year's information. Some from residents in earthquake or flooded areas make bleak yet courageous reading. Belongings lost, buildings gone, much loved churches full of family memories turned into rubble. Some lost established incomes from businesses, grieving not just for themselves but also knowing that in some situations their children are facing similar loss and upheaval. Yet faith prevails. New beginnings, however

small, are taken. Other letters show people have had years of great celebration, good health, interesting activities. The taking stock for them is to be thankful.

Returning to Jesus' birth-time, Caesar Augustus was a ruler first of Rome, then of the Roman Empire at the time of Christ's birth. For 58 years there was a tenuous, brutally enforced peace. He is remembered through the biblical record. The trip to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph was 85 to 90 miles, through Samaria. That was not easy for a pregnant person in the heat of the warmer months, either on foot or on a donkey. Soldiers would be curious re the couple. Bethlehem means 'House of Bread'. It was a busy, bustling, overcrowded town. The guest rooms were already taken so the holy family were forced to take the stable where the animals sheltered. Not the most ideal or hygienic birthing unit.

At least the baby would be safe in a manger; no animal would step on him. Imagine the smells and night noises as munching animals settled to sleep amidst the crises of a human birth, from a tired mother. The rough-hewn manger was a prototype of a paten, the little dish we use to distribute the bread of Holy Communion, the bread of life.

The angel Gabriel had promised Mary she would give birth to the Son of the Most High. Yet she gave birth in the lowliest of places. The angel Gabriel promised Mary that her son would reign over the house of David forever. Yet she was first visited by humble and confused shepherds. Mary was a young woman, probably around 16 years old, a first time mother confronted with paradox and contradiction.

Her story, the holy family story, speaks well of courage and faith, of trust and love in difficult and trying times. It speaks with empathy and understanding to the year and the journey many people have had in 2011.

The shepherds were humble folk. They were considered at the very bottom of the employment ladder as they could not easily attend worship: they had to mind the flocks at night – a tough and dangerous job. Yet they were given the message of great joy and responded in haste. For them the sense of God's glory was initially frightening, overwhelming. "Do not be afraid," the angel said, giving them directions to Jesus.

They went to see for themselves.

They saw the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They heard the cry of a new-born.

They fell to their knees in worship. They touched the straw and held the hand of Jesus.

The living God was there in the middle of the world they knew so well. They indeed had news of great joy.

Joy brings people to gather and generates human fellowship and society. Joy nurtures our faith, helps us value the bread of life.

Tonight, offer God the concerns and joys you experience. Nothing is beyond the gift of the living presence of God who still comes close, embracing us all with beautiful unconditional love as he enters our hearts, our homes, our places of work, our world.

Joyce